



## **Sunday 19 & 26 August 2018**

### **Sermons in Argentière & in Chamonix**

#### ***Matthew 6:5-9***

“And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. <sup>6</sup>But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.<sup>la</sup>”

<sup>7</sup>“When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard because of their many words. <sup>8</sup>Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

<sup>9</sup>“Pray then in this way: Our Father in heaven,    hallowed be your name.

#### **Mark 6 : 35-44**

35 When it grew late, his disciples came to him and said, “This is a deserted place, and the hour is now very late; 36 send them away so that they may go into the surrounding country and villages and buy something for themselves to eat.” 37 But he answered them, “You give them something to eat.” They said to him, “Are we to go and buy two hundred denarii[a] worth of bread, and give it to them to eat?” 38 And he said to them, “How many loaves have you? Go and see.” When they had found out, they said, “Five, and two fish.” 39 Then he ordered them to get all the people to sit down in groups on the green grass. 40 So they sat down in groups of hundreds and of fifties. 41 Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to his disciples to set before the people; and he divided the two fish among them all. 42 And all ate and were filled; 43 and they took up twelve baskets full of broken pieces and of the fish. 44 Those who had eaten the loaves numbered five thousand men.

### **Mark 7 : 31-34**

<sup>31</sup> Then he returned from the region of Tyre, and went by way of Sidon towards the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis. <sup>32</sup> They brought to him a deaf man who had an impediment in his speech; and they begged him to lay his hand on him. <sup>33</sup> He took him aside in private, away from the crowd, and put his fingers into his ears, and he spat and touched his tongue. <sup>34</sup> Then looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, “Ephphatha,” that is, “Be opened.”

« We can only pray ! » ... Is the retort of film dramas, when the hero has tried everything else and can't see a way out of his predicament: prayer is the last action before almost certain death or a fortuitous miracle. I imagine that subconsciously, even if it isn't quite put like that, that when in real life, things go wrong; when the earth opens under our feet, or there is a melt-down all around; when tornadoes, hurricanes and rainstorms carry away everything in their path; yes, I imagine that prayer is what we resort to (first or last...) whether one believes or not.

Why imply that, if perhaps a miracle should occur, it is in any way linked to the fact that one talks about praying, rather than to the prayer itself?

What is the place of prayer in our lives? In the life of humans today? When you do a quick Google search on prayer, you quickly come across other connected questions, those which are most frequently asked by internet surfers, such as:

« How do I pray to God, so that my prayer will be answered? » or « How do I pray to God to get pregnant? ».

There are even tutorials on YouTube ! And you can download the «keys » to being answered. Humans are, in fact, profoundly spiritual. When they come to see me, people often say that even though they are not practicing Christians, they do pray ( a little as if they expect a sort of absolution on the part of the pastor).

As if praying had nothing to do with any sort of religious practice.



As if praying had nothing to do with any community quality. But as if prayer was that little extra thing to maintain a connection, all the same, with religious people, (and therefore the pastor).

« Go into your room, close the door, and pray to your Father in secret » says Jesus... secret prayer between you and the Other. Secret, intimate prayer, in which one can say anything. A little like when Jesus took the deaf man aside, away from the crowd: secret, intimate prayer, where there is no question of allowing the indiscreet or the curious to get hold of what could appear to be a magic spell.

And then there are those who tell me they « don't know how to » pray, that it's a long time since they went to catechism... Ah! So I ask them if they know the Lord's Prayer, because the Lord's Prayer is very reassuring. It's the sort of life-belt of prayer, the Lord's Prayer, isn't it?

A litany recited by heart with which I, personally, have long had difficulty, because the requests presented in this prayer open up an area so extensive that I didn't know what I was saying any more, and it required too much energy each time to think about what I was saying.

The Lord's Prayer can make you dizzy when you think of it all. And even on its own the first phrase can make your head spin: « Our Father in Heaven... »

Even here, as one person, alone, you have to say « Our ». Not « my Father », not just « Father » - no, it's « Our Father ». That's it.

So you address yourself to Another, intimately, but even so you are not alone. This means that this God, this Father whom you address, is not only your Father, but also the Father of many other people that you cannot know; that's to say you have many brothers and sisters that you do not know, yet already by saying « our Father », it's like jumping from a plane without a parachute: it's scary...



