

# JESUS AND PRAYER

*Miguel Elizondo*

MISSION HAS ITS ROOTS in the kind of experience that Jesus had at his baptism: the Father was making him manifest, and sending him out, in the power of the Spirit, for the salvation, forgiveness and restoration of us all. Mission is therefore rooted in a relationship with the Father; and a relationship with the Father is rooted in prayer. It follows, then, that mission can never be accomplished without prayer.

But when we say that, we are making prayer a problem. Here we are, trying to carry forward a Christian mission within the nitty-gritty of how things really are—it's so complex, so hostile, so alienated from God. We know only too well how long we have spent worrying about how to fit in the prayer side of things when we are caught up in what we are doing, driven by commitments that tear us apart, that are always there, always pressing upon us. That is why we have so many problems about prayer, why we have all those different 'approaches' that people have suggested—all those treatises about prayer, all those methods, systems ....

At least in my experience, and in what I have seen and heard, the problem of prayer has been made far too complicated in comparison with the simplicity that we see in Jesus. How often have we heard people saying things like this about prayer:

In the midst of so many things to be done, *if* there are any times for prayer ... but sometimes a person can be tired, or needs to be thinking ahead to tomorrow because of their job ....

Last year, when I was giving a retreat to some laypeople in Panama, a young mother gave me a letter which her daughter had e-mailed to her from the United States. I must have been talking about prayer, and so she passed on what she had just received. It is a letter from Jesus addressed to any one of us:

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I was looking at you as you were getting up this morning, hoping you would speak to me—even if it were only a few words to ask my opinion about something, or to thank me for something nice which happened to you yesterday .... But I noticed that you were very busy looking for the right clothes to wear for going to work. I kept waiting for you while you were rushing around the house getting organized. I thought there must be a minute or two for you to stop long enough to say ‘Hello!’, but you were too busy. I watched you as you were on the way to work, and I waited patiently all day. With so much to do, I suppose you were too busy to say anything to me.

But that’s all right. There’s still plenty of time.

Then you turned on the TV. I waited patiently. You were eating your supper as you watched, but once more you forgot to talk to me. At bedtime, I think you were already very tired. As soon as you said ‘Good night’ to your family, you fell into bed and almost at once went to sleep.

No problem; perhaps it doesn’t occur to you that I am always here for you. I have more patience than you imagine. And I would like to teach you how to be patient with others too. I love you so much that I wait every day for a prayer, a thought, or a little heartfelt gratitude from you.

Oh well. There you are, getting up again. Again I’ll wait, with nothing except my love for you, hoping that some time today you might find a little time for me.

Have a good day.

Your friend Jesus.

That’s the kind of thing one hears in the course of a life which is dedicated, extremely busy, indeed busy for Christ’s sake. Is there anything we can say that will help to get us beyond the impasse?

### ***A Different Sort of Prayer***

We can begin with the obvious fact that Jesus did pray—we need only open the Gospels and cast our eyes from one end of the text to the other to confirm the point. But it is noticeable how little Jesus *talks* about prayer, certainly much less than we ourselves do. He hardly says anything at all about the theory of prayer. He speaks instead about the Father and about going to the Father. When they ask him to talk about prayer, it is about the Father that he talks. The questions about prayer

come from the disciples, not from Jesus—and these questions are there so that Jesus can tell them how to pray not just in any old way but rather *from within Christian faith*.

Let me quote a few texts to illustrate how it is that Jesus' prayer is something that runs through the gospel. In Mark 1:35 Jesus prays in the early morning; in Luke 5:16 we are told that he sometimes went off to pray during the day; Luke 6:12 tells of him praying also during the night. All this is presented as somehow routine.

The gospels also show us Jesus praying at notable moments in his life. We have already mentioned his baptism, which took place while he was praying (Luke 3:21). Before he chose the twelve apostles, Jesus passed the night in prayer (Luke 6:12-13); Luke 9:18 shows us Jesus at prayer before putting the questions 'Who do the crowds say that I am? ... But who do you say that I am?' In Luke 9:28-29, Jesus is said to have been in prayer when the transfiguration took place; in Luke 11:1, Jesus is in prayer just before the disciples ask him to teach them to pray. Jesus prayed at crucial moments in his life: in Gethsemane (Luke 22:41-44), and on the cross, when he prayed to the Father, asking forgiveness for those who had brought him there (Luke 23:34). He died with a prayer on his lips: 'Father, into your hands I commend my spirit'.

