

What would it have been like to see Jesus at prayer?

It was not unusual for Jesus to pray alone in the presence of his disciples.

Today, we are told: **"Once Jesus was in a certain place, praying, and when he had finished, one of his disciples said, 'Lord, teach us to pray'."**

To see the disciples sitting all around on the grass, on a rock, on a fallen tree – doesn't take much imagination – just watching the Lord at prayer.

It must have been a profoundly moving experience.

For us, prayer is a graced moment when we stop what we're doing. We put aside the things that preoccupy us and, from deep within ourselves, we become aware of God's love for us. Consequently, we reach out in response to God. Prayer is a moment of *communion* with God in which our faith embraces Him, and we surrender ourselves to Him.

What prayer was for Jesus we cannot really know. His relationship with the Father was profoundly different from ours. That's why Jesus never at any time spoke of 'our' Father.

He always spoke of *my* Father, or *your* Father.

That is also why Jesus said, in answer to the disciple's request: **"Say this when you pray..."**

In addition to wanting to pray, they wanted to learn to pray well. The first lesson here for you and me is clear – the first requirement for real prayer in response to the love of God is to *want* to pray – to *desire*.

The second lesson is equally apparent.

Essentially, our prayer must be *within* the prayer of Jesus, within the unfolding plan of God. We constantly need to ask ourselves,

"What does my prayer have to do with the concerns of God and the coming of His kingdom?"

To put it more simply: *"What does my prayer have to do with God?"*

You may find this notion a little surprising, even puzzling, but it's possible for us to pray in such a way that our prayer has little or nothing to do with God.

Without realising it, we can become so self-absorbed that our horizons shrink and we become entirely focussed on our own anxieties and concerns. Then, God becomes merely a supermarket or a welfare agency, the handy repository of those things we *think* we need.

When we do make legitimate petitions, our prayer expresses our worship and love of God.

Additionally, our prayer expresses a desire that – above all – God's Kingdom will come.

Sadly though, it's possible for our prayer to overlook the prerogatives of God and actually lead us away from His Kingdom. That's why Jesus says: **"Say this when you pray:**

**Father,
may your name be held holy,
your Kingdom come."**

This is the proper starting point for all prayer because this was always the starting point for Jesus. Asking God for His Kingdom to be the benchmark of all our desires enables us to receive much spiritual light.

This enlightenment casts its radiance on all our petitions, without which we will end up being absorbed in our own kingdom, not God's Kingdom.

This revealing radiance will tell us if our prayer has to do with the Kingdom of God, our journey to holiness, or our becoming like Jesus.

Alternatively, asking for God's Kingdom to come will reveal if our prayer consists of impertinent requests for impossible exemptions from the human condition. If our prayer is of the latter kind, it's not within the prayer of Jesus; rather, it's a rebuke to God. Because this kind of prayer suggests that God has somehow made a mistake and that He's responsible for fixing it.

So, now we can see the importance of the Our Father.

The Kingdom of God is coming; it's close at hand.

Our most urgent task – more important than our house, our work, our health – is to seek God's Kingdom in our lives and to be ready for its final arrival.

In the Our Father, Jesus also invites us to pray to the Father for our daily bread.

On this point, some people wonder, *"Why do I need to tell God what I need when He knows what we need before we ask Him?"*

St Augustine provides an answer to this question which is profound and appealing.

God wants us to ask what we need so that He can prepare our hearts for the gifts He wants to give to us. Additionally, asking for what we need increases our confidence in God.

In the Our Father, Jesus models another important disposition; namely: exercising the humility

required to ask for the Father's forgiveness.

In doing so, Jesus does not simply invite us to ask for the Father's mercy for our trespasses.

Ultimately, in order to receive God's forgiveness, we need to forgive those who trespass against us. If we do not forgive people who have hurt us, we will not be able to receive God's pardon and peace for our own sins.

Psychologists Dr Henry Cloud, PhD and Dr John Townsend, PhD, both of whom are American Christian authors,

explain that the wrong done to us can never be undone, but it can be forgiven and thereby rendered powerless.

To forgive means we will never get in the future from what is owed by the person who hurt us in the past. This grieving can prevent us from recognising what will never be. Contrariwise, precisely because we do let go of others' debt without expecting anything from a 'bad account,'

we are free to be our true selves in order get what we need from God and people who can give.

Without such interior freedom, attempts to receive from our debtors may take many forms. We may try to please those who hurt us in the hope they'll 'pay their bill' and give us the love they owe. Or, we may think that if we confront our debtors enough, they'll see their wrong and make it right.

Or, we may feel that if we convince enough people of how bad we've had it and how bad our parents were, our account will somehow be cleared in result.

Or, we could 'take it out' on someone else; thus, repeating the sin they did to us to even the score. Or, we could continue to try and convince our debtors how bad they are, thinking that if they just understood, they would make it better by paying what they owe.

So much energy is spent in these consequences of unforgiveness.

In contradistinction, as forgiveness enables us to let go of the past, we become free to receive what we would otherwise not be able to receive from God and others.¹

Finally, in the Our Father, Jesus invites us to ask for God's help to overcome the many temptations which seek to turn us aside from the right road.

This is where we ask God to deliver us from every evil. Constant readiness requires constant prayer, but always the kind of prayer that harmonises with the prayer Jesus taught us to pray.

¹ cf. Henry Cloud and John Townsend, *Boundaries* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan EPub Edition, 2012), 296-297.