

1st Sunday in Advent+ 1 Dec 2024 + Relational Prayer

As we begin Advent this weekend, Jesus warns us in our Gospel to *beware that your hearts do not become drowsy...be vigilant at all times and pray...* And so as we spend this Advent diving deeper into prayer, I'd like to recall something we said last weekend: that prayer is a relationship. It is a grace: it is pure gift. Most of us adults have a hard time receiving: gifts, complements, and even love. Reception requires vulnerability, and we like to be in control. We want to be in control, because we've all been hurt, and so we want to do all we can to make sure we don't get hurt yet again. It's understandable, but it's not what God wants for us. And it's very often from this utter poverty that we finally cry out to God, seeking more: seeking salvation. And it's at this very point that we realize God has been reaching out to us all along.

John Ch. 4 is a great example of this dynamic. Jesus is in the land of the Samaritans, the so-called the "impure ones," and encounters a woman. Breaking all social conventions, Jesus speaks to her, asking her for a drink of water. She is shocked that not only a man, but a Jewish man is talking to her, and asking her for a drink. So Jesus replies: *If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him and he would have given you living water'* (Jn 4:10). Now this woman has been married 5 times, and is currently living with another man. As such, she was probably a social outcast at that time, as evidenced by her going to the well at the heat of the day. Even more, we can see a deep inner thirst in her heart. She was desperately trying to fill a void that no man, no husband could ever fill. If only she knew the gift of God—the fulfillment of all her desires! If only she knew who was asking, she would have asked him for living water!

And so in a beautiful act of humility, she does ask, boldly: *sir, give me this water, that I may not thirst, nor come here to draw* (Jn 4:15)! *Give me!* It sounds almost childish, but I think it is more child-like. Her desire is bold, we might even say it is raw. She is sick of drawing water, yet never having her thirst quenched. She is ready to be filled.

I mention this passage because I think it is a good image of the way of prayer that I want to consider today: that is, praying with the *desires of our hearts*. It may seem strange at first to think of our desires as a place to enter into prayer. Yet St. Augustine, whom no one would ever accuse of being a theological lightweight, once wrote, *the desire of your heart is itself your prayer. Therefore, if you wish to pray without ceasing, do not cease to desire*. If that's not convincing, let's consider God's own word: Psalm 63, which prays:

O God, you are my God, for you I long; for you my soul is thirsting.

My body pines for you like a dry, weary land without water.

For your love is better than life, my lips will speak your praise.

My soul shall be filled as with a banquet, my mouth shall praise you with joy.

On my bed I remember you. On you I muse through the night, for you have been my help.

So how does the Psalmist pray? First, by seeking the Lord with the thirst of his heart and soul. He knows only God can satisfy his heart. He then praises the Lord—vocal prayer. Finally, he “muses” on the Lord in the night—we see here mental prayer. Now you may be thinking, ‘well ok, the Psalmist is holy, but I’m not that holy. I can’t say that my desires are always for God.’ Good! That’s honesty, that’s humility. But let’s push that further. Because I would bet that if we do, we will find that in the end, all of our longings are the same as those of the woman at the well and the Psalmist: *for you my soul is thirsting*.

Now if this way of prayer sounds a little foreign to you, consider St. Therese, the Little Flower, who once said: *For me, prayer is a surge of the heart; it is a simple look turned toward heaven, it is a cry of recognition and of love, embracing both trial and joy*. We can all do that. We can all lift up our hearts to God. In fact, some of the most powerful prayers are as simple as “*God, I really need you right now. Please help me!*” But if you would like a little more concrete method of this prayer of the heart, I would like to offer a simple way, that is easy to remember by the acronym *ARRR*.

So first, A for ***acknowledge***. As you enter into prayer, simply *acknowledge* the truth: that God is your Father who loves you, and cares about what is going on in your heart. This is not naval-gazing. Rather, the act of acknowledging the truth in your deepest thoughts, feelings, and desires can uncover the lies, fears, sins, and wounds that might otherwise fester beneath the surface, and infect your entire life, unbeknownst to you.

Next, the 1st R: ***relate***. That is, tell the Lord about what you have just acknowledged. Don’t hold back; He can take it. Yes, He already knows about that anger, hurt, joy, and sorrow that you have been carrying. But He wants to hear it from you. And it honors Him when you are open and honest with Him, because it shows that you believe that He is listening. It puts you in the posture of a child before his Father, which is the only way to enter the Kingdom.

The 2nd R: ***receive***. This one is the hardest, because we are impatient people. In Scripture, this step is called *waiting upon* the Lord. Waiting for a Word, an image, a memory, a Scripture verse, a song, *anything* from God. Sometimes He is silent. That’s ok. It doesn’t mean He isn’t listening or that He doesn’t care. You may have to wait upon Him. Oftentimes the greatest comfort is just the presence of the One Who loves you enough to be with you.

Finally, the 3rd R: ***respond***. If the Lord has spoken to you in some way, how is He calling you to respond? And will you do it, or is there resistance there? If so, tell Him about that too. Struggle with the Word. Be honest, and let Him gently soften your heart. Or, if the Lord is silent, the response may be simply an act of faith in His nearness, and trust that His response will come when you are ready for it, together with the grace to respond.

What is helpful about this method is that it is just a *relationship*: a dialogue with the living God. And the more we get to know God, the more we realize it is true: He is our Good Father. And our souls will only find true rest, when they rest in Him.