

Prayer
19th Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)
(1K 19:9-13; Mt 14:22-33)

Both the Gospel and first reading show how the mountain is the place where man goes to meet God, the place of prayer. Prayer means seeking God, speaking to God, and listening to God.

Often when praying, we start “saying” our prayers, before actually “seeking” God. We need to first seek His presence, seek His face, seek His voice. And this is not as easy as it sounds. But the more effort we invest in this first step, the more fruitful will be the other parts of prayer.

Jesus “went up into the mountain” to pray. He deliberately got away from the crowd whom he was teaching all day. He dismissed his apostles. He wanted to be alone. He took advantage of the night time when he wouldn’t be disturbed. And he went to find that place on the mountain top, where heaven and earth meet, where he could be removed from the distractions of the world.

Likewise, Elijah journeyed 40 days through the desert to the mountain of God. He was hungry and thirsty. But in order to seek God’s will and find what God needed him to do in his desperate situation, he had to get away.

If we want a strong prayer life, we need the mountain, the desert, the night – we need to find the right place and the right time where we can be alone with God. When Jesus taught the disciples to pray using the Lord’s prayer, the first thing he said was to “*go in to your room, shut the door, and there speak to your Father in secret*” (Mt 6:6). Go to your private room, close off the world, be with God in solitude. This is what it means to “seek God.”

Some good places to pray are: one’s private bedroom; one’s favorite chair; the porch outside; the room with a shrine and holy images. Often, one must leave the house and go for a walk, or find a park. Besides finding the right “place,” one must find the best time: late at night after the house is quiet, or early morning. At some point, the “mountain” will be the parish church or local chapel. Many people attend daily Mass as an integral part of their prayer life, or an hour of adoration each week.

The place of prayer of course, is not just a physical setting, it is the heart. This is what Jesus means by “going into your room and being alone.” Find God in your heart; seek him in the depth of your spirit. To pray, it helps to close your eyes, relax your body and mind so they do not distract. It is better to pray while fasting, before eating, in order to avoid sluggishness.

Elijah heard God in the gentlest whisper of a breeze, not in the raging storm and earthquake. The disciples in the boat, likewise, were not able to recognize or focus on Jesus until they could set aside the fears and panic caused by the wind and waves. It takes a lot of effort and persistence to find that quiet stillness where God's voice can be heard, who literally speaks in Silence.

St. Teresa of Avila (1515-1582), even though she was already a nun, struggled for 18 years to overcome mental distractions before she could really advance in prayer. Eventually, she established a new religious community, the Discalced Carmelites, so that her sisters could more easily ascend the mountain of the Lord to pray, free from the world, free from distractions.

The storm is the enemy of prayer. And yet the storm is a regular condition of our lives, with its threatening waves, howling winds, and oppressive darkness. In the storm and on the waters, one feels afraid and insecure. The earthquake, wind, and fire experienced by Elijah are an external mirror of the interior turmoil he was experiencing, hunted by Jezebel, overwhelmed by the apostasy of his people. Likewise, the waves and darkness overwhelming the boat are an external reflection of the challenges faced by the Church and her apostles in the world. In both cases, prayer is the answer; but in both cases, prayer is a challenge.

Thus even before saying a word to God in prayer, and before being able to hear Him speaking, a big part of prayer is just arriving at the place where you can actually speak and listen to God: not only the physical place, but above all the spiritual place inside which the storm cannot touch.

We must realize that this first step of prayer, "seeking God," *is already prayer*. The struggle to find the right place, the effort to get silent – even if we don't seem to have much success – is already important and valuable prayer that brings grace. So don't give up. Whether it takes 40 days like Elijah, or 18 years like St. Teresa, keep trying to find and ascend that spiritual mountain where you can speak with God and hear His voice and be "beyond reach of the storm." Or, as in the case of Peter, desperately trying to focus on the Lord yet finding himself succumbing to those waves, calling out "Lord save me!"

When we do finally hear God's voice, and find that "place" where heaven and earth meet, we hear God saying what Jesus said to the apostles: "*Do not be afraid,*" "*I AM*" ("It is I"). God's voice and His presence bring peace. It is a peace which conquers all fear, and provides strength to overcome human weakness. Moreover, God is seen to be "over the waters," possessing full power and authority to quiet by a single command the forces of nature, as well as the spiritual forces of darkness. God is Lord of all, sovereign and completely distinct from the storm: "*The Lord was not in the wind – fire, – earthquake*" (1K 19:12).

This fact is so important that the storm is deliberately allowed by God to overwhelm us, so that we might come to faith and recognition of Him alone who is worthy of fear and homage. When Jesus sent the apostles in the boat, he knew what was to transpire. When Jesus went up the mountain to pray, it was for them he prayed. God permits the destabilizing storms in our lives, not to harm us, but to show the true foundation which transcends all the vicissitudes of mortality: Jesus the Son of God, walking upon the waters.

Both Elijah and the Apostles are taught to ignore the distracting aspect of wind-fire-wave-earthquake in their lives, and focus only on God who exists in a place of quiet and peace and strength, and there to worship and pray. God trains us in prayer by means of the storms in our lives.

No matter what happens in life, prayer is the solution. And prayer is first and above all the seeking for God, the listening for His solid and secure voice beyond, and through, and despite wind and wave. In our lives today and this week, let us see past the distractions and personal upheavals in our circumstance, to Jesus the Son of God walking over those waters, who commands us without fear or hesitation to “come” to him.