

The Catholic Parish of Petworth & Midhurst

West Sussex

Fr Peter's Homily for The Seventeenth Sunday of Ordinary Time (Year C)
24th July 2022

Jesus' disciples see him at prayer. And there must be something about that prayer, about the way in which it stills him, focusses him, centres him that is very striking, because immediately he finishes one of the disciples says 'We would like some of that, we would like to know how you do that, we would like to be affected by prayer in the way that you are, how is it done?'

This is still a common question today. How do you pray? What do you actually need to do, need to say? We are sometimes put off because the culture we live in is very much geared to instant results, instant effects: we have a question and we google it and it is answered; we want to know how to do something, there is a whole host of videos on Youtube to show us how. Answers come instantly. And in this context prayer seems very vague and rather unsatisfactory. There are almost never instant answers, and often there seem to be no answers at all. If we are honest we have a sneaky suspicion that it may, then, be a bit of a waste of time. If we don't see any answers, any effect, what is the point? If God is not going to give us what we ask for, and do it quickly, why are we doing this at all? We want to put a prayer into the machine, press the button, and out comes the answer. But that is not how God sees prayer, and it is not the sort of prayer that Jesus is doing which so affects his disciples, not the sort of prayer that makes them look at him and say 'We want some of that'.

When Jesus prays, and the disciples look on in wonder, this is something rather different. This is like watching a man in a polluted city, who has been gasping for breath, hold a mask to his face and breathe in oxygen – that is what the disciples see; or when someone is barely able to walk in the heat but refreshes themselves with cool fresh water. The disciples see Jesus pray, and see him coming alive, and that is what they want some of. We are wanting the bar of chocolate that comes out of the vending machine when we put in our money, make our request; but God the Father wants to give us a meeting with his Son.

So Jesus teaches his disciples the Lord's Prayer, which exists in slightly different versions in the different Gospels.

'Father' – the first word of the prayer already speaks about our place in the world, we are children looking to our Father, we are totally dependent. We are not approaching an equal, still less are we addressing a servant who we want to do our bidding, we begin prayer as dependent beggars, with nothing of our own, nothing that we can claim credit for ourselves, nothing but the fact of being his children. So with this realisation the transformation begins, and we begin to find our real selves.

'May your name be held holy' – this is so easy for us to say, and easy for us to think of as a prayer that the world may be converted, that the world may come to believe and to acknowledge the Kingdom of God. And what a great thing that would be! But primarily this is a prayer for my transformation, for our transformation. May I become, more and more, a person who lives in the shade of the holiness of God. May we become, more and more, a Church community whose actions decisions and priorities are about living in the light of the Holy Name of God. Let holiness

be our passion and our aim. Give me what I want, Lord, which is to live in the light of your holiness.

'Your kingdom come' – this flows from the previous petition. Whose kingdom do I live in? To whom do I bend my knee? Let me be a person who lives now, today, as a citizen of the Kingdom of God. Let me not make decisions and plans based on what anybody else says, but only on the basis of the values of the Kingdom of God. Let us be a community that lives, in every aspect of what we do, as citizens of the Kingdom.

'Give us each day our daily bread' – give us what we need for this day, do not shower us with so much that we will forget to ask you this again tomorrow. You know what we need for today, give us the grace to long for it. You know what I need more than anything else, help me to desire that more than I desire the things that I think I need. I want to receive, O Lord, what you want to give me this day. Help me to want this more and more.

'Forgive us our sins' – how much we need this. Jesus did not need to ask for forgiveness, but he knows that we do, we need this perhaps more than anything else. Help us, Lord, to know our faults, all the things we do or say that damage others and damage ourselves; help us to become more and more people who rejoice to be forgiven penitents.

'For we ourselves forgive each one who is in debt to us' – make us generous in being understanding, generous in dispensing freely what you have so freely given to us; to forgive someone is to give away, freely and joyfully, the power we held over them as someone in our debt. We refuse to keep them bound to us and set them free.

'And do not put us to the test' – we long to follow you, but we are no heroes, we have discovered that left to our own devices we will let you down; we have let go of the arrogant belief that we are rather good at this virtue stuff, rather good at doing the right thing, and we must acknowledge it is not so. Please, then, help us. We know that we will struggle to do the right thing, and time and again we will fail. Deep down, though, there is only one struggle that we will gladly lose, the struggle to impose our will over yours, our plans over yours. We will still fight, but this fight with you we hope to lose, and our prayer is that you will subdue us.

If we can pray as Jesus taught us, pray Christ's prayer, we have some hope that it might just come true. 'Lord, teach us to pray' – not just to say the words, but to let ourselves be changed.