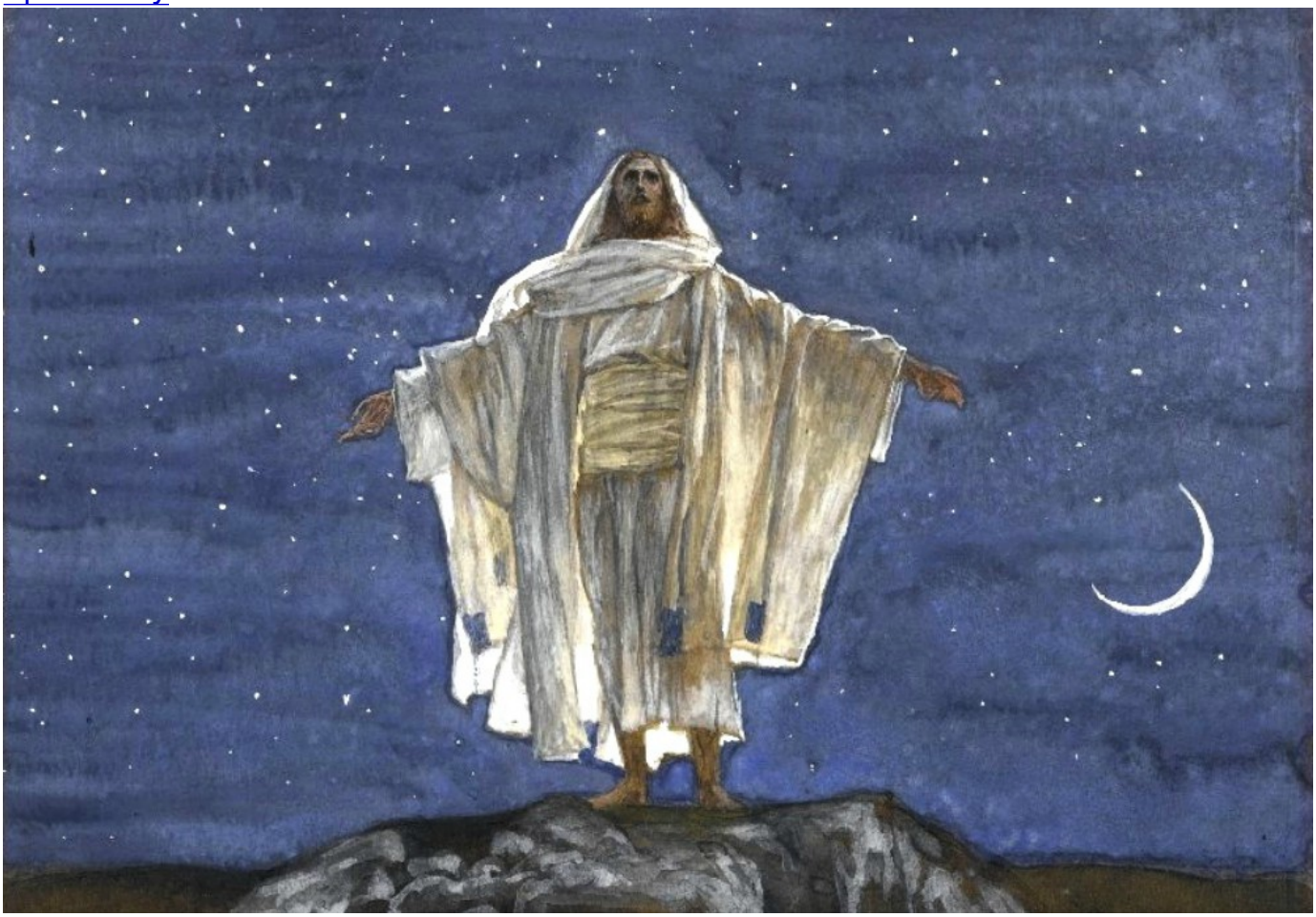
Opinion
Spirituality



"Jesus Goes Up Alone Onto a Mountain to Pray" (1886-1894, detail) by French artist James Tissot (Wikimedia Commons/Brooklyn Museum)



by Thomas Gumbleton

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

August 1, 2019
Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint
Soundcloud

As I began reflecting on these Scriptures for this Sunday, I wondered (and perhaps you do, too) what was it about Jesus when he was in prayer that the disciples found so attractive?

