

Sermon for Morning Prayer: Trinity XI

The Reverend Warren E. Shaw, Priest Associate

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the twelfth Verse of the twenty-sixth Chapter of the Book of the Prophet Isaiah.¹

“LORD, thou wilt ordain peace for us: for thou also hast wrought all our works in us. O LORD our God, other lords beside thee have had dominion over us: but by thee only will we make mention of thy name. They are dead, they shall not live; they are deceased, they shall not rise: therefore hast thou visited and destroyed them, and made all their memory to perish. Thou hast increased the nation, O LORD, thou hast increased the nation: thou art glorified: thou hadst removed it far unto all the ends of the earth. LORD, in trouble have they visited thee, they poured out a prayer when thy chastening was upon them. . . . Thy dead men shall live, together with my dead body shall they arise. Awake and sing, ye that dwell in dust: for thy dew is as the dew of herbs, and the earth shall cast out the dead.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the twenty-sixth Verse of the eighth Chapter of the Epistle of Blessed Paul the Apostle to the Romans.²

“. . . Likewise the Spirit also helpeth our infirmities: for we know not what we should pray for as we ought: but the Spirit itself maketh intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered. And he that searcheth the hearts knoweth what is the mind of the Spirit, because he maketh intercession for the saints according to the will of God. And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are called according to his purpose. For whom he did foreknow, he also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the

firstborn among many brethren. Moreover whom he did predestinate, them he also called: and whom he called, them he also justified: and whom he justified, them he also glorified. What shall we then say to these things? If God be for us, who can be against us? He that spared not his own Son, but delivered him up for us all, how shall he not with him also freely give us all things? Who shall lay any thing to the charge of God's elect? It is God that justifieth. Who is he that condemneth? It is Christ that died, yea rather, that is risen again, who is even at the right hand of God, who also maketh intercession for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written, For thy sake we are killed all the day long; we are accounted as sheep for the slaughter. Nay, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him that loved us. For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, Nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Text:

From the Second Lesson: "The Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with sounds too deep for words."³

Body:

Someone once defined prayer as "lobbying in the courts of the Almighty". If that is how we think of prayer, then surely the Apostle is right. We do not know how to pray as we ought.

There is nothing magical about prayer, but there is something mystical. It involves the perfect internal communication of the Holy Trinity. When we participate in it properly, we are drawn into the life of God himself.

How do we participate in it properly? I'll come to that in a moment. But first I want to clarify what I mean when I say that prayer involves the perfect internal communication of the Holy Trinity, and that when we participate in it properly, we are drawn into the life of God himself.

The Holy Spirit, the Third Person of the Holy Trinity, is of the same divine substance as are the Father and the Son and is their equal in glory. When he dwells in us, He searches our hearts and then reaches out from within to communicate with the Father on our behalf. Deity communicates with deity. God essentially prays for us, or as the Apostle puts it, "the Spirit himself intercedes for us with sounds too deep for words."

And the second Person of the Trinity is not left out because, as St. Paul writes farther on in the passage, Christ Jesus, who is at the right hand of the Father, also intercedes for us. We pray in His name because, as He told us when He walked the earth, no one comes to the Father except through Him. Moreover, when the Son of God was asked to teach His disciples to pray, He gave them the very words to say. We still say those words today: "Our Father, who art in heaven. . . ."

But the Holy Spirit goes beyond words and from the deepest darkness of our souls communicates to the Father the needs and realities of which we ourselves are not aware. "He who searches the hearts of men knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God."

So the Word and the Spirit, which go forth from the Father to carry out His will, return to Him in prayer. And so it is said that as Christians we pray *to* the Father *through* the Son *in* the Spirit.

St. Paul says, “The Spirit helps us in our weakness.” It does no good to try to hide our weakness and present ourselves to God as worthy of His favor. The Spirit does not help us when we do that.

The Gospel for today, which we are not reading because we are not participating in the Eucharist, tells about two men who went into the temple to pray. One of them presented himself before God as a good and righteous man, scrupulously obedient to God’s laws. And so he was. But Jesus said that his prayer was not heard.

The other man was ashamed of himself. He presented himself in all humility, standing off to the side with his head bowed and not even looking up. He called himself a sinner and asked for God’s mercy. His prayer was answered.

You see, there is no such thing as an entitlement in the Kingdom of God. The Spirit does not help us in our strength. He helps us in our weakness.

The Holy Spirit was implanted in you when you were baptized. He was called forth when you were confirmed. If you present yourself properly before the Lord, the implanted Spirit will help you in your weakness and your prayer will be answered because you will be praying in accordance with the will of the Father.

When we come to God with a shopping list or a wish list of things we want for ourselves, or even for others, we are not really praying. We are just lobbying. It is when the Spirit within us communicates with the transcendent Father

that prayer takes place. It begins with a recognition of the greatness of God. It appeals to His mercy and proceeds from there to align our hearts with His will.

There are many prayers in our Prayer Book that are structured that way. I will close with one of them:

ALMIGHTY God, the fountain of all wisdom, who knowest our necessities before we ask, and our ignorance in asking; We beseech thee to have compassion upon infirmities; and those things which for our unworthiness we dare not, and for our blindness we cannot ask, vouchsafe to give us, for the worthiness of thy Son Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

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¹ Isaiah 26:12-16, 19 (KJV).
² Romans 8:26-39 (KJV).
³ Romans 8:26 (RSV).