

Catecheses on the Lord's Prayer



*Pope Francis at General Audience, St Peter's Square, 11th September 2019.
Photo by Fr Keith.*

Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning!

Today we begin a series of catecheses on the Lord's Prayer.

The Gospels have consigned to us very lively portrayals of Jesus as a *man of prayer*. Jesus prayed. Despite the urgency of his mission and the pressure from the many people making demands on him, Jesus feels the need to withdraw in solitude and pray. Mark's Gospel recounts this detail to us from the very first passage about Jesus' public ministry (cf. 1:35). Jesus' inaugural day in Capernaum has ended in a triumphant way. Once the sun has set, multitudes of sick people have reached the door where Jesus is staying: the Messiah preaches and heals.

The ancient prophecies and expectations of so many suffering people are fulfilled: Jesus is the God-with-us, the God who frees us. But that crowd is still small when compared to the many other crowds that will

gather around the prophet of Nazareth; at certain times the gatherings are oceanic, and Jesus is at the centre of it all, the expectation of the peoples, the fulfilment of the hope of Israel.

Yet he slips away; he does not end up being a hostage to the expectations of those, who by then, had declared him a *leader*, which is a danger for leaders: to be too attached to people, not to keep their distance. Jesus realizes this and does not end up being a hostage to the people. From the very first night at Capernaum, he shows he is an original Messiah. At the end of the night, when dawn is already breaking, the disciples are still seeking him, but are unable to find him. Where is he? Until Peter at last tracks him down in an isolated place, completely absorbed in prayer. And Peter tells him: “Every one is searching for you”! (Mk 1:37). The exclamation seems to be the appropriate phrase for an overwhelming success, proof of the successful outcome of a mission.

But Jesus says to his own that he must go elsewhere; that it is not the people who seek him, rather it is above all he who seeks others. He must therefore not put down roots but remain a constant pilgrim on the roads of Galilee (vv. 38-39); as well as a pilgrim towards the Father, that is: praying. On a journey of prayer. Jesus prays.

And it all happens during a night of prayer.

In some passages of Scripture it seems to be first and foremost Jesus’ prayer, his intimacy with the Father, that governs everything. It is so, for example, especially on the night at Gethsemane. The final stretch of Jesus’ journey (by far the most difficult of those he has undertaken thus far) seems to find its meaning in Jesus’ continuous listening to the Father. Certainly not an easy prayer, indeed a truly ‘agonizing struggle’ in the sense of the athletic spirit, yet a prayer that is able to sustain the way of the Cross.

Here is the essential point: *Jesus prayed* there.

Jesus prayed with intensity in public moments, sharing the liturgy of his people, but also seeking withdrawn places, away from the turbulence of the world, places that allowed him to dwell in the

privacy of his soul: he is the prophet who knows the stones of the desert and goes up high into the mountains. Jesus' last words before dying on the Cross are words from the psalms, that is, of prayer, the prayer of the Jews: he prayed with the prayers that his mother had taught him.

Jesus prayed like all men and women in the world pray. Yet his way of praying also contained a mystery, something that certainly did not escape the eyes of his disciples, since the Gospels contain that plea that was so simple and immediate: "*Lord, teach us to pray*" (Lk 11:1). They see Jesus praying and they want to learn how to pray: "Lord, teach us to pray". And Jesus does not refuse, he is not possessive of his intimacy with the Father, but rather, he came precisely to introduce us to this relationship with the Father. And thus, he becomes the teacher of prayer to his disciples, as he undoubtedly wants to be so for all of us. We too should say: "Lord, teach me to pray. Teach me".

Even if we may have been praying for many years, we still have to learn! Mankind's prayer, this yearning which arises so naturally from our soul, is perhaps one of the deepest mysteries of the universe. And we do not even know whether the prayers that we address to God are effectively those that he wants to have addressed to him.

The Bible also gives us testimonies of inappropriate prayers, which in the end are rejected by God: It is sufficient to recall the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector. Only the latter, the publican, goes home from the Temple justified, because the Pharisee was proud and he liked people to see him praying and he feigned prayer: the heart was cold. And Jesus says: this is not justified, "for every one who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted" (Lk 18:14).

The first step to prayer is to be humble, to go to the Father and to say: "Look at me, I am a sinner, I am weak, I am bad": each one knows what to say. But one always begins with humility, and the Lord listens. The Lord listens to humble prayer.

Therefore, on beginning this series of catecheses on the prayer of Jesus, the most beautiful and just thing that we all must do is to repeat the disciples' appeal: "Teacher, teach us to pray!". It would be beautiful during this Season of Advent to repeat: "Lord, teach me to pray". We can all go somewhat beyond this and pray better; but asking the Lord: "Lord, teach me to pray". Let us do this during this Season of Advent and he will certainly not allow our invocation to go unheard.

- POPE FRANCIS, *Wednesday, 5 December 2018*

