

Sermon Ordinary Sunday 17 Year C 2022

You may remember that during the recent school holidays I took a group of some of our younger congregants to the National Gallery of Victoria. While in a room delighting in some Flemish masters, I was prompted to introduce the term 'triptych'. It's a neat technical word for what is really one piece of work on three panels, normally hinged so that the two outside panels can fold inward. The particular work we were looking at had the story of the feeding of the 5000 as the central panel, and the marriage at Cana and the raising of Lazarus as the two outside panels. On the reverse of one panel was the virgin and child with a bunch of playful angels, and on the other St Peter in a very luscious garden. Now all these panels would seem at first glance quite unrelated. But the three main panels all depict miracles of Christ. And closer inspection revealed that all the panels really did belong together. While depicting very different scenes and subject matter, they were all clearly from the same hand. There was the same interest in background detail, and of landscapes. And of particular interest to our group was all the different kinds of plants the artist had depicted, and the little creatures in all the panels: lizards, snails, dogs, birds, and even a monkey!

A triptych is three panels, and a diptych, of course, two panels. Perhaps the most famous of two-panel work in western art is the Wilton Diptych in the National Gallery, London. From the 14th century, and English, or maybe French, it is not very large but it is very beautiful. One panel depicts the figure of Richard II kneeling, and behind him, the Saints John Baptist, Edward the Confessor and Edmund the martyr. This panel is dominated by a brilliant gold. The second panel is of the Virgin and Child surrounded by angels. This panel is dominated by an incredibly vibrant blue. Again, very different, but they speak to each other, inform each other. The saints in gold direct their attention to Christ and his Mother. And Christ – the only figure in this second panel in gold – stretches out in his mother's arms to bless the figures past the hinge.

This idea of two panels hinged together to create one work, or at least a work which speaks to and informs the other, can be a helpful way of looking at various passages in the gospels. What is placed before us today is familiar to us, and indeed would seem to stand on its own. However, better sense is made of it when it is kept together with its immediate context. We could cut up the Wilton Diptych, and the Flemish Triptych here with its snails and flowers and lizards. And plenty of similar works have been over the centuries. But *the whole* would suffer for it. So too, today's gospel passage.

What we hear today follows immediately in Luke's Gospel of what we heard last week of Jesus in the house of Mary and Martha, with Martha castigated for her distraction and for her disoriented focus, while Mary commended for choosing the better part, for choosing presence with Jesus, for attending to Jesus. This immediately gives way to the note that Jesus was praying in a certain place, with an unnamed disciple then asking, *Lord, teach us to pray*. This becomes, if you like, *the hinge-point* between the two panels. Jesus models what Mary of Bethany aspires to. And the unnamed disciple seeks a part of this as well. He remains unnamed perhaps to represent us all, all of us searching and questioning, all of us wanting something of 'the better part'. In part, following Jesus is just responding to the call to share in 'the one thing that matters'. Importantly, in the request, *teach us*, is the sense that Jesus can indeed respond to it, that *he can* teach us to pray, that *he can* show us the way. Disciple means to follow in the footsteps of someone. It comes from the word 'to learn.' So, following Jesus involves being ready to learn from him and to accept the lessons he offers.

Now, we do not know how John the Baptist taught his disciples how or what to pray. But it clearly left an impression. It set John and his followers apart. John's distinctive ministry gathered around him a distinctive community. And it seems Jesus' disciples wanted similarly to be distinctive. Jesus' response to the disciple's request to teach them to pray ought to be set *alongside* the earlier story of Jesus in the house of Mary and Martha, because then we can get a fuller picture of what prayer is all about, what it is for, and what it is Jesus is trying to propose here. And it is simply this idea of presence, of *attending* to God. Prayer is, quite simply, making ourselves present to God. And *this* remains a distinctive practice!

So often, though, our prayer appears quite other than that. It can be a fraught and anxious business. Even in the request, *teach us to pray* we might sense some exasperation or frustration. Few of us, I dare say, find prayer natural or easy. It can be hard to apply ourselves to a pattern of prayer faithfully and devoutly. But in the simple request – *teach us to pray* – is a profound insight: we can only pray with a spirit of humility. We don't have it all worked out. We can only pray if we come to the Lord with openness, a willingness to be led and directed by him. And a trust that he will hear our desires, that he will respond to this cry of the heart. The request *teach us to pray* really shows the inner disposition that we all should bring when we seek to pray: that we should willingly place ourselves in the hands of the master.

Now, this position of openness and trust is really what is highlighted in the little parables used to illustrate Jesus' point about prayer. God is trustworthy and true. He will listen to us. He will take our concerns seriously. And *God desires our good!* We turn to God in prayer, and we are not going to find in response stones and snakes and scorpions! *God desires our good.* And if we persist in our struggles and our frustrations, they will bear fruit. Keep banging at the door and eventually it will open!

Prayer can frustrate us because it can feel like we don't know what we are doing. We know we are supposed to 'do it' but we feel we don't do it well. Or we can approach prayer with a motivation of guilt, with an idea that if we don't mention before God every person and situation and world event then we are somehow failing in our prayer. And this can lead to the situation, again, we saw last week in Marth's attitude, of her misdirected focus, of her activism, of taking the focus off Jesus and onto herself: *My sister is leaving me... Tell her to help me....* Prayer, if we are not careful, can be just another form of activism, where the focus is not in fact on God, but on the self, and our works, our achievements, our efforts. Our prayer can be determined more by the rule of law rather than the rule of grace. And this can lead to prayer becoming a kind of misery. Teresa of Avila's little dictum comes to mind: *God save us from gloomy saints.* We might say, *God save us from miserable prayers!* Prayer is not a burden. It is not something we have to do to impress God.

Good desires our good. So that we may receive the graces, the good God offers, we need to remember what we are trying to do in prayer, what our endpoint is, what exactly it is all about. And it is quite simply - to restate what I said earlier - *presence with the Lord.* Keep the panels side by side... Prayer - in Mary of Bethany's insight - is the one thing that matters. It is being attentive to the Lord, being present to the Lord, sharing his company. If we approach our understanding of prayer in this way, it can disarm so much of the anxiety and frustration that can surround prayer.

God desires our good. So, we should hear our Lord say to us, *prayer is a good, so let me give it to you.* It is not a stone, but bread! And through the grace of God, and the wisdom of the church, there are things that can help us overcome that sense of misery, of compulsion, of guilt and frustration. The church has had a lot of experience in helping people to pray, *of facilitating* the gift of Christ's presence. The daily office, the mass, the church's rich devotional treasury *all gifts* Christ gives us. So, accept the gifts, because he desires our good, and so that we may enjoy his presence. Amen.