

## Advent 1.07

Church law prescribes that the Sunday sermon be an explanation of the readings from Scripture and the application of them to the lives of the community. We normally adhere to that rule here, but this is a special season of the church year and I would like to do something special during it. I would like to dedicate these four Sundays of Advent to the topic of prayer. Today I would like to talk about personal prayer. Next Sunday I would like to do about public prayer. The third Sunday will be devoted to the prayer of the Mass, and the last and fourth Sunday will be about types of prayer. Let me say at the outset that these are simply my personal reflections. Therefore, you can take them or leave them, depending on whether or not you find them helpful.

Personal prayer. Let us begin with what I believe is a commonly accepted definition of prayer, at least in our Catholic tradition. Prayer is the raising of the mind and heart to God. This definition makes use of the image of space, of that which is lower or higher. Prayer is when we go higher, when we raise our minds and hearts. It is clear what we are raising our minds and hearts to, God, but what are we raising them from? From whatever we are thinking or feeling about. Did you even think about the fact that we are

consciousness machines. We go to sleep and wake up, and once we wake up, our minds kick into gear. We are thinking and feeling about something or someone all the time. Worrying, fretting, longing, rejoicing, feeling gloomy, feeling angry, plotting revenge, thinking lovingly of someone—these are all exercises in consciousness, and we know how rapidly this consciousness moves. The images, the moods, the thoughts are constantly changing, nudging each other, fighting with each other for the enter of our attention, for the center of our consciousness. And once in a while we stop the camera and, as it were, look upwards to the one we call God. We raise our minds and hearts to Him, and so we are praying. And we do so most of the time because we need help. We need help to control bad thoughts and feelings—our anger, our lust, our discouragement, our feeling of being alone and lost--, though there are other times when we do so because we are overwhelmed by the beauty of nature or the goodness of other people, of the love and kindness we find in them, and even more so when this love and kindness are directed at us.

Prayer then would seem to be those moments when we turn or raise our thoughts to God in order to ask for help or to praise him. And that would be true of all people all over the world who pray. And many, many people who don't go to a church, who don't

belong to any kind of organized religion, nevertheless pray. We are different because we belong to a church, and that affects the way we pray, because our church teaches us that God is one but three. And so our prayer can take place in three different keys. We can pray to God the Father or God the Son or God the Holy Spirit. Officially, liturgically, the Church prays to the Father through the Son and in the Holy Spirit. But many Christians, I suspect, concentrate a great deal of their praying on Jesus. That is easier. After all, he is human as well as divine. He is God made human. He has lived a human life. Therefore we can go to him with our problems because he has walked this way before us.

When we pray, when we raise our minds and hearts to God, we are bringing him into our consciousness. Therefore we could get the impression that God is absent from us until we do so. That is not correct. He is already there. It is we who are absent from him, and not the other way around. God is always on the air. It is we who must tune in. The German theologian Karl Rahner tells us that if God were not present to us, we would not be able to be conscious. Our ability to think about particular things can take place only because there is a huge, unlimited background against which they can be presented. Without that background we could not see these things. God is that unlimited background. Therefore we who are

conscious, who can think, can do so only because that background is present to us. To use the words of Acts, in him we live and move and have our being. And so when we pray, we are simply turning our attention to the one who is always there.

Prayer then is an activity which centers us. We put the particular things of our lives into that larger context which is in fact God. Therefore prayer pulls us together, and in doing so it gives us rest and direction. Without prayer our lives can simply break up into an unfocused succession of individual events and objects. We have to pray to pull ourselves together. And all of us feel that need, though we may not recognize it as the need to pray.

And so let us ask ourselves: what is good for me in my daily life? It is enough for me to pray on the fly? After all we can pray wherever and whenever we want. Is it enough then for my daily life to pray while I drive or cook or clean or exercise? Or should I make time simply to pray? Someone once wrote that it was enough for him to pray on the run, for his work too was a form of prayer because it was done for the Lord. He could also point to the fact that as a member of a religious order he had previously prayed for many years in a concentrated way. There was a period of meditation every day for three quarters of an hour. With that

background he no longer needed to pray in a concentrated way. Maybe some of you feel that way. Your life is good. Your work is good. It is enough to pray on the run. But others say that occasional prayer, prayer on the run, will dry up unless we sometimes devote time exclusively to prayer. We do that by coming to church on Sunday. But maybe our lives would be happier if we made time each day for formal prayer. Maybe Advent is a good time to think about that.