And *where* did Jesus pray? Nothing in the Gospels ever suggests that Jesus went to the Temple to pray. He used to go to the Temple to meet people, to talk to them—they came there in large numbers and he made the most of the opportunity. But nowhere do we see him going to the Temple to pray. Rather he seems to pray just about anywhere else: the texts we have just looked at mention the hills and lonely places. He prays in ways prompted by what is happening to him at the time, such as when he sees how the little children accept him, or when he is about to raise Lazarus, or when he is in the garden or on the cross. He prays out of his experience as it progresses.

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So much seems clear enough; and it shows us that Jesus somehow drew a sense of God out of particular places, particular times, particular practices. He drew on God from where God was: in that life of love he was leading. God is love; Jesus was making that love flesh in lived life. It was out of that actual reality that Jesus' prayer was welling up.

There is a still more important question: *how* did Jesus pray? What was the source of his prayer? The prayer of Jesus always, always—and especially after his baptism in the Jordan—springs from his fundamental bond with the Father. The Father is everything in the mission of Jesus. That is why he will say, ‘my food is to do the will of Him who sent me and to complete His work’ (John 4:34). ‘I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will, but the will of Him who sent me.’ (John 6:38) ‘I do nothing on my own.’ (John 8:28) When he breaks the Sabbath and the people attack him, his reply begins: ‘My Father is still working, and I also am working’ (John 5:17)—even on the Sabbath the Father is saving and loving, so Jesus does the same. In other words, the starting point of Jesus’ prayer is the Father. Jesus is the Son. He has a task given him by the Father: to live in the world, and so to reveal Him. It is out of that reality, out of the Father, that his prayer wells up.

### ***The Father and the World***

All this—Jesus’ life, Jesus’ dedication, Jesus’ mission that he shares with us—should make us realise that we are not the ones who call the shots in our mission. We are in no position to take our own initiatives when it comes to living out of who the Father is and what the Father wills. We can only do it in relationship with Jesus, starting from him.

We often speak of the great difficulties which are presented by the cultures in which we live and their relationship to religion. But it is in this world that Jesus is involved, the world as Ignatius presents it in the contemplation on the Incarnation, full of every kind of person and situation, full of weeping and laughing, of birth and death, of exploitation and so on (Exx 160). It is to this world that Jesus has been sent. We need really to let ourselves be shaped by this Ignatian experience, this vision of faith, this hope rooted in a God who wills to save the world—whatever it is like—and to rescue situations—whatever they may be—within the one act of love for Jesus Christ. If we can’t manage that, then our vision will easily become worried, fearful, lacking any hope that things can be put right.

We can look at the world as a whole for solutions that are socio-political, cultural, economic and the like. We can also look at the world, at this same reality, with a view to making a discernment that comes from God, from the experience of the presence of God, and of



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the hope that it brings. There is a difference, one that leads us to specific options and decisions which are quite unlike what comes from merely human overviews, merely human reactions.

When Jesus adopted the latter kind of view, he was facing a much more complex situation than ours. For he was *introducing*, in his every encounter, a revolution in how people imagined God and their relationship to God. Religious attitudes were very ingrained—they tapped into very deeply rooted subjective, affective and cultural attitudes that were in fact sharply counter to what Jesus stood for.

For me, though, the important thing is *what* Jesus prayed. His filial relationship with God sheds no little light on the nature of prayer. For a start, in all Jesus' explicit prayers as presented in the Gospels there occurs the word 'Father'. They might be prayers of joy, prayers of suffering, prayers of thanksgiving, but always, always God is Father.

What does Jesus pray about? From the texts we have we must say that Jesus prays about the things that are happening in his life. These are what he processes with his Father, and it is on these that he builds his relationship with his Father. Not 'religious topics', then, but the life that he is living and what it throws up, a life coming from the Father and lived for the sake of humanity.

