

FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT | NOVEMBER 27, 2022

ISAIAH 2:1-5 | PSALM 122 | ROMANS 13:11-14 | MATTHEW 24:36-44

For Advent this year, we're going to be reflecting on prayer together. So we're going to take the readings for each week and put them in conversation with this book called *Learning to Pray* by James Martin. I know I've referred to him in homilies now and then, but if you don't know who he is, he's a Jesuit priest. He's a friend of Fr. Stephen's actually, and he writes very accessible books. He's good at making complicated things like prayer easier to understand.

One of the things he does right at the beginning is trying to define exactly what prayer is. The definition he uses is very simple. Prayer, he writes, is a "conscious conversation with God."¹

There are a few nice features in that definition. For one, it suggests that prayer can be any amount of time. You don't need to spend hours in silent meditation. It can be just a minute or two. Another good thing about that definition is that it focuses on intention, not on perfection. Or as Mary Oliver said, "Attention is the beginning of devotion."² So just paying attention is a good starting place. And third, it's a focus on conversation. A relationship with God isn't the outcome of a good prayer, it's what allows us to pray with confidence.

That last one is probably the most important. Because when we enter into a conscious conversation with God, we're doing exactly what Jesus did. Sometimes we borrow his words, like when we pray the Lord's Prayer, but as always inhabit his relationship with God the Father through the power of the Holy Spirit.³ So when we pray, we are opening ourselves up to transformation. We expect prayer to change us in some way.

In his book, Martin says that transformation is one of the most important reasons why people pray. He tells a story about getting ready for surgery, and he writes, "I started to think about all the things I was hoping to change in my life... As I enumerated them, these things that were distracting me from being the kind of person I wanted to become seemed, in a word, ridiculous. In other words, I saw the emptiness of whatever was moving me away from God." So this experience of prayer, inhabiting Jesus's relationship with God the Father, changed how he understood his life.

So if prayer is transformative, if it can change us, why don't we do it more? Well, Martin says, because it can change us. He writes that "even the possibility of change can be frightening... [People] might want things to improve, but changing their lives in any way is daunting. A Jesuit priest liked to say, jokingly, 'I'm against change. Even change for the better.'" If prayer helps us discern how we live our vocations, it can also mean changes that are not convenient or comfortable for us.

That kind of double-edged transformation is exactly what today's reading from Isaiah is about. Isaiah is living in Jerusalem, a city that is trying to compete with the other superpowers around it. They want to be impressive, and they want the other nations to take them seriously. So they're building impressive buildings, stockpiling weapons, trying to have a flashy, world-class city so that everyone will want to go to Jerusalem.

And the prophet Isaiah arrives on the scene offering a vision that suggests just that. "In days to come the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised above the hills; all the nations shall stream to [Jerusalem]." And if you're one of the wealthy, well-connected elites in Jerusalem, you're loving this vision. This is great. Just make the buildings taller. Just

¹ James Martin, *Learning to Pray: A Guide for Everyone* (HarperOne, 2021), 58.

² Mary Oliver, *Upstream: Selected Essays* (Penguin, 2019), 8.

³ Image here from Rowan Williams, *Being Christian: Baptism, Bible, Eucharist, Prayer* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2014), 62.

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make the weapons sharper. Just make the gold shinier. We just need to double down and keep doing what we're doing.

And then Isaiah makes the switch. The nations are not going to stream to Jerusalem because they want to see the latest building project or they want to see the newest McMansions. No, Isaiah says, they will say, "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths." The nations will look to Jerusalem not because Jerusalem is powerful or wealthy, but because the city of Jerusalem is just and merciful. It reflects God's Torah, God's ordering of society.

And this is where the reading gets fun. Isaiah offers a vision for this future society. "They shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more." What is Isaiah describing here? He's describing transformation. A transformation that runs so deep that they don't just put the weapons into storage, and they don't just throw them out. They transform them into the means of a just society. You can imagine that maybe this transformation isn't exactly what everyone had in mind. And luckily for them, Isaiah's vision doesn't come to fruition. But the role of the prophet isn't to give people an achievable way to make things marginally better. It's to offer a transformative vision of a world that reflects God's character. And that's part of what prayer does in us.

Last Sunday, I was out running errands after our interfaith service, and I happened to catch the headlines on WNYC. And the lead stories that afternoon were COP27 in Egypt, which seemed to accomplish little in addressing climate change, a mass shooting that killed five people at a LGBTQ nightclub in Colorado, and a story about survivors of torture in Russia.

So given the scope of the problems we face, what is the role of prayer in all this? It seems ineffective at best. And at worst it might even be offensive. In our lexicon, "thoughts and prayers" has come to mean, "It's really a shame, but what are you going to do?"

Obviously, praying for an end to hate crimes or climate change or torture and then going back to the status quo is obviously self-serving and cynical. But it's equally self-serving and cynical to see these evils as inevitable. Isaiah reminds us that while prayer might not be sufficient by itself, it always remains necessary. It's a way for us to inhabit a more generative reality and open up the possibility of transformation. That story that Martin told about praying before his surgery was about his own personal life, but Isaiah expands it and says it's for all of society.

If prayer means taking on Jesus's conversation with God the Father and growing into Christ, if that's the kind of transformation we're talking about, then it means opening ourselves up to the world's laments. That we may find ourselves weeping over Tuvalu, Colorado Springs, and Ukraine in the same way that Jesus wept over Jerusalem.

And through the power of the Holy Spirit, prayer transforms us to live as the body of Christ in this world. To love the way Jesus loves. To forgive the way Jesus forgives. To serve the way Jesus serves. This is why we pray the Lord's Prayer right before we celebrate the Eucharist. Gathered into one by the Holy Spirit, we are brought into the place of Jesus as we speak his prayer to God the Father, right before we receive his presence here at table, and are sent to serve as his body in the world.

That's the kind of transformation Jesus's prayer creates in us. Not always easy or convenient or comfortable lives. But lives brimming with the love of God that overflows in Jesus Christ.

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