

An Unexpected Guest

“Jesus was praying in a certain place.” I like that sentence, because it reminds me of the humanity of Jesus Christ. He was not a superhero, who never loses, never dies and never need any help. He was deceived by his disciple and was executed on the cross. He, like all of us, needed help most of all from God: God’s guidance, encouragement and loving words. So, he prayed; he woke up early in the morning to pray, went to the mountain to pray for the strength to know and to follow God’s will; he was in tune with God through prayer. The disciples experienced him as the one who always prayed.

One of the disciples asked him to teach them to pray. As he taught them how to pray we learn how Jesus understood God. He described God with one of the most intimate relationships, ‘a parent-child relationship’, meaning that we can communicate with God and that we can have a personal and intimate relationship with God; God is always with us, and is there for us. For some, God is like a loving mother. And for some God is like a gentle father or a lover or a partner or a friend. Each of us needs to decide for ourselves which image of God helps us to improve our relationship with God.

God, who is always closer than we think, gives us our basic human needs. Jesus teaches us to ask God for our daily bread, a reminder that God provided manna to the people of Israel each day while they were in the wilderness. Since they could not keep any manna overnight, they had to depend on God to provide fresh manna each morning. When we ask God for our daily bread, we humble ourselves, remembering our limitations and our dependence on God. In this way, we learn to be thankful for everything God provides to us, and to share these things with others.

Jesus also taught us to ask God to forgive our sins. What is a sin in the Bible? The ‘sin’ word that is used most frequently in the Bible is the Greek ‘hamartia’, which literally means ‘missing the mark or the target’. Think about archery. Think about an archer, a bow and an arrow. In archery, an arrow is supposed to hit the target; success does not depend on the arrow or the bow; it depends on the

archer. So, I think what Jesus means by asking God to forgive our sins is that we need to admit that we are not experts about our lives. God provides our bows and arrows, and we, in turn, need to let God guide our hands and direct our aim. The life, the death and the resurrection of Jesus Christ confirms that it is good for us to live in and by God. The following story helps us to understand why we can still trust God even in uncertain situations in our lives.

Jesus says, "Suppose one of you has a friend, and you go to him at midnight and say to him, 'Friend, lend me three loaves of bread; for a friend of mine has arrived, and I have nothing to set before him.'"

Jesus identifies us with a host, who asks three loaves of bread from a friend at midnight. The host has an unexpected guest at midnight, but the host is *also* the unexpected guest to the sleeping friend. We don't usually encounter unexpected people in our households, because we know who is invited, we know when visitors are expected. However, in our lives, we *do* encounter unexpected guests, whether we like them or not. These guests are not something we can welcome, manage or handle, but something we are not prepared to deal with: a loved one's illness, a disease, losing a job, a separation, even death. None of us invite those challenges into our lives, but they come without asking our permission.

Jesus encourages us to ask God for help, saying 'Your heavenly father is always ready to help you, to give you what you need and even much more than what your parents can give you'. Jesus wants us to be persistent and not to be ashamed to keep on asking.

Many of us have tried, and some of us have tried, tried and tried again to keep on asking God for help, but most of us have not received all that we ask from God. We have asked, but it has not been given us. We have searched, but we have not found. We have knocked, but the door has not been open for us. We are caught between God's promise and our life experiences.

Let me share with you my experience. My brother passed away with a brain tumour two years ago. He was just thirty-nine years old. He left his wife and two young children; they are now a thirteen-year-old boy and a nine-year-old girl. One

month after his brain tumour was diagnosed, which was unexpected, he died. He and I were so close; he was like my friend, my father and my mentor. When he was dying, I was working and studying in Canada. I realized that there was nothing I could do for him, except pray.

Everyone who knew my brother prayed for him hoping that he would live. Actually, he was in good hands; the doctor had just performed a successful surgery on another patient who had almost the same brain tumour as my brother. But his condition was unpredictable; it was up and down. My mother phoned to tell me that he was in serious condition, and I knew that I had to be ready for his death, but I was not. Even two years later still I am not ready to say good-bye to him, and I am still seeking the answer from God, 'why?'

Before he died, I was planning to give him a healing touch, and I wanted to say how much I love him. But just before I arrived in Seoul, he passed away. That was the hardest time in my life, and I am still struggling to find the meaning of the tragedy, and to find the meaning when Jesus said, "Ask and you will receive; seek and you will find; knock and the door will open."

While I was preparing this sermon with such big questions in my life, I dropped by the Anglican Church on Buller Street. I attended the centering prayer group and the Eucharist. During the prayer, I was given the text, 1 Corinthians 12:3, "No one can say 'Jesus is Lord' except by the Holy Spirit." And, I realized it's not by myself but by the Holy Spirit that I can say 'Jesus is Lord'. Likewise, I can't find out the answer for my big questions by myself. Perhaps, those questions are not necessarily resolved at once, but at least I know I need to be holding by my faith with the help of the Spirit. And that's enough for now.

I am glad that Jesus finishes today's story saying, "How much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!" This helps us to understand the difference between what we ask and what God gives us, and to open ourselves up to new possibilities from God which we don't know yet, but will know someday by the Spirit; we can ask God again and again by the Spirit. There is grace for us. Thanks be to God.