

My Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

Today Jesus proposes for us three images of the Kingdom of heaven that are truly fascinating. First, he suggests that evil is sewn into the fabric of good even in the Kingdom of heaven. Since he proclaimed that the Kingdom is already here, already now, because He has come into the world, he is simply making clear what most of us already sense. There truly are evil people in the world, along with the vast majority who are really good. There are evil impulses even within ourselves, struggling against our best selves. But, what is most interesting is that Jesus gives us the reason in this parable as to why God does not at once strike down those who are evil, or even root out those evil impulses within ourselves. He tells us, "...if you pull up the weeds you might uproot the wheat along with them," which is to say that God is confident that, in the end, good will overcome evil, and what evil does remain will then be destroyed.

In the next parable Jesus likens the Kingdom of heaven to "the smallest of all seeds", the mustard seed, which when full grown "is the largest of plants. The seed might be likened to that drop of Precious Blood that dripped from the Cross on Calvary that swept over the earth to the point that over a billion people on the earth profess that Jesus is Lord. Or it might be likened to that droplet of water that fell upon our heads on the day of our Baptism that has flooded our hearts, our souls, our minds with a strong and abiding faith.

Again, in likening the Kingdom of heaven to a little bit of yeast kneaded into three batches of wheat flour that has risen into a large and fluffy bread. Perhaps he is suggesting the gift of the Eucharist as the yeast that helps us to rise above ourselves in giving generously of ourselves and our resources so that we can feed the hungry of the world.

Jesus uses these most mundane, every-day things of life, every-day things of the earth, to make ever more apparent that the Kingdom is here, the Kingdom is now. Can we see it? How do we recognize it? How can we know that it is really here?

Whether it's the shooting down of hundreds of innocent people in a passenger plane over the Ukraine or the rockets and troops killing innocent people in Israel and Palestine, there is plenty of evidence that evil seems to be winning the day. Where is the Kingdom of heaven to be found amidst the evil in the world? Those bad habits I can't overcome; the unkind, hateful thoughts I still harbor toward another or others; the selfish, arrogant, lustful, or angry attitude that I just can't shake, why isn't the Kingdom within me rooting them out?

Why hasn't the seed of faith grown within me? I'm still full of doubt, despair, depression. Anxieties and worries are still wearing me down? Why hasn't the seed of faith grown into the largest part of me where I can find peace and live in harmony with myself and with others?

Where is the leaven that will enliven my faith and encourage me and excite me about giving myself in service to God, His Church, and others? Why am I still so full of myself, when the Kingdom of God within me should be helping me to arise above myself, my greed, my selfishness?

In our second reading, St. Paul suggests for us what our problem is, “We do not pray as we ought”. Do you know what to pray for when you go before God? Do you consider your prayer life fulfilling? If not, I don’t know that you are in good company, but you are in plenty of company, since recent surveys on the topic suggest that close to 90% of Christians do not believe they have a meaningful daily prayer life. Let me say that again, close to 90% of Christians do not believe they have a meaningful, daily prayer life.

Some of the best people in the world pray for hours every day for years, and yet the answer to their prayer seems to evade them. This was Mother Teresa’s experience. She sought with all her heart to serve God, to see Christ in the poorest, most broken people on the face of the earth, yet, in her prayer life, she experienced only the absence of God. God seemed to be silent when she needed him most. She could never even say that one of her prayers had been answered.

If that’s how it was for the saintly Mother Teresa, how much more so for the likes of you and me? Yet, it seems some people pray for absurd things—that I get an “A” in the test I never studied for; that tomorrow’s a sunny day so I can play golf; that I can make more money so I can get a larger house or the Mercedes I always wanted—and their prayers seem to be answered almost immediately. What’s up with that? How do you explain it? I can’t! It’s one of those things that remind us that we walk by faith and not by sight. “The Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with inexpressible groanings,” St. Paul tells us.

In Alexander Solzhenitsyn’s, *A DAY IN THE LIFE OF IVAN DENISOVICH*, Ivan endures all the horrors and torture of a Soviet prison camp. One day he is praying with his eyes closed when a fellow prisoner notices him and says with ridicule, “Prayers won’t help you get out of here. Opening his eyes, Ivan answers, “I do not pray to get out of prison but to do the will of God.” That, My Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ, is the prayer of one in whom the Kingdom of heaven is to be found. That’s what St. Paul is telling us today, “And the one who searches hearts knows what is the intention of the Spirit, because he intercedes for the holy ones according to God’s will.”

