

07 February 2021

Writings: Prayer

In the morning while it was still very dark, Jesus got up and went out to a deserted place and there he prayed (Mark 1:35).

A few months before my ordination to the Priesthood, one of my professors asked me what I thought would be my biggest challenge in Parish life. I answered having to get up in the middle of the night to respond to a hospital call. He replied that would be a challenge but there was probably a greater one. My next response was to celebrate Mass in a prayerful way each day. He said that would also be a challenge but it was not likely to be the greatest one. I then stated the need to find new material so I could give interesting Sermons. He noted that while preaching well was difficult, there would be something even more challenging. When he saw I had no more answers, he suggested maintaining your prayer life. I pointed out that for the past five years in the Seminary I went to Morning Prayer, Evening Prayer and Mass with the community and had time for private prayer. Yes, he responded, but in the Seminary, we tell you when and what to pray. In a Parish, you will be on your own. After thirty-one years of Priesthood, I have discovered making (not finding) time for prayer is a constant struggle for a Parish Priest.

In today's Gospel, after a day of active ministry, Jesus goes off by himself to pray in the early morning. By doing so, he provides an important lesson about how his disciples must learn to integrate prayer into their busy lives.

Prayer, fasting and almsgiving were the three pillars of the spiritual life of most Jews. Many prayed twice a day (in the morning and evening). There were formal prayers which were offered on these occasions as well as those for celebrations in the Synagogue and the major Feasts (Passover, Booths, Weeks). The Gospel of Luke records how Jesus prayed before such major events in his life as the selection of his Apostles; their being sent on their mission and the Crucifixion.

In our story from Mark, Jesus has started his public ministry and is having great success. His teaching with authority, driving an unclean spirit from a man and miraculous healings are designed to give concrete expression to his message "the Kingdom of God has come near". He must have aware of the positive impact he was having on the lives of people. The number of people coming to see him was growing rapidly. Yet, he must have been aware of the danger of being caught up in the busyness of active ministry. It can be exhilarating to be successful and the center of attention. His decision to go off alone to re-connect with his Father likely indicated his desire to put some balance back in his life. As he tells his disciples, his mission was not to stay where it is safe in Capernaum but venture into other areas where he is not known to spread the good news there. His life of active ministry had to remain integrated. Prayer made that happen.

People frequently complain to me they can never find time to pray. With this Covid 19 pandemic, many individuals may have more time on their hands. I wonder how many are using it to develop their prayer life. It isn't that they don't have reasons to pray. Disciples of Jesus need to pray for those who are sick or dying. They need to pray for their families, those who care for the sick and those working in healthcare. They need to pray for public officials who are responsible for making decisions about how to contain the virus and how care for those suffering from it effects, including those who have lost their jobs or businesses. But they also need to pray for themselves to insure their busyness never becomes so focused on the immediate task at hand that they lose sight of the bigger picture. Their motivation should be rooted in the recognition all people (not just immediate family and friends) are their brothers and sisters in Christ. Every individual is made in the image and likeness of God and each must have their needs met regardless of the inconvenience imposed upon us.

For good actions to achieve their purpose they must be rooted in good motives. It is easy to get so caught up in the doing that the reason behind it gets lost. Prayer, as Jesus showed, can help prevent that from happening.