

Dear Friends,

When the disciples came to Jesus to ask him to teach them how to pray, he gave them as a model of prayer what we call the Our Father or the Lord's Prayer. We think of it as *the* Christian prayer and sometimes call it the prayer of the Christian family, but I sometimes wonder what makes it distinctively Christian - apart from the fact that it was given us by Christ. It does not refer to any particular Christian beliefs and I think could be prayed equally well by Jews and Muslims, all the people of what are called the three Abrahamic faiths descended from Abraham, and perhaps, for all I know, even by people of other religions.

God is indeed one. It is the same God who is present throughout the world and in the hearts of all people, whatever their nationality or persuasion. As we heard Peter say last Sunday, 'God does not have favourites,' so everyone is his favourite, everyone shares equally in his life and love. It is not surprising, therefore, that when people seek God in prayer they should want to say the same kind of thing. We do, however, have different ideas about God, which is why we have different religions, and it is an unfortunate fact of human nature that we like to think that God does have favourites - and we are they! Our religion is the right one, the others are all impostors. This is not a universalist view of God, but a sectarian, tribal one, and once we are launched on this path we can justify any amount of ill-treatment of others who do not belong to our tribe.

The result is the terribly sad scenes that we have been witnessing this last week in what we call the Holy Land. It is holy not so much because it or its people are holy, but because God is holy and this is where he chose to show himself to mankind in special, definitive ways. I first visited the Holy Land nine years ago with a parish group. Before then I used to think, 'As a Christian of course I would like to see the land where Jesus himself lived, walked about and carried on his ministry of making God known, but I do not think it will matter too much to me if I never do.' Having been there once, I do not think that any more. It does make a real difference to one's faith to walk on the same ground where Jesus walked, to breathe the same air, to see the same hills and lakes; so if you ever do get the chance to join a group going to the Holy Land, do take it. Since that first visit I have been back three times and would gladly go again.

One of the places we went to on that first visit was the university of Bethlehem set up by American Jesuits, which has Christian students but also many Palestinian Muslims. We heard of the many hardships put in the way of the students simply in

order to get an education and improve their lives. One girl, for instance, from Gaza, told us how travel from her home to the university was constantly being interrupted and even made impossible by the closing of borders and checkpoints. The university itself had sometimes been closed down at a moment's notice and for no apparent reason. If you want to get a flavour of what life can be like for the Palestinians there is an excellent and moving short film available online, *The Present* by Farah Nabulsi, about a man buying a refrigerator as a birthday present for his wife and encountering unbelievable difficulties even in doing something as simple as this. From what we heard it is all too true to life.

I greatly admire the Jewish people and value our relations with them and our descent from them as followers of Christ, who was of course Jewish, and one can sympathise with their situation as one small country set in the midst of larger and possibly hostile neighbours. It is not surprising that they defend themselves against attacks with what many think is disproportionate force. How we long, as lovers of the Holy Land, for an end to these troubles. What a great example it would be to the world if Jews, Arabs and Palestinians could live together peacefully and co-operate for their mutual benefit. Jewish people believe that the land, the *Eretz Israel*, was given to them by God as their homeland, but others have always lived there as well, and they could so easily be neighbours rather than enemies. It is after all a long time since Isaiah said that the Jews are God's chosen people not to lord it over others, but to be a light to the nations.

After Ascension Day we are looking towards Pentecost, the fiftieth and final day of Eastertide. It corresponds with the Jewish festival of Weeks, *Shavuot*, fifty days after the Passover, which celebrates the wheat harvest and also the giving of the Law at Mount Sinai. For Jewish people it is the Law which is the assurance of God's presence with them, for Christians it is the gift of the Spirit. We will hear on Pentecost Sunday how the Spirit came on the first followers of Christ in order to confirm his continuing presence with them, not as the bodily human person they had known, but as the universal cosmic Christ present everywhere and in everyone by the power of God's Spirit.

In any kind of enterprise the key to success is preparation, like revising for exams. Wheat will grow well, for instance, when the soil has been prepared and the growing plant is carefully tended and nurtured. We need to take time over it - it will not all happen at once - but if we do prepare well then we can expect successful fruit. So the disciples needed to prepare to receive the Spirit and they did so by prayer. After seeing Jesus return to the Father they went back to the holy city and there, in the upper room (perhaps the same location as the Last Supper), together with Mary and

others they waited patiently, 'constantly devoting themselves to prayer,' as the book of Acts tells us.

This time between the Ascension and Pentecost was the first *Novena*, nine days of prayer, which has become a favourite devotion for many people and for many purposes. You may have some particular need or intention you want to pray for over nine days. We all certainly need to pray for peace in the Holy Land and reconciliation between its peoples. There is always a large question about what exactly we are doing when we pray *for* something. Are we reminding God of something he has forgotten, or trying to change his mind to get him to do things he might not otherwise do? But at the simplest level it is just a natural human desire, to place our needs before God and ask him to be with us in them – and then leave the outcome to him. In one sense we do not need to pray for the coming of the Spirit, because he has already come, he is already with us! What we can do is open ourselves to his presence, seek to know him more truly and deeply, and so be able to live our lives in hope and faith, out of the centre which is the presence of God within.

There is an ancient hymn of the kind known as a Sequence which is part of the liturgy of Pentecost: *Veni, creator Spiritus* – Come, creator Spirit. You might like to pray this text each day between now and next Sunday and associate it with whatever particular intentions you have. This would be a good way of keeping this Novena:

*Holy Spirit, Lord divine,
Come from heights of heaven and shine,
Come with blessed radiance bright!*

*Give us virtue's sure reward,
Give us your salvation, Lord,
Give us joys that never end!*

Wishing you every blessing,

Fr. Robin

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