They wanted to discover what happens in prayer because I'm sure they saw in Jesus someone who, even in the midst of the struggles that he was facing on this journey, all the attacks that came against him at different times from the religious leaders, the discomfort of going on a long journey and being outdoors all the time, and yet even in the midst of all his activity and his teaching, he could go apart and be with God in prayer.

I'm sure the disciples saw a change take place in the visage of Jesus. He became very peaceful, deeply in communion with God. It must have been an extraordinary experience to see Jesus in prayer.

Seventeenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

July 28, 2019

Genesis 18:20-32

Psalm 138

Colossians 2:12-14

Luke 11:1-13

That's why the disciples said, "Teach us how to pray. We need to be able to get away and go into ourselves and find God within us as you do, to come to peace, to come to calmness, to come to joy."

So our lessons today help us to understand how to pray and to understand something more about the God to whom we pray.

In that first lesson, I think we discover something that, even though it's offered to us as an example, it's not the kind of example that we should follow in prayer, to think that we have to bargain with God somehow. Abraham, at the time that he made that prayer, it was long before Jesus. God is only slowly being revealed to Abraham and Sarah and the chosen people.

In the beginning of the Letter to the Hebrews, the author says, "God has spoken in the past to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in different ways, but in our times God has spoken definitively to us through Jesus." God's revelation is only slowly given to the people over those millennia that took place before Christ. Slowly, they began to know God.

Even in the Old Testament, a great difference happens. When you go to the Book of Isaiah, you find a time where Isaiah preaches to the people not to go to war.

They were determined to divide God. Isaiah begged them not to do it, but they did and they were totally defeated. Their city was destroyed; the temple was destroyed. But Isaiah, by this point in the history of God's relationship with humankind, was able to proclaim to those people who had disobeyed, "God is waiting to be gracious to you."

Look it up in Chapter 30 of Isaiah. "God is waiting to be gracious to you." They don't have to wager or carry on a conversation with God bargaining. No, God is waiting.

We all remember the story of the prodigal son. God is not only waiting for that son to come back, he runs out to greet the son. The father in the parable—that's God coming to greet us, to be gracious to us, to share with us God's own life, God's goodness, God's love if we take the time to be quiet, to be in prayer with God.

In the Gospel lesson, Jesus teaches us the prayer that we're all familiar with because we've learned it from the very beginning of our training in our religious belief.

We need to examine just a couple of phrases to realize how profound this prayer is. This is teaching us how to pray, not bargaining with God, but first of all recognizing who God is. *Our God in heaven, hallowed be thy name*. We're praising God. God is hallowed and sanctified, which means totally apart from us and we're praising that God who brought into being everything that is. We try to let ourselves become aware of the goodness of God in creation, the marvelous universe.

Advertisement

We just celebrated the anniversary of the first landing on the moon. In the press and the media, we saw pictures again of that extraordinary event, the first time we had broken through space and were able to land on the moon. As we recall (I think most of us can recall) the pictures that we saw of how beautiful the Earth looked from space, and we began to think, but that's only the closest planet. There's a whole universe that God has created simply out of love and a whole race of people — ourselves whom God has called into being, not because we have earned it in any way, but only because God first loved us, drew us into being.

Hallowed be thy name. We begin to think about how to praise God. We're such extraordinary gifts, gifts that we could never bring about. Only God can draw into being through love all that is. Every one of us is a gift God has drawn. Life is a gift God has given us, and so we praise God.

