

What should we pray for?

Most of us have had the experience of asking for something and not getting it. That experience begins in childhood when we begin to learn the difficult lesson that others do not automatically respond to our wants and whims. In adolescence we discover that our peers are not mirror images of ourselves and do not always behave or respond to us in the way we want them to. In adulthood we learn the delicate art of compromise when what we want and what others want come into conflict with each other. We also discover that in our relationship with God our prayers are not always answered, even when they focus not on ourselves but on others and their well-being. The experience of unanswered prayer can be a real challenge to our faith.

In today's gospel, James and John come before Jesus with a prayer of petition. They ask him, 'allow us to sit one at your right hand and the other at your left in your glory.' The previous time Mark had depicted James and John together was on the mount of transfiguration with Peter. There they had an experience of Jesus in his glory, flanked by Moses and Elijah. James and John understood this experience as an anticipation of what was to come, and in the future, they wanted the places occupied by Moses and Elijah. Mark emphasizes the inappropriateness of this request of James and John by placing it immediately after the third announcement by Jesus of his coming passion and death, 'the Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death; then they will hand him over to the Gentiles—' (Mk 10:33-34). As Jesus declares that he is shortly to be humbled, James and John ask Jesus that they be exalted. Here is a prayer that has far too much of 'self' in it. It is not a prayer that Jesus can respond to. Sometimes, our own prayers can have a lot of 'self' in them, even when they are prayers for others. One dimension of our growing up into the person of Jesus is learning to pray as he prays, entering into his ongoing prayer to the Father. It is only the Holy Spirit who can enable our prayer to harmonize with that of the risen Lord. As Paul states in his letter to the Galatians, 'God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying "Abba" Father!' (Gal 4:6). In his letter to the Romans, he comments that 'the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words' (Rom 8:26). Our prayer will be a sharing in Jesus' own prayer when it is shaped by the inarticulate sighs of the Spirit deep within us.

In response to the brothers' request of Jesus, he makes his own request of them, 'Can you drink the cup that I must drink, or be baptized with the baptism with which I must be baptized?' Jesus is presented in the gospels as asking many questions. One access point to the gospel story of Jesus for us today is to sit with the many questions that Jesus asks. A very different form of prayer to the prayer of petition is to listen to the various petitions that Jesus addresses to us and, having listened, to respond honestly from the depths of our heart. Jesus' petition to James and John finds an echo in Jesus' own prayer of petition in the garden of Gethsemane, 'Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet, not what I want, but what you want' (Mk 14:36). The very cup that Jesus asked James and John to drink, he hesitated to drink himself. Yet, he went on to drink it because his prayer, 'Remove this cup from me', was secondary to his more fundamental prayer, 'Not what I want, but what you want.' Jesus does not request of his disciples anything he is not prepared to do himself. As today's second reading

remarks, we have a high priest 'who has been tempted in every way that we are, though he is without sin.' Jesus' petition to James and John is addressed to all of us. He asks if we are prepared to commit ourselves to his servant way, even when it means the way of the cross, the way of self-denial and self-giving. The attentive listener may be put in mind of the sacraments of Eucharist and baptism by Jesus' reference to 'the cup' and 'baptism.' At baptism we are baptized into Jesus' servant way and when we celebrate the Eucharist, we renew our commitment to that way.