

30th Sunday in Ordinary Time, B – October 29, 2018 – Very Rev. Bryan W. Jerabek, J.C.L.
Cathedral of St. Paul, Birmingham, Ala. – 5pm Vigil, 8:30 & 11am Sunday Masses – 875 words

The gospel this Sunday teaches us some important lessons about prayer – three of them, to be exact. Perhaps we might not wish to see ourselves in the company of Bartimaeus, this blind beggar on the side of the road, but he appears to understand intuitively something that we so often struggle to “get” – he understands in what true prayer consists. We need to pay attention to the lessons that he teaches.

The first lesson has to do with persistence. Bartimaeus repetitively cries out to Jesus. The people try to silence him; perhaps they were trying to maintain a certain respectable appearance and having this noisy blind beggar around was not helping! But for all their attempts to silence him he only cries out the louder: “Jesus, son of David, have pity on me”. Are we this persistent in our prayer?

Well, we might first ask, What are the factors that cause us to stop praying? Discouragement is surely a big factor. We give up praying for a certain intention because we think that God has already said “no”, or that he is ignoring us, or that he does not have time for us. We fail to consider that at times, also, we do not pray as we should: think of last week’s gospel, in which our Lord’s response to James’ and John’s grandiose request was “You do not know what you are asking”! But when we do persist, he often helps us to see that problem, and thus allows us to adjust our petitions accordingly.

The evil one also is very effective in leading us to discouragement. When we are discouraged, he has us where he wants us. Discouragement, in general, is something we must resist and struggle against. God loves us; he is on our side. He is not a God of discouragement. We should not give immediate credit to the devil, though: often, our discouragement arises from our own “need” for instant gratification. But God is not like a vending machine who dispenses what we want whenever we seek it. Bartimaeus shows us that persistence – even patience – is what we need when we pray.

Second, this blind beggar teaches us about being specific and definite in what we seek. When Jesus asked him, “What do you want me to do for you?”, Bartimaeus had a definite request ready. If the Lord were to ask you or me the same question, what would we seek? We need to make a specific or definite request. It does not always have to be something big; in fact, it is good to pray for the small things, also: in doing so, we learn to see that God does care about the little things in our lives; that he is also in the details.

In this regard, I remember a friend who was struggling financially. In situations like that, many often pray generally (“God, give me enough money to live comfortably, or at least to get by”), or they tend to ask for extravagant sums, perhaps even through piously playing the lottery (“Lord, just imagine the good I would do if I won”). This friend took a much different approach, however. When it was getting time to have to pay a bill, she would pray for exactly the amount needed. And it usually worked out that she had the money, one way or another. In this way she grew in her trust of God and saw that he cared about the smaller details of her life.

Third and lastly, the prayer of Bartimaeus leads him to follow Christ. We may ask for all sorts of fine things in prayer, but if those prayers do not lead to our more closely and faithfully following the Lord, they accomplish little of lasting value. Unfortunately, we may sometimes fall into the trap of being a sort of “fair weather friend” of God, praying most fervently only when we need something, but at other times in more of a perfunctory way. Our prayer, rather, should flow from and back to our relationship with him, which must be constant, such that it makes us grow in holiness.

In the end, this is really what prayer is about: growing closer to God and coming to know his will. As the great poet and theologian, Dante, wrote, “In his will is our peace”.¹ May we prefer nothing to God’s will in our lives. A very fine prayer for all of us to say daily is, “Lord, help me to want what you want”. His answers to our prayers do vary. When we have our hearts set on doing his will – come what may – we also learn to see that he only wants what is good for us – he spares no good thing that we need. But he also desires to give his gifts in the context of a loving and faithful relationship, in which we seek to follow him daily.

Therefore, let us persist in prayer; let us be definite in our prayers; and may our prayers make us more faithful followers of Jesus Christ. In short, let us imitate Bartimaeus, the blind man of the gospel, who knew better than all around him how to touch the Lord’s heart and have his prayers heard.

¹ Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy*, “Paradiso”, canto III, 85.