

## The Personal Prayer Life of Jesus

*Contemplation is always from the inside out, pure gift from God communicating himself, centering prayer is the active effort to enter within and to stand at the threshold of the inner chamber where God dwells, waiting to be touched by God. Contemplation is that divine touch; all other contemplative disciplines are preparation and disposition. (Carmelite Studies, 1999)*

What do the Gospels tell us about *the personal prayer life of Jesus*? Surprisingly much. Luke records Jesus praying ten times, eight more than the other synoptics; John accounts for three separate prayer sequences: the prayer at Lazarus' tomb (in 11:42), the Johannine interpretation of Gethsemane (in 12:27-28) and the beautiful priestly prayer of Christ at the Last Supper (in 17). Jesus always prays alone, though sometimes aloud, so that in this sense He shares His prayer. But while He attends the synagogue regularly (Lk 4:16), there are no descriptions of His participation in the liturgy or in group prayer. The Gospels zero in on His personal relationship with the Father.

Luke is the evangelist of prayer. Besides the personal prayers of Jesus, He has an additional twelve teachings on prayer as such. This emphasis fits the contemplative character of the Lucan Gospel tradition. Prayer, praise, and rejoicing in the Spirit leap out from every page. It is no accident that the Holy Spirit likewise dominates the same pages. Luke's Gospel begins with Zechariah in the temple (1:9) and ends with the Twelve in the same temple "constantly singing the praises of God" (24:53). The first recorded words of Jesus concern His Father's business (2:49) and His last words on the cross are a filial surrender into the Father's hands (23:46 citing Ps 31:5). Jesus prays at His baptism (3:21), in the desert (5:16), before Peter's confession (9:18), on the mountain (9:29), in a moment of exultation (10:21), before teaching the "Our Father" (11: 1), for Peter (22:31), at Gethsemane (22:39-46), and on the cross (23:34, 46). Only two of these prayers, the

exultation and Gethsemane, are found in the other synoptics. Each incident brings out a different teaching about Jesus' prayer, and together they flesh out a perfect model of prayer. We shall organize our reflections in the following Trinitarian formula: Jesus prays to the Father in and for the Holy Spirit. This is the dynamic of Jesus' prayer and it must be our own as well.

### Jesus Prays

Dom Chapman once remarked: *if you want to pray well, then pray much; but if you don't pray much, then pray regularly and you will pray well.* Jesus prays both much and regularly. He prays at key moments in His ministry, and Luke makes explicit the correlation between His prayerfulness and His mission. In Luke, for example, Jesus is praying at His baptism in the Jordan, and it is during this prayer and only after the ceremony that He receives the Holy Spirit (3:21). Early in His ministry the pattern emerges of frequent withdrawals to "deserted places" for prayer (5:16). The motive is not the avoidance of trouble, as Mark seems to suggest (Mk 1:45); it is the demands of a healthy rhythm of prayer and action in His life. Jesus gravitates toward solitude and delights in being alone with His Father; He willingly spends the whole night in "communion with God" (Lk 6:12), "praying in seclusion" (9:18). Prayer is like coming home, the reunion of Son with Father. His prayer is the summit and source of His service of God. He comes out of prayer ready for decisive action, such as naming the Twelve (6:12) or revealing His identity (9:18).

Prayer was the heart of His life. The great mystical events like the transfiguration occurred, according to Luke, “while He was praying” (9:29). These events were interludes. The mountain top was no permanent abode and served to prepare for the stark reality of the cross. When that hour of darkness came, Jesus continued to find His strength in union with the Father. His prayers in the garden and on the cross were not the ecstasy of divine consolation but the bitter dark night of the silence and absence of God (22:39-46; 23:34, 46).

Jesus prays early and late, for long hours that sometimes stretch through the night. His preference is for isolated places and, in Luke’s view, the mountain rather than the plain. Jesus preaches down below, but prays on the heights. Thus Matthew’s “Sermon on the Mount” becomes Luke’s “Sermon on the Plain” (Lk 6: 17). But did Jesus pray only between times, as it were, as the opportunity presented itself or as He felt the need? His pious Jewish contemporaries prayed three times each day; morning, afternoon and night. Did Jesus follow this practice? We would speculate so. Actually the gospel yields clear evidence that He did. In a marvelous display of biblical detective work Joachim Jeremias presents arguments to show that these prescribed prayers were part of Jesus’ religious consciousness. They were a “given” that became part of His thinking and practice.