The mature Catholic in whom the Kingdom of God dwells understands that God is not a vending machine. He's not just there when we need something or want something. He did not create us so that He might serve us, but that we might serve Him and seek to do His Will. Jesus put it this way, "...Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven". That is what needs to be the daily prayer in our lives—that God's will be done in our lives. If you trust that God loves you and wants only what's best for you, that's all you need pray for—His Will be done in your life. If you don't trust in God's love and trust that he wants what's best for you, why bother to pray? You think you might hit the jackpot? Be careful what you ask for. You just might hit the jackpot and it could be the worst thing that ever happened to you.

That having been said, I believe that God understands when we make requests for ourselves. Nothing is more human. But do you really expect him to respond to every passing want and perceived need?

Recently, I ran across an interesting piece of information. Did you know that in the Jewish faith, it is considered unrighteous to ask in prayer for things for ourselves on the Sabbath? The Sabbath is a day of rest, and they believe that even God should be allowed to rest from providing for us. On the Sabbath, prayers focus instead on praise and giving thanks for God's many blessings. If you listen carefully, to the prayers of the Preface and the Eucharistic Prayer that too is the focus of our Catholic prayer. In fact, that is what the word, *EUCCHARIST*, means—*GIVING THANKS!*

Please, don't misunderstand me. There's nothing wrong with asking God to meet our needs. There really is no wrong way to pray. But, trust that God is already aware of our needs, much like the parent who knows what the child wants, but likes to hear him or her ask anyway. However, how much more pleasing to God is the prayer we offer for someone else.

There's a great little story going around about a shipwreck. Only two men survive. They swim to a small, deserted island. They decide to pray. Being of a competitive nature they wanted to know whose prayer was more powerful. So they divided the island and stayed on opposite sides.

The first thing they prayed for was food. The next morning, the first man saw a fruit bearing tree on his side of the island, and he was able to eat its fruit. The other man's side of the island remained barren.

After a week, the first man was lonely and prayed for a wife. The next day, there was another shipwreck, and the only survivor was a woman. She swam to his side of the island. On the other side, there was no one.

Soon the first man prayed for a house, clothes, and more food. The next morning he found a ship docked on his side of the island. The first man boarded the ship with his wife, deciding to leave the other man behind. He felt the other man was unworthy because none of his prayers were answered. God had not blessed him. Why should he?

As the ship was about to leave, a Voice came from heaven, “Why are you leaving your companion on the island?” The man said, “My blessings are mine alone since I was the one who prayed for them. His prayers were all unanswered. So he deserves nothing.”

“You are mistaken, my friend,” said the Voice. “He had only one prayer, which I answered. If not for that, you would not have received my blessings.”

“Tell me,” said the man, “What did he pray for that I should owe him anything?” The Voice replied, “He prayed that all your prayers be answered.”

I love that little story. It reminds us to get outside of ourselves and to focus ourselves on the needs of others. You have a serious spiritual problem if, in your prayer, your focus is all on you, what you want, what you need. Who is on your prayer list?

I hope for one that I am. Nothing gives me a greater sense of confidence, a firmer conviction that everything will be alright, than the blessed assurance that someone, somewhere is praying for me. And, if you doubt for a minute that someone is praying for you, be assured that I am. That is my responsibility before God—to pray for you, to pray for all our parishioners, indeed, to pray for all who live within our parish area, whether they be Catholic or not, That is why I have been sent.

Finally, there is one other prayer that I know will always be answered. “Lord, use me to do your work.” The Lord told us that “the harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few.” If you make yourself available to God, trust me, He will have work for you to do.

You will find in the Bulletin today, opportunities that will be presented to you to work in this vineyard of the Lord that we call our parish. Please pray over them throughout this week, ask the Spirit to guide you into the work that God needs you to do, and then make yourselves available by filling out an application next week, or call the Rectory as the Spirit moves you to make yourself available. If none of the ministries mentioned move you, more opportunities will be presented in the weeks to come. Or, if you see a work or a ministry in the parish that needs to be done and you feel called to do it, call me. We’ll talk! In the mean time, keep praying, “Lord, use me to do your work.”

These, my dear Friends, are the prayers that will always be answered: to do the will of the Father; to pray for somebody else; and to do the work that the Lord needs you to do. Pray these three prayers and I guarantee you will always be praying for the right things, you will see the Kingdom of heaven all around you, and you will experience the Kingdom of God within you. God bless you!