And then you say « Our Father...in Heaven ». Now it's getting worse. «who is in Heaven». Because at heart you would rather be talking to someone a bit nearer than that. Sure, progress certainly has been made in communication but, even so, heaven is pretty big.

Taken literally, this phrase insinuates in our minds the idea of the bearded old bloke on his cloud, pulling the strings of destiny for this and that person...Overall, it's an image of God that many non-believers hold - in general a caricature that I am constantly combatting.

« Our Father in Heaven » ... So far, so different, so much “other” than me, a poor little human being, that I can't get my hands on Him, can't imprison Him, make Him into my own thing, my security blanket.

Saying « Our Father in Heaven » already opens the door to a world of possibilities. It is, when you think about it, saying everything that needs to be said.

Saying « Our Father in Heaven », obliges us to look further than our own navel: it's not only about not being alone, but more about turning one's gaze towards heaven. When Jesus prayed, it is written « he lifted his eyes to heaven ».

That was in the texts we heard just now: in the healing of the deaf-mute, and the story of the feeding of the five thousand.

This bothered me and I asked myself « hey, why does he do that? Is this the case every time Jesus asks for something? » So I looked at the original Greek. And what a surprise! The expression « lifted his eyes» is one verb. A verb which also means « recovered his sight ».

So we have the same expression for when Jesus prays for the deaf-mute, when he thanks God for the five loaves and two fish, for when Jesus heals the blind, for when Saul regains his sight after losing it on the road to Damascus. But it is also the verb used when Jesus sees Zaccheus perched in his tree, when he sees the poor widow



putting her all into the offering. And it's the (only) verb used to describe the women arriving at the tomb and seeing the stone rolled away.

« Lift up the eyes, recover sight ». Looking at the texts where this verb is used (Zaccheus, the widow's offering, Saul, the women at the tomb) the first idea that comes to mind is to say that it's about seeing beyond appearances. To see beyond what seems to be visible. To lift up one's eyes is to «resurrect» one's way of looking at things.

To see beyond what is visible to the eye. To put it another way, to be conscious, to be sure, to be serene and confident that Another, God, « Our Father », already knows.

To be conscious, to be sure, to be confident that our prayer, no matter what it is about, is heard. To be conscious, to be sure, to be confident as the Psalmist (Ps 121) who says - and says to me -:

I lift up my eyes to the hills.

From where does my help come?

<sup>2</sup> My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth.

<sup>3</sup> He will not let your foot be moved;

he who keeps you will not slumber.<sup>4</sup> Behold, he who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep.

<sup>5</sup> The Lord is your keeper; the Lord is your shade on your right hand.

<sup>6</sup> The sun shall not strike you by day, nor the moon by night.

<sup>7</sup> The Lord will keep you from all evil; he will keep your life.

<sup>8</sup> The Lord will keep your going out and your coming in from this time forth and forevermore.

And even when we are unable to formulate a beautifully-worded prayer, what does it matter? The deaf-mute starts talking again, even when he himself had asked for nothing and the content of Jesus' prayer was nothing more than a breath, a sigh.



We are so often embarrassed at not being able to express ourselves clearly or intelligibly. But look at this - with his sigh, Jesus delivers us from blame for all the prayers which we have failed to articulate - the situations of suffering, pain, and sometimes even joy, that we have allowed to slide past without voicing a prayer or saying the words.

The content of prayer can be devoid of words, like the account of the feeding of the five thousand. At no time did Jesus actually ask for the bread and the fish to be multiplied. It's only in Harry Potter that we have magic spells for this sort of thing. No, Jesus lifts his eyes towards heaven, pronounces the blessing (just giving thanks for the food), breaks the bread, and gives it to his disciples for them to distribute to the crowd: 5000 men (they never counted the women and children ) were fed that day. And Jesus never explicitly asked that 5 loaves and 2 fishes should become enough food for all those people.

Jesus just « lifted his eyes towards heaven »; he saw beyond what there was to see, fully confident. Prayer is a state of being. It's about our whole being turning resolutely towards this “beyond what can be seen, understood or heard”.

Resolutely turned towards heaven. « Truly I say to you, if anyone says to this mountain: “ Get up and throw yourself into the sea” and doesn't doubt in his heart, but believes that it will happen, it will be done. That's why I declare to you that anything you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be given to you.»

(Mark 11:23 & 24)

AMEN

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