One of the prayers was the “Shema,” the ancient Hebrew creed drawn from Deuteronomy 6:4-5, which reads: “Hear O Israel, the Lord our God is one Lord. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your might.” The other prayer was the “Tephilla,” a series of blessings eventually fixed at the number eighteen. The creed and the blessings were recited together in the morning and the evening, and the blessings alone in the afternoon. These forms supplied a structure

for Jesus’ prayer life. Their phraseology became His own, so that their phrases spring from His lips in His spontaneous speech. When the lawyer asks what is the greatest commandment, Jesus gives, not just the command, but the whole “Shema” as the response (N& 12:29). Divine titles in the “tephilla,” such as “the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob” or “Lord of Heaven and earth” trip off Jesus’ tongue as familiar, habitual phrases (Mk 12:26; Lk 10:21). So the practice of praying three times daily is something taken for granted by Jesus and his audiences.

But Jesus did introduce radical changes. He not only personalized the formal prayers and extended their length, He revolutionized man’s approach to God by introducing an incredibly intimate filial note. Jesus prayed to “Abba” rather than the “Lord of heaven and earth.”

### **The Profound Shift ... To The Father**

The profound shift that Jesus brought to Jewish piety was to make the “Abba,” which means “dad” or “papa,” the normative title for God in the New Testament. The word is Aramaic, the language Jesus spoke. It was translated into Greek by the more formal title “Father.” Whenever we read “Father” in Jesus’ prayer or His teaching on prayer, we can well suspect that the original Aramaic was “Abba.” The word Abba is not entirely lost in New Testament language. It turns up in Mark’s Gethsemane scene: “Abba (Father), you have the power to do all things...” (Mk 14:36). It is also retained by Saint Paul (Rm 8:15). But generally we read “Father” in the New Testament. Perhaps the intention of Jesus would be still better preserved were we to read, for example, “Our Abba” instead of “Our Father” in the prayer Jesus taught. All Jesus’ prayers are addressed *to the Father*. There is one exception, the cry of abandonment on the cross when Jesus calls out to God in the words of Psalm 22: “My

God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mt 27:46). In other prayers, He savors the title Father, repeating it over and over. In the burst of praise and thanksgiving on the return of the disciples, He uses it five times within two verses (Lk 10:21-22). When His soul is buried in anguish in the Garden or on Golgotha, it is to His Father that he plaintively calls to deliver Him, to forgive His executors, to receive His very life. Whether the prayer is one of joy or sorrow, it expresses limitless trust and expectancy.

In view of the filial quality of prayer in Jesus' teaching the insistence on persistence may come as a surprise. Persistence may seem like an impertinence. Think of the two Lucan parables on the subject, that of the importunate friend who comes in the middle of the night looking for bread (11:5-9), or that of the unjust judge (18:1-8). These parables, however, teach perseverance and nothing more. They certainly do not suggest that prayer forces a reluctant change in God. The Christian persists in prayer, because he trusts, because he has faith (see Lk 18:8). He lays his life open to God on God's terms, in the utter conviction that God will come. The Christian does not trust in prayer but in God, from whom every best gift comes. Rene Voillaume has remarked that the Gospel teaching on prayer can be reduced to two things: faithfulness and the certitude of experiencing God. It is interesting to note that these two touch both participants in the prayer dialogue. Man must be faithful in praying and God will certainly come. This is to say that man shows his faith in God by taking Him at His word, by praying and continuing to pray because God bids him do so (e.g. Lk 11:9-10). The certitude of experiencing God's presence is based on the Lord's own promise: "If anyone loves me, my Father will love him and we will come to him and make our abode with Him" (in 14:23). Faithfulness and the presence of God are the condition and the consequence respectively of the prayer Jesus

lived and taught. It is prayer in and for the Spirit of God.

