

29TH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME, C

THE CONNECTION BETWEEN PRAYER AND ACTION

“Jesus told His disciples a parable about the need to pray continually and never lose heart” (Luke 18: 1)

Our World in Context: We live in very challenging and life altering times. The war between Russia and Ukraine has not only dragged longer than anyone thought it would, but it has acquired multifaceted dimensions with imminent most devastating humanitarian crisis of the twenty-first century. The ripples effects of this coupled with other variables have resulted in a global inflation with unexpected economic and financial depressions. The Pound Sterling that topped the stock market is tumbling, and here we seem doomed in energy and electricity bills escalation. The immigrants are pouring in through every corner of our borders; poverty and unemployment are soaring, and the gaps of the divide between the privileged and the needy are gulping larger. This unfortunate picture of our world presents a world in dire need of divine intervention. That divine intervention can come about when men and women raise their hands, minds, hearts and voices in prayer, persistent prayer. This is exactly what the Readings at today’s Mass invite us to do. To pray without losing heart.

To Pray is to Persist: We can understand prayer, in the thought of St. Therese of Lisieux, to be “the lifting up of our minds and hearts to God.” In other words, prayer is a form of communication with God; it means to have a relationship with God. In the Gospel (Lk. 18: 1-8) Jesus uses the Parable of the Unjust Judge or the Parable of the Persistent Widow to emphasise the “need to pray continually and never lose heart”. It is instructive to note that twice so far when Jesus teaches us about prayer, He accompanies it with an emphasis on persistence. Therefore, prayer is not supposed to be a one-off exercise – it is supposed to be a continuous, consistent, and persistent action of the followers of Christ, who are called Christians. St. Paul urged his early converts and all of us, more than once, to pray continually, without ceasing (1 Thessalonians 5: 17-18; Philippians 4: 6; Ephesians 6: 18). Prayer is thus expected to be our way of life, and indeed our way to God through Christ, Who teaches us to pray. If, as understood earlier, prayer is a relationship with God, then it follows that we must maintain that bond through constant communication.

Connection Between Prayer and Action: The First Reading of today (Exodus 17: 8-13) presents Moses “on the hill” with his hands raised and stretched out holding the “rod of God” in his hands because Israel led by Joshua was at war against the Amalekites. If Moses’ hands were raised, the Israelites had the advantage in battle. Like the “Old Moses”, Jesus, the “New Moses”, was “on the hill” of Calvary with hands raised and stretched out, nailed to the wood of the Cross. Moses was not at the battlefield, but his prayerful posture guaranteed victory to the Israelites. His action had immediate effects on the outcomes of the battle. Likewise, Jesus was not and is not at war against the powers that torment us, but His death, resurrection and ascension impact evidently on the results of our battles with the Ancient Serpent. Just as the action of Moses, from a distance, had effects on the results of the battle, so Jesus’ role at His Father’s Right Hand has immediate effects on our prayers, which many times are battles against the “Amalekites” in our lives. By his action, Moses was standing in the gap for the children of Israel against their enemies; Jesus continues to stand in the gap against all our enemies. In the same way, we are invited to stand in gap for each other against our enemies, who are “prowling like a roaring lion, looking for someone to eat” (1 Peter 5: 8). Every good prayer has positive impact on our actions and what happens to us.

The Need for Prayerful Support: Moses’ hands grew weary and needed to be supported with stones, but more so by Aaron and Hur. Yes, dear friends sometimes we too can grow weary in prayers. Sometimes we may not find the right words. Sometimes the experience can be dry, tepid, and insipid. Then we need to be supported. At such times, we need to pray with others and others to pray for us. Therefore, we need to intercede for one another. This is why communal prayers, in family, Church, fellowship, school, office, etc is very important. Jesus assured us: “Wherever two or three are gathered in My Name, there I am with them” (Matthew 18: 20). As baptised Christians, filled with the Spirit of God, we have a duty to intercede for one another in prayer. The Holy Word encourages us to “pray for one another” (Ephesians 6: 18; James 5: 16; 1 Timothy 2: 1)

Be Persistent to the End: The need to pray persistently which is the reason Jesus told this parable is lucidly revealed in the fact that Moses’ hands had to remain in that position “till sunset” to guarantee the final onslaught of the Amalekites. Sometimes we are satisfied with little answers or small victories, and we refrain from continuing in our prayers for greater results or the ultimate victory.

Sometimes the answers come in small doses, and we must persist to the end to experience the fullness of divine providence in answer to our prayers.

The Example of the Woman: The woman in the parable of Jesus presents another slant to consider in our prayers, that is, those moments when our prayers are not or seem not to be answered. What do we do? The woman in Jesus' parable that was ignored by the unjust judge severely provides a model – she kept going! She was undaunted and determined. Her case was hopeless because the judge was not only unjust, but “he had no fear of God nor respect for man.” Such a man would have been the most difficult to persuade or even compel. Our love for this woman is that even in that situation, she would not give up. Our case is very different, unlike the unjust judge, our God is loving, merciful and forgiving. Even when He judges us, His judgement is soaked in the oil of compassion. Just as the persistence of the widow paid off to the widow's advantage, so too God does not fail to answer us when we persist in praying. Jesus draws the great lesson from there and assures us that God will surely see justice done for us, His children who cry to Him day and night, even when He delays. He will do it and do it speedily. Remember what God said to Habakkuk about two Sundays ago: this vision is for its own time, write it down for come, it must: “if it comes slowly, wait, for come it will, without fail” (Habakkuk 2: 3). Patience in prayer is a special grace we should all be asking for because we are dealing with a patient God, Whose timing is very different from ours. For Him, “A thousand years are like yesterday, come and gone” (Psalm 90: 4; 2 Peter 3: 8).

My dear friends, we are reminded that our life as Christians must be a life of prayer. In our prayer, we must adopt the attitude of trust and hope, which would enable us to be patient, persevere and persist with the assurance that God will answer us in His way, at His time, for the reasons best known to Him. Never give up on God. Never stop praying because “Our help is in the name of the Lord who made heaven and earth” (Ps. 120: 2).