



17th Sunday in Ordinary Time - Sr Nuala Cotter

mercredi 24 juillet 2019

Learn to pray

Last week, we were with Jesus as he enjoyed the hospitality of Martha and Mary ; the dinner at their house provided a moment of friendship and peace for him and his disciples as they traveled toward Jerusalem. We remember how Mary modeled the attitude of the disciple as she sat at Jesus' feet - and while we can be distracted by Martha's complaint and Jesus' response, we might also consider how Mary's discipleship (and what Jesus had to say about it) might have affected the other (male) disciples. Did they learn anything that day ?

One chapter and a few miles farther along the road, we find the disciples making an important request : "Lord, teach us to pray just as John taught his disciples." Interesting to consider that we're almost halfway through the gospel, and this idea is coming to the fore just now. By this time, they'd often seen Jesus praying, and yet, they ask him to teach them how to do it only now. A coincidence of timing, perhaps ? Luke doesn't say, but I'd like to think that maybe, just maybe, they were responding to what they'd seen and heard back in Bethany.

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A way of prayer offers an identity to a group, whether that group is made up of rough and ready Galilean fishermen, pious ladies of the Rosary and Altar Society, or a monastery of saffron robed Tibetan Buddhists. A way of prayer shapes you, helping you to look not only "out" toward God, but also "in" toward your own heart - where God is also, of course ! Jesus teaches his friends that both elements are necessary for his way of prayer.

Father. Begin by looking toward God, but in as simple a way as possible. No bowing, scraping, or groveling necessary. No grandiose titles for God, nor any need to abase yourself, either, no need to point out to God what a miserable little nothing you are. In fact, implies Jesus, God is "our Father." You and me and the rest of all humanity made in his own image and likeness "in the beginning." Have the confidence to simply say "Father" (as I do).

Hallowed be your name. Your name, your Self, is what holds Creation together ; may anything not holy ("hallowed") be removed. Here we might also look within ourselves - whatever is not "of God" : may it be banished from our hearts.

Your kingdom come. Jesus has been teaching about the Kingdom since the day he took up the scroll of the Torah in the synagogue at Capernaum. He has made it very clear that it's not an earthly kingdom, but

a movement, a kind of “breaking-in” of the divine into the world. It’s a kingdom that turns things upside down, including us. May we desire that kingdom so much that we hasten it through our own actions. And may it be God’s kingdom, and not some cheap knock-off that we construct from our own daydreams.

Give us each day our daily bread. There’s quite a bit of scholarly discussion about this request, a lot of focusing on the meaning of the words “each day” and “daily,” but in keeping with the notion of the simplicity of Jesus’ teaching here, we can decide to focus instead on the possessive pronoun, “our.” Not “my.” “Our.” Jesus teaches his way of prayer not to one special initiate – John, say – who learns an arcane method that marks him out as special. No, from the beginning, it’s been “our,” and here it’s “us” and “our” in a petition with implications for anyone praying it : this bread is to be shared. We can read the words (and pray them) on two levels – the daily bread that gives us the calories we need to sustain our bodily selves – shared. And the daily bread of the Eucharistic celebration, equally necessary to sustain our spiritual selves, always shared with the community when it gathers. Here again we’re being invited to look outward toward God who will provide the bread, but also inward to ourselves : are we ready to share whatever we have so that others may have life with us ? Jesus invites us to practice gathering, breaking and sharing “bread” together.

And forgive us our sins for we ourselves forgive everyone in debt to us. It’s often been observed that God has to have mercy on us because we have so very little for each other. Boldly ask for pardon, yes, but only because you pardon others. No room here for grudges, vengeful thoughts or deeds, pride or any other of the sins that mark each one of us. Call to God to free you – and your neighbor (“us”) — from them all – and so help us to have mercy.

And do not subject us to the final test. For Luke’s community, this most likely meant the temptation of apostasy from the Christian Way – not some kind of character-building exercise – but something deadly and final. 2000 years after Luke, most of us are probably more familiar with Matthew’s way of expressing this petition : “**Lead** us not into temptation” (Mt 6:13). It can be confusing : would “Our Father” really “lead us into temptation” ? Recently, Pope Francis has proposed that this might be better rendered as “Do not let us **fall** into temptation.” We English-speaking peoples might want to think about that change, as other language groups have already done.

Jesus and his disciples are on their way now to Jerusalem, a place that he knows very well will mean his death. Just as they are only getting around to asking him to teach them to pray now, his friends also haven’t paid too much attention to his predictions of his imminent Passion and death. Soon, they will have a rude awakening. Soon, too, they will learn in a painful but powerful way that the way of prayer they learned on this dusty afternoon along the road, the attitudes called for by this prayer and the One who taught it to them, will be all that they have left, but that they will be more than enough. May we discover the same thing. Amen.

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Genesis 18:20-32 ; Psalm 138:1-2, 2-3, 6-7 ; Colossians 2:12-14 ; Luke 11:1-13

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