

“Lord, teach us to pray.”

Lk 11:1

Two weeks ago we heard the parable of the Good Samaritan, and learned that love of our neighbour is not an optional extra for Christians but is an integral part of our Faith and life. Last week we heard the account of Martha and Mary, Martha being fretful about many things whilst Mary sat at her Master's feet. We learned that attending to our chores is not sinful, but that becoming anxious and fretful about earthly concerns may be, especially if it comes at the expense of not listening to the voice of God. It was also suggested last week that in Luke's Gospel our eyes are being drawn from the very practical aspects of our Faith, such as helping neighbours in distress, upwards towards the presence of God as we sit at His feet and listen to His voice. Today, Luke takes us up to the next level, that of prayer, by which our actions here below are raised up to a supernatural plane as we participate in the goodness of God Himself. And just as Our Lord was asked by His disciples to teach them how to pray, so it is still a common request by parishioners today. 'I don't know how to pray,' is a common theme. So, what is prayer?

The first thing to say about prayer is that it is much easier than many people think. And the best place to start with prayer is simply to start praying! Never mind for the moment about theories or forms of prayer. Prayer is chiefly something we do, not something we think about or even feel. Prayer is something we *do*. Prayer is not meant to be a sort of intellectual assault course which demands huge amounts of understanding. If it were, then clever people would be better at praying than the rest of us. But that's not how prayer works. Neither is prayer about feelings. It might be nice to come away from a few minutes of prayer with a warm and rewarding set of feelings. These are what the saints call 'sensible consolations,' and are fine as far as they go. But they are not what prayer is about. After all, if

prayer were chiefly about feelings, then the chances are we would only pray when we felt like it, and that is certainly not the basis of a fruitful prayer life! No, prayer is not something we feel or even think. Prayer is chiefly something we do.

So, what is it that we do when we pray?

First, as has been said before, it is worth remembering that there are four types or categories of prayer: adoration, contrition, thanksgiving, and supplication. When we pray, we are either adoring or worshipping God, or expressing our sorrow for sins, or thanking Him, or asking Him for what we need. Some prayers, of course, may be a mixture of all of the above. A.C.T.S. Adoration, Contrition, Thanksgiving, and Supplication. A.C.T.S.

Second, it is worth remembering that these four acts of prayer can take different forms, oral, meditative, or contemplative. Oral prayer is when we use words, either set prayers like the Our Father or the Hail Holy Queen, or litanies or the rosary and so on, or words that we come up with ourselves. Much of the Mass is oral prayer.

Meditative prayer is when we spend time pondering on a particular thought, or theme, or topic. We might take a line from the Gospel passage of the day and mull it over, thinking about it from every angle, and trying to unpack it so that God's voice comes through and we can hear what He is trying to say to us.

Contemplative prayer, on the other hand, is when we simply look; when we gaze upon the face of the Lord, in the Blessed Sacrament for example, and do not try to put anything into words. We just gaze upon Him. I'm sure you know the story from the life of St John Vianney, the Curé d'Ars: the saint came across a man sitting in the church day after day, but seemingly doing nothing. He didn't have a prayer book in his hands nor even a set of rosary beads. Eventually, St John Vianney asked him what he was doing. The man replied, nodding towards the tabernacle where the Blessed Sacrament was reserved, 'I sit here and look and Him, and He sits there and looks at me.' *That* is true contemplation. If you have

ever been in love, and simply wanted to be in the company of the person you loved and to look upon him or her, then you get the picture.

So, the four acts of prayer – adoration, contrition, thanksgiving, and supplication – can be carried out in one of three ways, through oral prayer, through meditation, or through contemplation. Once we have said this much, we have actually said quite a lot about prayer, and we have a good starting point for our own prayer life.

Next week, when the Gospel is about the man who built a bigger barn to store his bumper harvest, we shall look at the *object* of prayer, that is, not *how* to pray but *why* we pray.