

Third Sunday of Easter, A – April 23, 2023 – Very Rev. Bryan W. Jerabek, J.C.L.
Cathedral of St. Paul, Birmingham, Ala. – 8:30 & 11am, 3:00pm Sunday Masses – 975 words

We are used to reading the passage about the Road to Emmaus and the Supper shared with the Lord there and reflecting on its many connections with the Holy Eucharist; and that is surely a legitimate and proper way to approach it. But it recently occurred to me that there is a great lesson on prayer in this passage, too. And that is where I would like to focus this year, as we return to this very familiar and beloved text of Sacred Scripture.

The first detail that is so instructive for us as we consider this passage from the standpoint of prayer, is how it mentions that Jesus first drew near and began walking with them. Prayer is always God's initiative. It may not always feel that way. But think, for example, about the passage from St. Paul that teaches that no one can say Jesus is "Lord" except by the Holy Spirit. We can lift our hearts to him only because he makes it possible.

Our thoughts thus also go back to an earlier scene in the gospels, where the disciples implored Jesus, "Lord, teach us to pray, just as John taught his disciples". Saint John the Baptist was known to be a master of prayer, capable of sharing and imparting that gift to others. But now they saw this same capacity – or, rather, a greater one – in Jesus himself. They sensed that they could not pray rightly without his help. So it must be for us.

So when we set out to pray, we should ask for the Lord's help. Indeed, once we have done so, he has already come to our aid. We simply cannot reach him without a boost from him. Thus, each day, in the Church's sacred liturgy, when so many pray from that official prayer known as the Liturgy of the Hours or the Divine Office, we begin with the invocation, "God, come to my assistance; Lord, make haste to help me."

Christ drew near to them; we need him to draw near to us, too, if we will pray well. But I have already anticipated myself a bit, for what follows next on the Road to Emmaus is equally important. We see how the Lord, who knows all things, wants them to talk to him about it all the same. "What are you discussing as you walk along?", he asks. But he knew full well! Yet he wanted them to verbalize it, share it, hear themselves speaking about it.

Indeed, our starting point now is the knowledge of who Christ is, handed down to us by the apostles through their successors. Those walking along the way with him did not yet fully have this knowledge, but we do. We know that he is God and man, that he is Lord of all. Therefore, nothing that they were perplexed by or questioning about was hidden from him. He knew exactly what they were thinking and discussing.

They responded with a "yes or no" question: "Are you the only visitor to Jerusalem" – 'you poor, ignorant soul!', we practically hear them thinking – "who does not know of the things that have taken place there in these days?" But he did not grant them a "yes or no" answer. Instead, he replied, "What sort of things?" Again, he wanted them to talk it out; he wanted to hear from them. Yes, he wanted them to hear themselves.

Saint Augustine of Hippo was another great teacher on prayer, and we have many of the considerable number of letters that he wrote to those seeking spiritual guidance. Among them was a Roman noblewoman named Proba, who eventually had to flee for her life to Africa when Rome was sacked in the year 410. And this letter is a masterpiece of instruction on prayer and very relevant to the Road to Emmaus conversation.

There St. Augustine speaks about how, when we make our petitions known to God, it is not as if we are informing him of something new, something he does not already know. No, we do so to enlarge our own desire for the great things he is preparing for us. In other words, prayer changes us; it enlarges our hearts, as we gradually move from the limited and finite things our hearts – unaided – want, to the grandeur of God's plan for us.

And so it was that the disciples, after having this discourse with Jesus that he himself had initiated, and eventually inviting him to remain with them, came to see that their hearts had been burning within them as they spoke to him. They had been distraught and perplexed, looking for answers but never imagining how great those answers might be. And the Lord opened their eyes, gave them to understand, and indeed, gave them his very self.

We would do well to reflect on how our own prayer has changed as we have continued down the road and the Lord has enlarged our hearts and our desires. How we pray now is very likely not how we used to pray; nor is it how we shall pray in the future, if we continue making our petitions known to God, exercising our desire before him. He will keep stretching our hearts and deepening our desire for what he truly wishes to give.

But we ask him to help us – “God, come to [our] assistance; Lord, make haste to help [us]!” – for we sense that without him we cannot do this prayer thing right. “Lord, teach us to pray, just as John taught his disciples!” True prayer is his initiative; it does not tell him anything new; it does not change him in any way. But it does change us and prepare us – as the fruit of our prayer that awaits us is far greater than we can ever imagine.