From the evidence we have we can see this quite clearly. In Matthew 11:25, there is his experience of rejection by the religious authorities, by the wise and the powerful, and of acceptance by the simple. When Jesus sees this, what does he say? 'I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth.' For prayer he uses what his experience gives him. When he is about to raise Lazarus (John 11:41), what does Jesus

say? 'Father, I thank you for having heard me'—he thanks the Father for having been able to respond to such a tragic situation for that family. When he is in a critical position, one that is really difficult for him, he prays 'Father, glorify your name' (John 12:28)—in other words, 'help me'. In the supreme crisis of his life, his prayer is 'Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet, not what I want, but what you want' (Mark 14:36). By the time he reaches the cross, it is quite clear that Jesus lives his life in relationship to the Father.

In John 17 (referred to as Jesus' priestly prayer) he lets us overhear his prime concern: 'those whom you gave me'. What does he ask the Father for? 'Protect them'—those who are about to go forth into the world and yet must not be of the world. 'Father ... I made your name known to them.' What is it that is foremost in Jesus' mind? 'Father, that they may be one, as we are one'—one like you and me. In short, everything that he lives is his prayer.

### ***Do Not Worry***

When a whole life is lived like this, in accordance with what God wishes to be lived, there are no worries about prayer—not about times, or methods or systems or places. Prayer is just a way of life. If I live with faith—and that's the key—then from that life prayer will truly arise. Whatever I do, be it in a group, with a community, with trade unions, in teaching, education, pastoral or social work—whatever it is, the crucial point is that I live my life as a person loved by God, a person wanting to make God present in the world as best I can. Following my own lights, and discerning as best I can as I go along, it is here that I will find material for my prayer. And then there's no need to lose sleep about whether what I'm doing in my prayer is OK or not. The worries and uncertainties that we have, the contradictions we encounter, and the non-response we meet with, and whatever else that I cannot now imagine—all this will have to form the content of Christian prayer. That is how it was for Jesus—even if we do not have that inseparable bond which he had with God, the God of life, the God who is life for human beings.

It is from this source that prayer springs. We should not be surprised that St Ignatius, who lived all this out and was writing about

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it, sends us into the world in the way he does, so exposed to resistance from outside, with so little help, and so on. For he believes that we must carry that profound experience with us, and that the law of prayer has to do with *discernment*, with prudent discrimination, not with times and places. The Church requires that there be fixed times—that's fine, but we must never be in a state of putting all our effort into these. It is that thought which has led us to worry about whether we have missed the hour or the time. But the real question is rather different: 'Did you, or did you not, *pray* during the time you were praying?'

### ***Temples Are Finished***

All this depends on one great innovation: Jesus says that temples are finished; there won't be any temples for meeting with God. The temple is going to be Jesus himself (see John 2:21). From now on, anyone who identifies with Jesus as the Life amid everything that we happen to be living will surely find God there.

We come across the elaboration of all this in the text in which Jesus meets with a woman who could hardly be called a contemplative: a Samaritan woman, living in an irregular marriage. It is to this woman that he reveals the great truth that there is no need to go to any temple in order to pray. Rather, God is spirit and truth—which we can translate as 'love and fidelity'. God is faithful love, love faithful to the end. Anyone who lives in this spirit with fidelity is already in the place where they will meet with this God who is just that: love and fidelity.

This represents an enormous shift. When prayer is concentrated in the Temple, one has to go to the Temple in order to meet with God. If one localises God in that way, that is what happens. One has to leave everyday life in order to go to the Temple to pray and to meet with God. But Jesus says that God has come to me, that God has come and dwelt with us, that He is still coming within us. The radical shift which the experience of Jesus presupposes depends upon whether or not one has grasped that truth.

When this shift is made, God acquires a new name: Father. And the relationship which this Father-God establishes is not tied to a place. The relationship between father and children is intimate and personal. That is why the Samaritans do not have to suffer the humiliation of having to go to Jerusalem to pray in the Temple.

Jesus puts it powerfully to the Samaritan woman that the Father is looking for worshippers of this kind: people who offer the worship for which the Father longs, and longs because He also longs to communicate with us. In other words, what is at stake here is what we find already in Hosea 6:6: 'I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice'—a contrite heart rather than holocausts. That is central to what Jesus came to tell us.

