

Homily  
30 Ord C  
Oct. 22/23, 2016  
St. Bernard Church

How do we pray? How would we describe our prayer life? Can we say that our prayer life has a dynamic quality?

When we meet Jesus on the day we die, I think we will see very clearly the mistakes, the sins, that we committed during our lifetime.

But, I think we will see something else even more clearly than that. Beyond what we have done that was sinful, we will see that in our lives we missed out on opportunities to experience the power, the richness, of the life that Jesus made available to us. It is going to be crystal clear to us that we allowed ourselves to be distracted from the fullness of the life that Jesus had made possible for us.

Saint Paul, in his Letter to the Ephesians, describes the kind of life available to every Christian. His description takes the form of a prayer. He writes:

“May the eyes of [your] hearts be enlightened, that you may know what is the hope that belongs to his call, what are the riches of glory in his inheritance among the holy ones, and what is the surpassing greatness of his power for us who believe, in accord with the exercise of his great might..”

Have we experienced the “riches of glory” and the “surpassing greatness of power” referred to by St. Paul? If Jesus asks us, on our judgment day, “Did you take advantage of the power that I made available to you?” how will we respond?

The whole purpose of Jesus’ becoming human was to enable all of us to share more fully in His own divine life, to become united with Him, God the Father and the Holy Spirit, to share the supernatural love and power of the Trinity. Sharing the divine life means experiencing the deepest love, the deepest joy, the power of God’s grace, the power of healing and the power to sacrifice ourselves for others.

We access this power by prayer. And prayer begins with the humility demonstrated by the tax collector in today’s Gospel. The Pharisee, the first person described in our Gospel, is filled with pride in his own behavior, giving himself a trophy for his good deeds.

But the tax collector feels unworthy to even raise his eyes to heaven, feels unworthy to even be in the temple. His prayer is that of a beggar: “O God, be merciful to me a sinner.”

Prayer begins with the recognition that we deserve nothing from God. Our very life is a gift. Every good thing we have is a gift. No matter how much good we do, no matter how much time we spend in church, the very best of us are still weak and sinful.

Today's Gospel tells us that human power and human pride are barriers to experiencing divine power. It tells us that if we want to have access to God's power, we have to acknowledge our own weakness, our own unworthiness.

In 1988, on a Saturday evening during a trip to Ohio, I had what you could call a conversion experience. I had the experience of God penetrating every cell of my being with His presence. I didn't ask for this. I didn't even know things like that happened to people.

But I knew it was God. He was telling me that He was real and that His love for me was real, that it was personal.

The next day, a Sunday, the 2<sup>nd</sup> reading at Mass was from the 2<sup>nd</sup> Letter to the Corinthians, Chapter 12. In that reading, Saint Paul describes how he was given some suffering from God in order that he wouldn't be too prideful. Saint Paul says that he begged God to relieve him of this suffering. God answered Paul with these words, "My power is made perfect in weakness."

The meaning of those words hit me like a ton of bricks. Yes, God could use whatever human talents I had. But if I wanted access to His power, to His grace, I needed to acknowledge my weakness, my inadequacies, and put all my trust in Him. I realized that my weaknesses, my inadequacies, were what made room for God's grace. I knew that from then on, if I was doing whatever God asked me, my feeling of inadequacy did not need to stop me, that God's grace would make up for whatever I was lacking.

For the first time in my life, I began to pray with humility but also with an expectation that God would answer my prayer in some way. As time went by, I experienced more and more of the "riches of glory" and the "surpassing greatness of power" that I referred to earlier.

Here's one example.

I'm employed part-time as a chaplain at a local car dealership. Last year, one of our employees, Ken, suffered a brain hemorrhage. When I went to see him at the hospital, he asked me if I was going to pray with him. I said, "Sure," but I wasn't sure at all what I would say. I took his right hand in my right hand and put my left hand on his head. Then I prayed out loud for 2 or 3 minutes.

When I finished praying, Ken still had his eyes closed, and he didn't move. My first thought was, "O my gosh, is he dead?" He looked so peaceful. Finally, he opened his eyes and looked at me. "Have you prayed like that before?" he asked. "Not exactly," I said. I found out later from other people who saw Ken at the hospital after I did that he had told them something unusual had taken place when I prayed over him.

Several weeks later, when Ken had returned to work, we went to lunch together. After we sat down, I said, "Okay, Ken, tell me what happened." Then he explained that while I was praying over him, he had the experience of hearing a large choir of angels singing. He said it was the most beautiful song he had ever heard, the most beautiful experience he had ever had. He said he thinks about it every day.

We both broke into laughter, a joyful laughter, of gratitude that God had blessed Ken in such a wonderful way.

If something like this can happen to me, it can happen to anyone. I'm basically a pessimist, a worrier. But I'm learning to pray with confidence in God, not in myself, and to expect that God is somehow going to honor my prayers.

One of the prayers I use a lot now, especially during Mass, is simply called the Jesus Prayer. The version I use goes like this: "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the Living God, have mercy on me, a sinner."

Like the tax collector in today's Gospel, I often feel that I am connected to God by the tiniest of threads. But that is when I experience the most powerful graces. It's when I start thinking in a prideful way about my own accomplishments that I become disconnected, and God has to do something to restore my humility.

So I strongly recommend saying this often: "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the Living God, have mercy on me, a sinner." And then look for his mercy and grace to come into your life.