Sermon for July 27, 2025 Br. John Maine, OP

“What Words Can Do”

When I was looking at our readings for today, a memory came to me, something that happened many years ago. Not an especially happy memory, mind you, but a meaningful one. At the time, I was serving as an on-call chaplain at St. Mary’s Hospital and on this one day I was called to the bedside of an elderly gentleman. He was very close to the end of his life’s journey. In the room there with him were three other men, a neighbour as I recall and a couple of rather distant relatives from out of town. They had an air about them of weary waiting. Paying scant attention to the dying man, or to me, they kept instead a watchful eye on the monitor that charted each fading heartbeat. Otherwise, they just chatted amongst themselves, mostly about the Blue Jays.

Well soon enough the moment came. The man in the bed breathed his last. A nurse suddenly appeared, did a quick check, switched off the machines, murmured a few things and then disappeared as quickly as she’d come. And there we were, left in the presence of that strangest and most unsettling of mysteries, a person physically in our midst as before and yet now completely and forever gone. The silence that descended on that room was profound. I sensed the uncertainty of my three companions, over what to think or even, maybe, what to feel. Suddenly one of them looked over at me and said, in a rather small, lost voice, “You, uh, you wanna say some words?”

You wanna say some words . . .

Well, you know, that’s a very human request and it introduces us to what our readings today are all about. Having the words to say – why, and about what, and to whom. But having the words. Because it matters so very much for us to have them. Words to offer hope, that can help make sense of things that don’t make sense. Words of life, speaking a truth greater than our heads can easily understand but which our hearts can instantly recognize. There are so many moments when those are the words we instinctively need to know, to hear, to share together. We can’t and we don’t ever just make them up. True words are those that come from a sacred Source and are handed down to us, from generation to generation. They’ve stood the test of time because of their power to connect us to the Holy One at the heart of everything, including ourselves.

What we’re talking about here is prayer, that intimate conversation between ourselves and God. Because the truth of us is that we’re each not only a “me” but a “me, with the One who is infinitely more than me”. That’s the very essence of our human being, that our existence is grounded in this most fundamental of all our relationships.

Which is why both our Old and New Testament readings witness so passionately to its importance. For the prophet Hosea, it’s like a committed, exclusive and lifelong arrangement, like a marriage. As such there’s no place in it, he says, for any other of the small gods of this world. And the apostle Paul takes the same approach, from a different angle. Writing to the Colossians, he tells them they have all they need in the one God revealed in Jesus Christ. The world can tempt us to embrace other, lesser gods, he says. But all that matters is for us to stay to true to the one Love so steadfastly true to us.

Well, okay, I guess that’s clear enough, clear but also perhaps more than a bit unnerving. Because living as part of a mysterious Other, as close as our own breath and yet infinitely beyond our knowing, has to leave us wondering how to engage in this relationship. What should we say? And how? We’re back to needing some words.

Which brings us to our Gospel lesson today. A disciple sees Jesus praying and, when Jesus finishes, says to him, “Lord, teach *us* to pray.” Give us the *words* we need. In reply, Jesus says, “When you pray, say” – and thereafter we hear those phrases so very familiar to us all. It’s our most famous prayer, the one we all know by heart, that we call “the Lord’s Prayer”. Not quite in the form we know today but the essentials are there. What we say every Sunday when we’re called to “pray in the words our Saviour has taught us”.

The prayer itself is really quite beautiful and I say “really” because I think we often rhyme it off without giving it too much thought. But consider: first, “Our Father” – addressing this infinite Presence as a beloved parent, like Jesus’ Abba or Papa, is where we start. That intimacy and trust is the context for prayer. “Your kingdom come” – affirms the purpose of life to be a world of right relationships, of justice and peace, for all beings and for the earth. “Our daily bread” – we humbly ask only for what is needed to sustain us, nothing more. “Forgive us as we forgive others” – help us always to be honest with ourselves, that we might be as compassionate and kind to others as you, Lord, are to us. “Save us from the time of trial” – spare us from what we cannot bear and help us bear what we must. Keep us in your mercy, that we might be merciful to others.

Such is the briefest review of the Lord’s Prayer, the template and inspiration for all the many other words of our own. The affirmations and the petitions in the Lord’s Prayer reflect our need, and our commitment, to conform our lives to the life of God, to be loving as God is loving.

And yet. . . And yet, here’s the thing. As important as the Lord’s Prayer surely is for us, Jesus devotes very little time to the words themselves – just three short verses in our Gospel lesson. What he then speaks about, at length, is not the prayer but the crucial importance of persevering in our prayer. Because Jesus knows how easy it is for us to lose heart. We pray and it seems there’s no answer. What we want doesn’t happen, or not soon enough, or not as we expect, or it’s something else entirely that happens and we just don’t understand. Our cry echoes the cry we heard in Psalm 85 this morning: “How long”?! How long, O Lord? Have you forgotten about me? Are you angry with me? Am I being punished?

To all this Jesus says no, you’ve just got to trust, trust in the goodness and love of God and *keep praying*. After all, if a neighbour will give you want you want just because you keep pestering him, how much more, says Jesus, will the infinitely good God respond to your needs. Everyone who asks will be answered, he says. Just keep at it, keep praying.

Well, the prospect of badgering and haranguing God with endless prayers to get what we want sounds more depressing and exhausting than anything else. But I don’t think this is what Jesus means. This is about prayer keeping ourselves connected with God. And it’s praying regularly, frequently, that builds up that relationship. And it’s the strength of that relationship, that lifelong journey together, which gives us the strength to keep going, and praying, even in the dry and dark times. Our prayers equip us to, as the Bible puts it, “wait for the Lord” in the tough times, wait with confidence and hope.

Thinking about this drew me to another source of wisdom, not the Bible but still, pretty high up. In fact, I went to the top, yes, to “The Boss” – Bruce Springsteen! You see, one of many songs of his that I really love is called “If I Should Fall Behind”. Bruce dedicated it to his wife Patti on the eve of their wedding. Listen to these lines of the opening verse:

We said we’d walk together, darlin’, come what may

That come the twilight, should we lose our way

If as we’re walking, a hand should slip free

I’ll wait for you, and should I fall behind, will you wait for me

I think we can see those lines, not just as coming from two people in love, contemplating their life together but as ourselves, contemplating our life’s journey with God. I mean, here we are, trying to live our baptismal vows and be our best selves, trying to walk with God in goodness and love. But then comes the twilight, the darker times, and we lose our way. Then if a hand – our hand – should slip free, then we say, Lord, I’ll wait and watch for you and, if I should fall behind where you’re leading, will you, Lord, please wait for me. Wait for me to catch up, wait for me to find you again.

I think that’s how we “wait for the Lord” and why we persevere in prayer. Yes, our life has times of holding on and letting go, of starting out and starting over. We seek and we find, we knock and the door is opened, as Jesus says, over and over. This is the zig-zag, up-and-down way of our walk with the Lord. Always, it seems, there are times when we end up waiting, waiting for what the hymn calls “the Heart of my own heart”, the One who is always waiting for us. And there’s only gentleness and humility here, no fear, no judging, no punishing, because the love we have come to know and build together is greater than any mistakes we could make.

So we keep praying those words we’re given to say, or that the Spirit may inspire in us. Words that help bring us and keep us together. In themselves, they’re not magical and just saying them once in a long while does nothing. But “praying without ceasing” as Paul likes to say, with hearts wide open and looking and longing, those words become what they are – the Word of God. And they bring us back into the arms of God again and again, in ever new and more wonderful ways.

So, someone asks us, you wanna say some words? Yes, we reply, we do, today and every day. Now and always. Amen.