### ***Beyond the Sacral***

What does prayer depend upon? It depends on the image and the experience I have of God. If God is thought to dwell in the Temple, or in the sanctuary, then naturally prayer will mirror this image. Such ways of thinking have been communicated, inculcated through Christian catechesis. Somewhere Origen takes up the contrast in the Letter to the Hebrews between Christ and the High Priest of the Temple. Whereas the latter entered the Holy of Holies once a year, leaving the people behind, Christ has taken our flesh upon himself and is therefore with us all the year round—the year of the Lord's favour which he proclaims (Luke 4:19).

This is the reality of which Jesus makes us aware. And it alone provides the means for breaking down the wall that we normally feel to exist between prayer and a life of activity. We habitually think that prayer takes us to some other location inwards; conversely, action leads us outwards. We have one current of prayer directed towards the Father, and another one of action directed towards other people.

But Jesus lives his life on another basis. His encounter with his Father in no way leads him to forget his people in the world. Nor does his mission towards human beings in any way imply that he leaves the Father. His relationship with the Father never depends on some kind of impossible withdrawal from his responsibilities, from his functions, and



from everyone else. He stands before the Father in solidarity with the whole of humanity, saints and sinners; and in him the Father loves them all.

Christian spirituality, then (quite apart from anything specifically Ignatian or Jesuit), does not limit life in the Spirit to some particular area, such as the times of prayer, or the sacramental life, or works of explicitly Christian charity. The spiritual life is not confined in that way. It is the whole person in their prayer, the entire reality of their human existence, which becomes a holy place—a place where the action of God is revealed in order to commit us to the work of humanity's salvation. And so, when we pray the mysteries of Jesus' active life, we must allow ourselves to be touched deeply by the presence of the people whom the Lord places in our life; by the professional and ethical demands of our work, whatever it be; and by the affective concerns of a heart constantly affected by events, present and future. We must enter into solidarity with programmes of relief and consolation, informed by a discernment of the signs of the times as they announce the arrival of God's kingdom—a solidarity which is also compassion in the face of the injustice and evil produced by sinful structures. A person who prays is interrogating God about the events of real life, with a view to becoming able to receive them from His hands and to respond to Him in Jesus Christ, in the way that St Ignatius suggests to us.

### ***Prayer beyond Religion***

There is a shift here, certainly—one that upsets quite a few people. Obviously you need to teach people if you are to get across the real truth here, the real truth about prayer. Prayer touches us in very sensitive places. The most sacred reality for Christians, for those who believe in God, is God Himself. For such people, the most important thing is to have a right relationship with that God. And this has led to a system with its own momentum for regulating relationship with God, the system of Christian religion—a system which ordinary and simple people easily just pick up and internalise. This system generates, even among Christians, a religious conception of God which does not fit with the basic experience of Jesus. It just does not fit.

With the best will in the world, people focus their sense of God round the idea of the sacred; the sacred captures the imagination.

What is sacred is set apart: it stands above the everyday, above the merely human. From that starting point it is not easy to get across the truth about God. This truth must not come suddenly out of the blue; it has to begin with the proclamation of Jesus and what he is, and of the God whom Jesus came to share with us. From here we discover what prayer is, the true meaning of the 'Our Father'—this is not a 'religious' prayer, but rather a prayer composed out of the human and Christian content of our lives. Transforming people's image of God, then, is not at all easy. When we speak about what Jesus was really like, the effect is disorientating. It provokes resistance, and charges of heresy.

It follows that I must get to a point where I can let myself work through the saving power of that grace which Jesus gives me. I don't win my way to God; I let God win me. I don't try to look convincing to God; I let God convince me. I don't pray to God; I let myself be prayed by Him. I don't love God; I let God love me. All this is part of recreating, renewing an authentic prayer.