### **In And For The Spirit**

For Luke prayer is always heard, because its object is the Holy Spirit. Matthew records the following saying of Jesus: "Would one of you hand his son a stone when he asks for a loaf, or a poisonous snake when he asks for a fish? If you, with all your sins, know how to give your children what is good, how much more will your heavenly Father give good things to anyone who asks him!" (Mt 7:9-11). Luke gives his own twist to the last verse: "...how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him?" (Lk 11:13). Is Luke narrowing the field of prayer? Or is he simply offering one example of an object of prayer? He is setting down the one ultimate object of all prayer. Ultimately we are always praying for an outpouring of the Holy Spirit.

Whatever the object we are seeking in prayer, we are implicitly asking for God's love, for the Giver Himself. This follows the laws of all human petition. The baby who cries for food needs the food. But he needs love still more. The food is a symbol of the deeper need to be loved, to be fostered and nurtured. If the food is thrown to him lovelessly and the baby senses a personal rejection, he may reject the food completely and starve to death. The food has become a countersign. So it is with prayer. It is a reaching out for God's love. The good news of the Gospel is the inestimable gift of God's love and presence in our lives. All God's other gifts are specifications and mediations of that divine love. When we pray for good health or financial assistance, we hope to receive what we request. But if God says no, it does not matter very much, because His powerful love is mediated through sickness and trouble as well as prosperity. And love is the meaning of our search in the end. For this reason we say that prayer originates and ends

in the Holy Spirit, the principle of God's life and love in us. To pray we must be en-Spirited, as Jesus was, and whatever we ask, even if it is a material favor or a spiritual gift, will likewise be en-Spirited or we will not receive it. Prayer is thus the vehicle of the Spirit in our lives.

Prayers are always answered, because they ask for and bring an increase of the Spirit. Jesus exemplifies this principle. "In the days when he was in the flesh," writes the author of Hebrews, "He offered prayers and supplications with loud cries and tears to God, who was able to save Him from death, and He was heard because of His reverence" (He 5:7). He was heard, but He also underwent death. He received what He asked for because, ultimately, He sought the comforting strength of the Father's love. Prayer and the Holy Spirit are like two poles of the one circuit. The two are frequently associated in Luke's gospel. The Spirit hovers over Jesus at His baptism, just as the "mighty wind swept over the waters" (Gn 1:2) at creation. The Spirit descends on Him "in visible form like a dove" (Lk 3:22) and constitutes Jesus as the New Creation. Filled with the Spirit He is led by the same Spirit into the desert to do combat with the devil (4:1-2). Later on, like Mary and Elizabeth at the experiences of God's work in them (1:14,47), He rejoices in the Spirit as He observes God's power and love (10:21). This characteristic Lucan response of praise and rejoicing over God's marvelous works is expressly attributed to Jesus only on this one occasion. But Jesus Himself is the most marvelous work of God, a constant living praise of the Father.

The emphasis in Jesus' prayer is communion and identification with the Father. He walks with the Father as He moves through the events of His life, from the Jordan to Tabor, from Tabor to Golgotha. Whether He is transfigured in glory or abased in suffering, He is one with the Father in utter trust and love, and this is what brings Him to the reward of the resurrection and the sharing of His Holy Spirit with his brethren.

### **Jesus Our Model**

The Gospel accounts, especially Luke, supply direction for the Christian's personal prayer life. We are called to relive the life of communion with the Father which Jesus exemplifies. Our first movement in prayer is in a sense horizontal, a spousal union with the Risen Christ. This begins when we say, "Jesus is Lord," in the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 12:3). As sons in the Son, as sharers in the secrets of the Father's life through the revelation of the Son (Lk 10:22), we receive "a spirit of adoption through which we cry out 'Abba!' (that is, 'Father!)" (Rm 8:15). The Christian's prayer life is thus begun. The Christian is less than faithful to Jesus' example if he fails to pray much and to pray regularly. He is called to have a daily regimen of prayer of fixed times and even places, if possible, and at the same time to seize opportunities in the events of his life and in moments of quiet to commune with his Father. This personal prayer life must be for him as it was for his Master, a source and a highest expression of his service to God.