

Prayer in a Time of Pandemic

Yesterday I received an email from a friend who is very poorly. He is not suffering from the Coronavirus but he has a deteriorating condition that is incurable. He tells me that things are not good at the moment but that, "I must remember Luke 22:42." I am not someone who instantly knows a Scripture reference like that, but I was fairly sure that I knew what this one was without having to look it up, "Father, if you are willing, take this cup away from me. Yet not my will but yours be done."

This is Jesus' "Agony in the Garden", as we call it. It is at the same time his lowest moment, and his greatest act of trust, of faith, in his Father's will at the beginning of his Passion. Luke's description of the scene is powerful, "In his anguish he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat became like drops of blood falling to the ground." (22:44) Desperately wanting things to be otherwise, he nonetheless abandons his will to that of the Father. There is no greater illustration of heartfelt prayer than this.



Many years ago, in an RE class in school, I was taught a mnemonic to help illustrate the four elements of prayer: ACTS. The letters stand for Adoration, Contrition, Thanksgiving and Supplication. Whenever we pray, we are offering praise and worship to the One from whom all things have their life and being. We ask pardon for our sinfulness. We give thanks for all that God gives us, and finally we pray for our own needs, and the needs of others.

Look at the structure of the Mass, or browse through the great biblical book of prayers, the Book of Psalms, and we find "ACTS" fleshed out for us. Here we find all aspects of prayer laid out before us. Whether we are engaged in a few minutes of prayer each day, a day of prayer or a week of prayer, we always praise and worship our God, ask pardon of our sins, give thanks for all the blessings we have received, and ask for our needs of the moment.

In this time of pandemic we are called on to renew our faith in the manner of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. God knows what it is we want, even before we ask for it. Jesus tells us this just before he teaches the Our Father to the people gathered in front of him at the Sermon on the Mount (Mt. 6:8). In offering prayers of petition, we know that God already loves us. We do not pray that God will change. God does not change no matter how many prayers we might offer up. God always remain the same: loving us without condition or reserve. We pray, like Jesus in the Garden for things to pass, to get better, but also that our wills be in tune with those of our loving Father. We pray, as always, "Thy will be done".

At this time we especially ask God to be with all those suffering from illness, caring for others, anxious for others, searching for medicines to relieve symptoms and ultimately for a vaccine that will counteract the virus, and above all that God will hold us all safely "in the palm of his hands"(Is. 41:13), and we do so firmly rooted in the example of faith shown us by Jesus himself.

For further reading:

Richard Leonard sj, *Why Bother Praying?*, Paulist Press, New York, 2013.

Richard Rohr ofm, *Breathing Under Water – Spirituality and the Twelve Steps*, St Anthony Messenger, Cincinnati, 2013.