Movements are springing up nowadays which separate themselves from 'religion', from the Faith, because they see that religion does not help them to respond to how they really feel—'there must be more to God than this!' At the same time, there are movements in the Church which are well thought of, well accepted by the Church, yet which promote various kinds of religiosity as a relationship with God. But it is important not simply to identify Christian faith with religiosity. The chains which tie the Christian faith to religion cannot be broken; there do have to be signs. But when things go wrong, we identify living the faith with religious practice, and we say, revealingly, 'I am a practising Christian' or 'I go to Mass'. But things are not like that. Religion is not just a set of practices; religion should be expressing a *faith*. Jesus made that quite clear.

Again, the links between religion and faith have led us to talk often about 'doing our prayer' or 'making meditation'. But I ask myself: what does '*making* a meditation' mean once a person has begun to enter into the good news of Jesus Christ? It sounds as though we are in some way fabricating God. But for Jesus, prayer is not about '*making*' or '*doing*' but '*being*'. Prayer is a matter of being chained to God, of being related to God, in every dimension of who I am and of my dealings with others.

Thus Jesus comes to tell me that the spiritual life, the life of prayer, is not a space filled with acts of piety which have to be performed, but

is the very essence of life itself, of the spiritual life. When you take the experience of Jesus as your starting point, *the life of prayer is the very essence of life.*

Of course it has to *happen*; we do have times and we do 'make our meditation'—these express a way of being and of living the totality of our life. But our prayer is above all a quality of life, an orientation of our life as a whole. It moves out from God towards all the relationships in our lives. Prayer, then, is not so much an act as a personal attitude—an attitude drawn from a person's life as a whole under God, the God of Jesus. Prayer is like love. Love is not a matter of doing something, but rather an attitude in which two people are captivated by each other, give themselves to each another. Love is shown in deeds rather than in words, as St Ignatius says; but love is shown in words too, and in fact love does not *consist* in either deeds or words. It is an attitude, a relationship of one person to another. What is communicated is not deeds or words, but the self. That is the central point of what Jesus came to tell us.

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### ***A Message at the Wrong Moment***

A while ago, I came across the following passage, entitled 'A Message at the Wrong Moment':

I have often asked myself what all this stuff is about prayer. I have heard so many versions! Some spoke to me about a special time which one had to observe until the clock struck. 'Don't abandon the full hour of prayer!' Others said to me that one had to find contemplation in action. In time, I got into yoga and zen. Just to be seated in total emptiness and silence, taken up in a cloud of unknowing, that too is prayer.

Yesterday, while I was having a walk near my house, I saw an old man sitting on a bench. He was looking at the world with his glassy eyes, and seemed to be quite all right. It was as though he was there without being there, as if the square made no impression on him at all; as if he accepted that people passed by on their way to I don't know where and he was connected to a time without time. Once more I understood that God could not harm anyone.

Prayer does not have to be some complex task. To pray is to be. Techniques, resources, methods eastern and western, doubtless

have their uses. But it occurred to me that the best form of prayer has to be something as simple and easy as breathing.

People were scandalized to read, in *The Silversmith and I*, by Juan Ramón Jiménez, 'Happy are the birds, for they don't have to go to Mass'. Obviously, birds don't have to go to Mass, because they are always at Mass, because they always behave in just the same way whether they are at Mass or not. And we humans, if we did not have so many masks, would equally live continually celebrating our 'Mass of the world' as Pierre Teilhard de Chardin did on that day in the great desert of China when he had no bread or wine with which to celebrate Mass.

Today I'd like to celebrate a Mass of the street-corner kiosk, a Mass of waiting under a street lamp, a Mass of the antique shop with its smell of Victorian furniture, or of the square with its little old men surrounded by dogs. I would like that. But then I imagine the president of the Bishops' Liturgy Commission looking at me sternly and saying, 'No, you can't do that. How can you celebrate Mass without vestments?'

At that point I will take refuge in the gospel and will remind myself of that homely Jesus who had so little to do with the priests of his time. I will remember that the priesthood, according to the most orthodox of theologies, is the universal priesthood of every Christian. Then I shall pray with Juan Ramón: 'Happy are the birds, for they don't have to go to Mass'.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This article originally appeared in the Central American Jesuits' review of spirituality, *Diakonia*, and we are most grateful to the editors for permission to publish an English version. Both the original editors and the translators have adapted the text for written presentation, while trying to retain something of the original's informality and spontaneity.