

16th SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

We do not take our spiritual selves seriously if we do not set aside some time to be with, and to listen to God. Most of us say some morning and evening prayers. But, sadly, these prayers often consist of over-familiar words, which we humble in haste while our thoughts race ahead to the tasks that await us. Those prayers are a bit like washing one's hands fully dressed when what is needed is a bath or shower. We need concentrated, dedicated prayer, prayer that is like a hunger that must be satisfied and for which there was no substitute. That kind of prayer always transforms and fortifies us. As Gandhi said, "Prayer is not asking. It is a longing of the soul. It is the daily admission of one's weakness." I know the constant cry from all of us is that we just don't have time..... but that reminds me of a cartoon I received on Thursday.....The doctor is saying to his rather obese client *"What fits your busy schedule better, exercising one hour a day or being dead 24 hours a day?"*

For many people prayer consists of saying prayers rather than praying. In a sense, prayer begins where expression ends. The words that reach our lips are often but waves on the surface of our being. The highest form of worship is silence.

Probably the most beneficial prayer of all is just to be in the presence of God, without saying or doing anything. I reckon that our Catholic understanding of the "real presence" of the Lord in the Blessed Sacrament is one of the greatest treasures of our faith. Just to sit in his presence, as Mary – in today's Gospel – sat in the presence of Jesus. I know I'm really lucky – I am able to take that opportunity most mornings. (Mind you, it certainly doesn't **have** to happen in a Church) But to some this sitting silently in the presence of the Lord might seem a waste of time when there are so many things to do.

To be in the presence of God, without saying or doing anything, is no easy thing. Because as soon as we stop **doing**, we feel empty, even useless. Most people get their sense of self-worth from doing. They don't know how to cope with idleness and stillness. The result is that their lives can be shallow and superficial.

A lot of people tend to equate love of God with social action. Of course prayer can be a cop-out and an escape. But so too can social action. Our action can be a cop-out from seeking God. And without prayer it can become totally self-directed, self-propelled, rather than inspired by God.

Henry David Thoreau lived for two years in a shack in the woods in Maine, USA. And what did he do in that time ? He planted a vegetable garden, read books, and observed nature. But sometimes he did nothing at all. He says, “Sometimes on a summer morning, I sat in my sunny doorway from sunrise till noon, rapt in a kind of dream, amidst the pines, in undisturbed solitude and stillness, while the birds sang around me.”

So what fruits did he reap from that ? He says”

“I grew in those seasons like corn in the night. They were not time subtracted from my life, but so much over and above my usual allowance. It is not enough to be industrious; so are the ants. What are you industrious about ? Fear not that your life will end; rather fear that it may never have begun.”

Some may dismiss Thoreau as an idle dreamer. But we need to spend time in prayer and reflection, if only to sit quietly in the presence of God. This is not time wasted, but time well spent. Each day we should try, if only for a short while, to seek the face of God.

At a superficial glance it might seem that Mary’s part was the easier – all she had to do was sit there – and Martha’s the harder. But on reflection we can see that at least sometimes Mary’s part is by far the harder of the two. It’s not easy to set aside one’s own work and give one’s undivided attention to another person. I know – it’s one of my best sins ! And to give that kind of wholehearted attention to God is not easy. But it’s tremendously fruitful spiritually.

Anthony Bloom says that one of the first people who came to him for advice when he was ordained was an old lady who said “Father, I have been praying almost unceasingly for fourteen years, and I have never had any sense of God’s presence.”

“Did you give God a chance to put in a word ?” he asked.

“Oh, well,” she said, “no, I have been talking to him all this time. Is that not what prayer is ?”

“No,” he said. “I don’t think so. Now what I suggest is that you should set apart fifteen minutes a day, and just sit before the face of God.”

And so she did. And the result ? Quite soon she came once again and said, “It’s extraordinary, when I pray **to** God, in other words, when I talk **to** him, I feel nothing. But when I sit quietly, face to face with him, I feel wrapped in his presence.”

Ultimately prayer is not about words but about communion with God. Prayer is a resting in the presence of God. It’s more a question of staying quiet in his presence than of saying prayers just for the sake of words.