

THE THREE PILLARS OF LENT, PART THREE:

PRAYER

On Ash Wednesday, we began our season of Lent with a Gospel reading from the Sermon on the Mount (Mt 6: 1-18), where Jesus spoke of the three great pillars of Lent: prayer, fasting and almsgiving/acts of charity. We saw, for example, how they are the perfect antidote to the three frequent temptations and corresponding vices that we face about pleasure, possessions and pride. These three pillars are, of course, are things that we should do as Christians all the time, but in Lent they take on a special focus and intensity.

Lent is a time when we can focus, or refocus, on prayer. Hopefully, we do take time to pray. After all, it is so essential for us. We are made, or hard-wired, to pray! If we do not eat properly or keep hydrated, then our bodies soon get sick and decline. So too with prayer. If we do not pray then our spirit quickly becomes sick and withers, and good relationships with God, others and self, fade away. Prayer is not always easy, but we should not think that we cannot pray. Saint Francis de Sales famously wrote that everyone can pray, because, he said, “so long as they are capable of grace, they are also capable of prayer.” He went on to say: “it is only the devil who is incapable of prayer, because he alone is incapable of love.” With all this in mind, let us explore a few important lessons in prayer; so that our prayer, with God’s grace, may be refreshed, renewed and expanded in this holy season of Lent.

First, we need to see that there are many *forms and types* of prayer and there are many different ways that we can pray. A key thing to remember is choosing a type of prayer and also a time and place for prayer, that will fit in with our busy lives. This is the wise advice, once again, of St. Francis de Sales, writing more than 450 years ago. He points out that we can often make the mistake of trying to pray in a way that just does not fit in with our schedule, our needs or our personality. Then we become discouraged and think that we cannot pray and so give up. He reminds us that the issue is probably not so much that we cannot pray, but that we have tried to pray in a way that does not suit our circumstances and needs.

In Chapter 18 of St. Luke’s Gospel, Jesus gives us some wonderful teachings about prayer. First of all, he encourages us to pray and to pray with persistence, using the parable of the unjust judge and the woman who persists with her demands for justice (Luke 18: 1-8). Perhaps our Lord is thinking especially of one of the many forms of prayer: what is often called *intercessory* or *petitionary* prayer. The most familiar form of this would be the “Prayers of the Faithful” that we have at Mass each week; when we pray for the church, the world and for all sorts of needs. Most of us also pray this way every day, especially if we have a particular person or thing to pray for: someone who is sick, a worry or crisis, an exam, or a job interview.

The Our Father is actually an example of this intercessory prayer too. After acknowledging God's name as holy and praying for the coming of the Kingdom and that God's will be done, we then ask for all sorts of things. We ask for our daily bread, for being forgiven and to be able to forgive and not to be put to the test. So, intercessory prayer is a really important form of prayer. Perhaps when we pray in this way, we are not so much pestering God so that He will somehow change His mind, but rather to ask for His help and placing ourselves and what we are praying for in His hands. It is also a prayer of love, especially when we pray for others, because in doing so, we are showing our love and care for them. It is good to know that many of our shut-ins are such a vital part of our community, not least because even though they may no longer be able to get to Mass, they spend many hours praying for all those in the parish and the wider community: you and I!

Jesus then goes on provides us with a further insight about *how* to pray (Luke 18: 9-14). Jesus' tells a colorful story of two people coming to the Temple to pray; it might be called a lesson in how to pray... and also how not to pray...! The story focusses especially on what we might say is the right (and the wrong) disposition or attitude to have when we wish to pray. The first character is the Pharisee: a member of an elite lay group who strictly followed the religious law and practices. Notice his disposition and attitude. He seems to despise everyone (except himself, of course) and there is no respect for the tax collector or anyone else. We might even ask about his attitude to God: he seems so full of himself and so perfect that one wonders why he even needs God at all. There is no humility in the way he addresses our awesome God, or a realization that he is actually speaking to God. The content of his prayers are all about how great he is and how terrible everyone else is. His prayer is not then really prayer at all: it is just a series of statements about how wonderful he is. Look at the Gospel again and hear the telling words about the Pharisee: "he spoke this prayer *to himself*..." The ego has landed!

This contrasts with the attitude of the tax collector as he comes to pray to God. He knows who he is, what he has done and he knows his unworthiness. He also knows that he is speaking to God, and his body language shows this: he stands off at a distance, he did not dare to raise his eyes to heaven and he beats his breast. He then prays directly *to God* (and not to himself): "O God..." and then He simply asked God to be merciful to him, a sinner. God hears this prayer and the man goes home "justified" (literally meaning in a right and restored relationship with God).

Jesus' parable teaches us much about the right attitude and disposition when we come to pray. We need to be honest about ourselves: God knows who we really are and what we have done, whether or not we like to be honest about it ourselves. After all, it is usually not a good idea to begin a conversation with somebody, not least God, by being dishonest about things, especially ourselves! We also need to recognize both God's amazing love and mercy, but also that God *is* God: awesome and transcendent. Additionally, we can be aware of the importance not just of words, but also of our body language when we pray (incidentally, that is why we sometimes stand, sometimes sit and sometimes kneel at Mass...we most certainly do use our bodies to pray). Finally, we can acknowledge our absolute need for God's help, so that we can finish our prayers and leave "justified": that is in a right and good relationship with God, with others and with ourselves.

As we continue our journey through Lent, perhaps we can reflect more on prayer and our own prayer life. Sometimes we might make a resolution (and better still then act upon it) to go to the gym to get fit again, or to improve our diet, so as to live a healthier life. Why not do the same thing with our spiritual life, by renewing and refreshing our prayer life...? Unlike the gym or some new diet, it does not cost us anything, except a few extra moments of time and a little bit more effort. Besides, it is God who will provide the gifts that we need to grow in prayer and we can be sure that the benefits will be huge!

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