

The Gift of Jesus, a Galilean Jew, to Humankind

As we have seen throughout these reflections, Jesus' life of prayer flowed from his intimacy with God. Yet his rich personal experience of his Abba was not limited to his pattern of praying alone in deserted places. His awareness of God's presence filled every moment and situation of Jesus' daily life. This intimacy was the source of his desires, teaching, and compassionate engagement in the lives of other people. It was the wellspring of the authority, energy, and wisdom that attracted and transformed their lives. In Jesus' words and actions they could recognize God's presence in a palpable way. Their lives were not the same and this gave birth to a strong desire to remember their encounters with Jesus and share these experiences with other people. When Jesus invited them to be disciples, they, too, wanted to be wrapped in God's presence. They asked him, "Lord teach us to pray." because they wanted to be like him.

Jesus' response revealed the risk and richness of prayer. At first he described the venue for intimacy with God and the need to cross a threshold leading to an "inner chamber." The desire for intimacy must be coupled with openness and trust that God will be present. God's response will be a dynamic and intimate revelation of God's presence within the human heart. Jesus learned that God is already present within every human heart waiting for us. Jesus knew from his own experience that God is not an "other". We do not have to ask God to come from "out there" or wait for a future encounter after we die. Also, Jesus was very clear in his belief that the intimacy he experienced with God was not unique; it is the gift of God for every person.

"But whenever you pray, enter your personal chamber and shut your door and offer prayer to the Father in secret (unlike those who love to be seen praying in public); for your Father who sees you in secret will offer recompense." (Matthew 6:6, translation by David Keller.)

The mutual presence described by Jesus is always available to everyone. It is not contingent on institutional expectations, whether a person is "worthy", or fulfillment of a need for "spiritual advancement." It is pure gift.

The second part of Jesus' response to the disciples' request is what is called "The Lord's Prayer." It is not teaching about prayer. A more accurate title for Jesus' response would be "The Master's Prayer." Jesus' relationship with his disciples was congruent with a pattern of many itinerant Jewish teachers in the first century. The disciples and their teacher, whom they called "master", traveled and ate together, often sleeping outdoors or in local homes that offered

hospitality. Teaching was often outdoors, but the primary “teaching” was the relationship that developed between the disciples and their master. The activity and example of the master along with living together was as important, or more important than words. The disciples who asked Jesus, “Master, teach us to pray.”, were devout Galilean Jews and prayer was already a rich part of their daily lives. They had lived with Jesus “on the road”, listened to him, and seen the power of his actions to heal, feed, and restore people’s lives and dignity. They wanted to be like him and realized that his intimacy with God was the source of God’s energy and movement in his life. As we have seen, “The Master’s Prayer” is a window into the mind and consciousness of Jesus. It expresses everything that was fundamental in his relationship with God and what he had heard from his Abba about God’s desires for human life. It is not ideology or theology. Jesus is proclaiming a very “streetwise” summary of the purpose, vulnerability, and challenge of human life. It is a bold pastoral statement about God’s forgiving and transformative power. “The Master’s Prayer” expresses the responsibilities, risks, and possibilities for all persons who entrust their lives to God.

After sharing “The Master’s Prayer”, the rest of Jesus’ life and ministry continued to be enlightened and empowered by his relationship with God. His manner of life manifested the One he experienced in solitude. On another occasion, toward the end of his life, he reminded his disciples to follow the example of his intimacy with God. His words were congruent with his earlier exhortations about prayer. Jesus was passionate about sharing both his intimacy with his Abba and the intervention of God’s compassion in people’s lives that flowed through him. Jesus offered his disciples a relationship that would enable them to share his union with God and, like Jesus, manifest God’s love and power to heal and restore human lives.

In his intimacy with his Abba, Jesus experienced steadfast love; this love is not contingent on being “clean”, acceptable, or approved. He learned in his “inner chamber” that even though the Torah is a fundamental part of devotion to God and other human beings, God’s love and loyalty is not based on compliance with the law. When Jesus was criticized for sharing a meal with “tax collectors and sinners” (persons who disregard the Torah) he responded, *Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. Go and learn what this means, ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’ I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.*” (Matt. 9:12-13) Jesus, who knew his sacred scriptures well, was referring to the prophet Hosea, who heard from God, *“For I desire steadfast love (mercy) and not sacrifice; the knowledge (experience) of God rather than burnt offerings.”* (Hosea 6:6) The Hebrew word “châçad” or “hesed” means loving-kindness, steadfast love, grace, or mercy. Its root means “to bow in courtesy to an equal.” It refers as well to a life of sanctification and faithfulness to the covenant. Jesus is

