

Jesus, Teacher of prayer (from Pope Francis' General Audience 4th November 2020)

During His public life, Jesus constantly availed himself of the power of prayer. The Gospels show this to us when He retired to secluded places to pray. These are sober and discreet observations, that allow us only to imagine those prayerful dialogues. They clearly demonstrate, however, that even at times of greater dedication to the poor and the sick, Jesus never neglected His intimate dialogue with the Father. The more He was immersed in the needs of the people, the more He felt the need to repose in the Trinitarian Communion, to return to the Father and the Spirit.

There is, therefore, a secret in Jesus' life, hidden from human eyes, which is the fulcrum of everything else. Jesus' prayer is a mysterious reality, of which we have a slight intuition, but which allows us to interpret His entire mission from the right perspective. In those solitary hours - before dawn or at night - Jesus immersed Himself in intimacy with the Father, that is, in the Love that every soul thirsts for. This is what emerges from the very first days of His public ministry.

One Sabbath, for example, the town of Capernaum was transformed into a "field hospital": after sunset they brought all the sick to Jesus, and He healed them. Before dawn, however, Jesus disappeared: He withdrew to a solitary place and prayed. Simon and the others looked for Him and when they found Him they said: "Everyone is searching for you!" How does Jesus reply? "Let us go on to the next towns, that I may preach there also; for that is why I came out" (see *Mk* 1:35-38). Jesus always goes a bit further, further in prayer with the Father, and beyond, to other villages, other horizons, to go and preach to other peoples.

Prayer was the *rudder that guides Jesus' course*. It was not success, it was not consensus, it was not the seductive phrase "everyone is searching for you", that dictated the stages of His mission. The path Jesus charted was the least comfortable one, but it was the one by which He obeyed the Father's inspiration, which Jesus heard and welcomed in His solitary prayer.

The Catechism states that "When Jesus prays He is already teaching us how to pray" (no. 2607). Therefore, from Jesus' example we can derive some *characteristics of Christian prayer*.

First and foremost, it possesses primacy: it is *the first desire of the day*, something that is practised at dawn, before the world awakens. It restores a soul to that which otherwise would be without breath. A day lived without prayer risks being transformed into a bothersome or tedious experience: all that happens to us could turn into a badly endured and blind fate. Jesus instead teaches an obedience to reality and, therefore, to listening. Prayer is primarily listening and encountering God. The problems of everyday life, then, do not become obstacles, but appeals from God Himself to listen to and encounter those who are in front of us. The trials of life thus change into opportunities to grow in faith and charity. The daily journey, including hardships, acquires the perspective of a "vocation". Prayer has the power to transform into good what in life could otherwise be condemnation; prayer has the power to open the mind and broaden the heart to a great horizon.

Secondly, prayer is an art to be practised *insistently*. Jesus Himself says to us: knock, knock, knock. Jesus Himself says to us: knock, knock, knock. We are all capable of sporadic prayers, which arise from a momentary emotion; but Jesus educates us in another type of prayer: the one that knows a discipline, an exercise, assumed within a rule of life. Consistent prayer produces progressive transformation, makes us strong in times of tribulation, gives us the grace to be supported by Him who loves us and always protects us.

Another characteristic of Jesus' prayer is solitude. Those who pray do not escape from the world, but prefer deserted places. There, in silence, many voices can emerge that we hide in our innermost selves: the most repressed desires, the truths that we insist on suffocating, and so on. And, above all, in silence God speaks. Every person needs a space for him- or herself, to be able to cultivate the inner life, where actions find meaning. Without the inner life we become superficial, agitated, and anxious - how anxiety harms us! This is why we must go to pray; without an inner life we flee from reality, and we also flee from ourselves, we are men and women always on the run.

Finally, Jesus' prayer is the place where we perceive that everything comes from God and returns to Him. Sometimes we human beings believe that we are the masters of everything, or on the contrary, we lose all self-esteem, we go from one side to another. Prayer helps us to find the right dimension in our relationship with God, our Father, and with all creation. And Jesus' prayer, in the end, means delivering oneself into the hands of the Father, like Jesus in the olive grove, in that anguish: "Father, if it is possible... let your will be done". Delivering oneself into the hands of the Father. It is good, when we are agitated, a bit worried, and the Holy Spirit transforms us from within and leads us to this surrendering of oneself into the hands of the Father: "Father, let your will be done".

Dear brothers and sisters, let us rediscover Jesus Christ as a teacher of prayer in the Gospel and place ourselves in His school. I assure you that we will find joy and peace.