

Sacred Heart Novena Gardiner Street (3)

A prayerful heart.

Kieran J. O'Mahony, OSA
www.tarsus.ie

Introduction

Welcome again to "Is your heart in the right place", the novena to the Sacred Heart. During the novena, my hope is that you have begun to open the Gospel of Luke, which is the biblical foundation for these reflections. Last night, the reflection touched on compassion. Tonight, the title is "a prayerful heart."

The pandemic we are experiencing has been a challenge at many levels. Not everything, however, has been negative. One of the benefits of the lockdown – at least on the faith level – has been that we've been thrown back to our own resources. This includes our practice of prayer. Usually, we have the support of others when we pray – still true to some extent with live-streaming. It is not at all a bad thing to be on your own with God.

Topic

You don't have to be doing that for very long before you realise that you need help, that DIY spirituality takes you only so far.

Arguments

1. The disciples request – Lord, teach us to pray, just as John taught his disciples – speaks to the experience of us all. When I was first ordained I felt strongly my own inability to pray, to sit with God. Fortunately, a few things came together. There was the discovery of Taizé prayer, which is very calming. Then a confrere, in his ministry, was promoting what was called "centring prayer," in the Benedictine tradition. At the same time, Scripture was becoming very real for me. Coincidence perhaps, but I like the notice on the church on the Stillorgan Road which read: "Coincidence – when God chooses to remain anonymous." Eventually, something unlocked and the words of Psalm 80 really spoke to me: "A voice I did not know said to me, I freed your shoulder from the burden." Of course, it is "ongoing" as they say. Sometimes, I feel like joining the spiritual version of the AA, the FPA, the failed prayers' association, and we could meet and say, "my name Kieran, I can't pray." There'd be no shortage of chat!

2. If someone asked me, where in the New Testament is the best teaching on prayer, my reply would be: Paul, John and Luke. Luke, in particular, has a wonderful catechesis on prayer, which you will have noticed as you make your way through the Gospel. He doesn't just talk about it, he does it, so we see it happening across the whole Gospel, which starts with prayer in the Temple and in the Temple ends with prayer.

First of all, there are lots of prayers in the Luke, not just the Our Father. It is Luke's prayer that shape the daily prayer of the Church: the morning starts with his "Blessed be the Lord the God of Israel;" as the light fades, we pray his "My should glorifies the Lord"; just before sleep, we have Luke's "At last all powerful Master". Every Sunday, the first words of the Gloria come from the song of the Angels at the birth of Jesus.

Secondly, he reflects on prayer, particularly in three parables: the parable of the friend at midnight, the parable of the widow and the unjust judge and the parable of the tax collector and the pharisee. Persistence is the key, stickability. In tonight's parable, the friend keeps banging at the door. In the parable of the unjust judge, he actually says to himself (in Greek): "if I don't give in to her, she'll give me a black eye" – one of the strong women in Luke's Gospel!!

Thirdly, he shows Jesus at prayer much more frequently than in Mark or Matthew. For instance, before the choosing of the Twelve, Jesus prays – but only in Luke. At the Transfiguration, Jesus goes up the mountain *to pray*, but only in Luke. It is obvious

enough that the Transfiguration was a moment of prayer, but only Luke says so. In fact, in Luke's Gospel, Jesus prays twice as often as in the other Gospel and also he dines out twice as often. Which either means prayer makes you hungry or else food helps you to pray...! That's be great news...

3. Prayer is the heartbeat of faith. No prayer, no faith. Think of a heart monitor in a hospital: no prayer and the graph of faith is flat. You may have noticed that the disciples didn't say to Jesus "Lord, teach us a *prayer*" but "Lord, teach us to *pray*." The Lord's prayer was not first of all a formula but a pattern of prayer, the steps to take. So, how do we get beyond the business of "saying prayers" to "praying"?

There are different names in the tradition for spending time in stillness: the prayer of quiet, the prayer of presence; the prayer of simple regard. In modern language, centring prayer or Christian meditation. It calls for no special equipment: just a time and a place, a chair and yourself. The usual recommendation is to pray for 20 minutes or so, holding your attention with a prayer-word. It sounds easy but it does call for faithfulness and stickability. For a long time, it will consist of setting aside my expectations, my plans, letting God lead. Very practically, it helps to practice this prayer at the same time and in the same place, each day. Light a candle, read a peace of scripture to start. Sit with God and let God lead!

Conclusion

In the reflection this evening, we've come full circle. We started with our own need: Lord, teach us to pray. We know Luke's offers great guidance in prayer – practical and inspirational. And finally, we look at our own habits of prayer – taking us back to our own need of help.

If someone said to me, where's the best teaching on the Holy Spirit in the New Testament, I would say Paul, John and Luke. Perhaps it is one of these "coincidences" that the best writers on the Holy Spirit are also the best writers on prayer.

Let us pray,

Provident Father,
with the prayer your Son taught us always on our lips,
we ask, we seek, we knock at your door.

In our every need,
grant us the first and best of all your gifts,
the Spirit who makes us your children.
We make our prayer through our Lord Jesus Christ,
who lives and reigns with you
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
God, for ever and ever. Amen