reminding those who criticized him that fulfillment of the Torah means having the same loving-kindness and steadfast love toward other persons as God expresses to the people of Israel. Jesus must have been thinking of the prophet Micah, as well: *“He has told you, O Mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?”* (Micah 6:8) This awareness is an integral part of the gift Jesus offers us as a result of his intimacy with God in prayer. And he was adamant that the attitude of mercy he received from his Abba in prayer was the same attitude of God toward every person. This awareness was the watershed of Jesus’ compassionate engagement with people around him, especially “tax collectors and sinners”, the sick, the unemployed, the marginalized, and persons who were in debt and shamed by the wealthy and powerful. In many, if not most, Christian liturgies the congregation says or chants, “Lord have mercy...” This is not a plea for God to change God’s mind about us. It is an expression of our desire to remain in and manifest God’s loving-kindness. This is part of Jesus’ gift to all persons and a motivation to seek intimacy with God.

Jesus’ reminder about the need to remain faithful to intimacy with God was most likely prompted by his strong desire to exhort his disciples to have a more substantive part in what God had begun in Jesus’ life. Although Jesus’ teaching and actions were met with a vigorous and positive response from a variety of people, he was clear that the work was not his own. The gospels present him as one who is aware that God has chosen him for a distinctive role in the manifestation of God’s transformation of society and individual lives. This was demonstrated on one occasion, when Jesus was criticized for casting a demon out of a mute man. He responded, “But if it is by the finger of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come among you.”

At the same time Jesus was aware of growing resistance to his work. His mission and the authority present in his teaching and healing the sick was met with controversy. His life was threatened by religious leaders associated with the temple in Jerusalem whose authority was challenged by the way he sought to “fulfill” the Torah. Jesus’ popularity filled these leaders with anxiety and anger. They feared that he and the crowds who followed him might be the cause of a rebellion against Roman authority and control in Israel. A Roman response could easily end their fragile power and endanger the survival of their religious traditions and identity.

This, too, was a motive for Jesus’ reminder to his disciples. He was not naïve. He knew he would have to “go up to Jerusalem.” He was willing to accept the risks of being faithful to the realm of God that he saw breaking into the lives of people through him. He could not ignore God’s demands for justice, healing, and compassion that could transform people’s lives, including the lives

of the leaders who sought to silence him for the sake of stability and peace. (“May your will be done on earth as in heaven.”) It seems clear that Jesus’ reminder to remain faithful to intimacy with God was motivated by his desire to share his life with God with his disciples and at the same time prepare them for the reality that he would not always be with them. This was not just a “back-up” plan in case he would be executed. It was a firm statement of his belief that God never intended to limit the manifestation of the realm of God to Jesus’ life. He was confident of God’s desire for his disciples. In John’s gospel Jesus speaks plainly about how this will be possible and assures them that they will be able to continue the works God made tangible through his life. Jesus’ words are congruent with what he shared earlier in his mission when the disciples asked him, “Lord, teach us to pray.”

“Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father. I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it...I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. On that day you will know that I am in the Father, and you in me, and I in you...Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them.” (John 14:12-14, 18-20, & 23)

The gift of Jesus, a Galilean Jew, to humankind is this:

Jesus’ life of prayer makes God’s presence and love tangible in a unique way that is accessible for every human being. Every person can experience the same intimacy with God that was the heart of Jesus’ life. The foundation of Jesus’ relationship with God was the time he spent in silence in his “inner chamber”, his heart. This mutual presence created a unity that was the source of his desires, words, and compassionate engagement with other people. It made it possible for God’s divine presence and energy to be tangible in his life. God’s desires for human life were fulfilled in the way Jesus lived. It is not simply that Jesus is an example to follow. That is only part of his gift. Embedded in that example is the life-giving and uncreated energy of God that his life makes possible for other human beings. Jesus did not believe that his way of life and the power present within him was a unique gift meant only for him. He proclaimed that every person who entrusts himself or herself to God will share this same gift for the life of the world.

Although Christians continue to experience Jesus’ presence in a unique way in their common life, his gift is not the exclusive possession of any institution. Just as death could not limit or end

Jesus' presence and the power of God's life in him, no institution or religious tradition can contain his gift or presence. The gift of Jesus, a Galilean Jew, was given before his way of life became the core of Christian living. This does not diminish the integrity of the Christian path or the fruit of its faithfulness to Jesus. It proclaims that the gift of Jesus to humankind knows no limits and is available in a myriad of ways to every human being.