Then Jesus teaches us to pray that *God's kingdom, God's reign will come*. That's very important for us.

If you remember in Luke's Gospel, at the beginning of the public life of Jesus on the Sabbath day, he goes into the synagogue and they hand him the book of the Scriptures to read. Jesus unrolls that Scripture carefully, Luke says, until he finds the place where it is written, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me. God sends me to bring good news to the poor, to give the blind new sight, to heal the brokenhearted, to set the downtrodden free, and to proclaim God's year of favor, the jubilee, when everyone has all he or she needs for a full life."

The reign of God is at hand, Luke tells us, and that's what it looks like — God bringing healing, goodness, love and fullness of life to every person — the reign of God.

One part of that prayer is: *Give us this day our daily bread.* That reminds us of one of the things that Jesus has said in the synagogue at Nazareth. God lifts up the poor. God brings justice to the oppressed. God provides for all of us what we need, but does not want us to have way beyond our need when others lack the barest necessities. So as we pray for the reign of God to happen, we also in a sense are committing ourselves to make it happen by working with Jesus and according to his way of love.

Finally, in that prayer we ask *God's forgiveness as we forgive others*. Some time ago, I heard an account of how Pax Christi, a Catholic peace movement, was started in Europe after World War II. It happened because Bishop [Pierre-Marie] Théas of the Diocese of Lourdes in France was in prison in France under the government that was formed that cooperated with Hitler. This government was not the genuine French government, but part of France gave in to Hitler and became a partner of Hitler.

Many people opposed it and they were in jail. The bishop was there, and other prisoners. At one point, they were praying. They said this prayer that Jesus taught: *Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come; thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.*

The bishop stopped the prayer and he said, "The Germans."

The prisoners cried out in anger, "No! We can't forgive them. Look what they've done to our children, to our cities, to our people. How could we forgive them?"

Bishop Théas knew immediately that it was going to be difficult to bring about peace in Europe unless that reconciliation could happen. After all, the countries Germany and France, two Catholic countries (a majority Catholic) in three generations — 1817, 1914, 1939 — go to war against each other, sons and daughters of God killing one another in war. That would only go on and on, the bishop knew, unless there was reconciliation.

When the war was over, he joined with the bishop from Germany and they developed this peace movement, the peace of Christ, Pax Christi, and began to spread that movement.

There has not been that kind of a war in Western Europe since World War II. The bishop, together with the German bishop, helped to bring about that reconciliation.

That's what we have to do in our time. We have to forgive one another, of course on an individual level, a community level, but we also have to be working for reconciliation among the nations because even now, the situation is dangerous. We spend more money on weapons than any other country in the world, in fact, more than the next 10 countries all together. We've gone to war many times. We threaten war right now.

We need this *pax Christi*, forgive our enemies, work for peace through reconciliation and love.

This teaching today about prayer is not something that is easy, really. In a certain sense, it's a call to us to follow Jesus more faithfully.

First of all, be with him in the quiet of prayer. Last Sunday in that Gospel about Martha and Mary where Mary sits at the feet of Jesus and listens — that's also what our prayer is. Each of us, as we go into a spirit of prayerfulness, trying to be silent. You don't have to say a lot of words, but listen.

Take the Scriptures, read them, listen deeply, and follow what Jesus teaches us. If we do that, I'm sure we will be praying the way Jesus prayed and we will discover the same deep peace, inner joy and gift of love from God and among ourselves with one another. That will be the result of our prayer if we listen deeply to Jesus and follow him and work with the fullness of his reign on this earth to form our world into as close an image of the reign of God as possible.

Editor's note: *This homily was given July 27 at St. Ambrose Church, Grosse Pointe Park, Michigan. The transcripts of Bishop Thomas Gumbleton's homilies are posted weekly to NCRonline.org. Sign up here to receive an email alert when the latest homily is posted.*