



What is Prayer?

by Jean Vanier

One of the members of our l'Arche community (a Christian community of able-bodied and disabled persons) spends a lot of time in the chapel. When asked what she did there, she replied, "I pray." "What do you do when you pray?" "I listen." "What does God say to you?" "God says, 'You are my beloved child.'"

Prayer is communion

Isn't this the heart of prayer: to hear Jesus say, "You are my beloved son, you are my beloved daughter; I rejoice in you"? Prayer is rest; it is to be still, to abide in the presence and in the arms of God, knowing that we are loved just as we are; we are held and safe. We do not have to be perfect or saints or anyone else; we can be ourselves.

Jesus says to us, "Abide in me, as I abide in you. As the Father loves me, so I also love you. Abide in my love" (John 15:4,9). This abiding is gentle trust; it is peace; it is safeness. As we abide and remain still in the love of Jesus, he reveals to us our beauty and our value: "I no longer call you my servants. Instead I call you friends, for everything I have learned from my Father I have made known to you" (John 15:15).

Friendship is not a one-way gesture but implies a certain equality and reciprocity; it is two-way. Friendship is communion, and communion is the to-and-fro of love. We give and we receive. We give our hearts, our trust, our openness-and we receive a heart, a trust, an openness.

Prayer is to say to Jesus, "Tell me what you want. May your will be done." Then, unexpectedly, Jesus says to us, "Tell me what you want." "Whatever you ask in my name, I will do.... If you ask anything of me in my name, I will do it" (John 14:13, 14).

Prayer is a journey

It is all so simple, so gentle, so loving. Prayer flows from faith, from our belief and trust that Jesus is living with and in us. Jesus is Emmanuel, God-with-us, in our everyday joys and pains, in our crises, in our work, and in our leisure activities; God-with-us as we go to bed, as we sleep, and as we awaken. Though we may not always feel it, we trust in Jesus' promise. We trust that he is there, the friend and the beloved. Jesus and the Father send us the Holy Spirit, who teaches us to live this friendship and communion with them. This implies, however, that we really want to live this treasure of communion with God; that we do not do just what we want for our own glory and power in a competitive world.

Prayer is a journey, then, as are all relationships. We grow in friendship and in mutual trust through the times of honeymoon and through periods of pain, absence, and trials of all sorts. It can begin as an experience of being overwhelmed by love, or it can begin as a small light burning in the heart. It can begin as we kneel by our beds to say our prayers or as we receive the sacrament of the Eucharist. It grows through many meetings until the friendship becomes rooted and we become one with the Beloved.

But to grow, this friendship demands fidelity and a struggle against seductions that can drag us away from communion with Jesus. It demands that we be part of a community of prayer and love that holds us and calls us to grow more deeply in this journey.

Prayer is to cry out

There are some persons with mental disabilities who, when I am with them, awaken in me what is most beautiful: my capacity to love and to be present to them. But then there are others who provoke me and awaken the anguish, fear, and darkness in me: my incapacity to love.

As we live with the poor and the broken, they reveal to us our own poverty and brokenness. They disturb us and reveal to us that we are part of a broken humanity. The good news of love is announced to the poor, not to those who only serve the poor. People come to l'Arche communities to serve the poor, but they will stay only if they discover that they are the poor, if they discover and accept their own inner disabilities and barriers. This is not an easy process when we have been accustomed to hiding these imperfections, even despising them, for the sake of success and power. Yet God hears the cry of the poor.

As we begin to follow Jesus and grow in our friendship with him, we discover all these obstacles. We discover struggles, temptations, and fear. Jesus tells us that he is the vine, we are the branches, and that branches that bear fruit may be pruned to bear more fruit (John 15:1-2,5). It is not easy to be pruned. To be pruned means to be cut open, to be wounded, to suffer loss. To be pruned is to live emptiness and anguish. It is to cry out in pain.

A young girl with a mental disability made her First Communion during a beautiful celebration of the Eucharist. After the ceremony her uncle said to her mother: "What a beautiful liturgy! The sad thing is that she did not understand anything." The young girl overheard this remark and said to her mother: "Don't worry, Mommy, Jesus loves me as I am." Assistants at l'Arche who cry out their inner anguish and feelings of guilt will also experience the response of God in moments of inner stillness and peace. They, too, are able to say: "God loves me just as I am, with all that is broken in me, with all my inability to love."

Jesus always wants to penetrate more fully into our psyche, into our hearts and flesh. He wants to liberate in us all our energies of love and wisdom; he wants to reside in us at the deepest level of our being, beyond all our fears and defense mechanisms. He wants to pray in us and to love the Father and others in and through us.

Prayer is meeting Jesus in the poor and weak

Dare I say, God's greatest fear is that we be frightened of God? Isn't that why God became flesh, became weak? "The foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength" (1 Cor. 1:25). God is the almighty Creator of heaven and earth. But as the Word becomes flesh, God becomes the weak one, the little one, the powerless one. Jesus becomes the little beggar who says: "I need you. I need your love. Give me your heart. Let me come and dwell in you."

Prayer is not simply to adore the greatness and beauty of God; it is to welcome the littleness of God, the silent, hidden God who yearns to find rest in open and humble hearts. Our God yearns to find a dwelling place in our hearts, to live and love in us, and to reveal God's forgiveness through us.

As we live in communion with all sorts of people, we discover that prayer is not just time spent alone in chapel. In Bethlehem and in Nazareth, Mary did not leave her child in a corner when she prayed! Her prayer consisted of being with Jesus, loving him, listening to him, touching and nourishing him, playing and laughing with him.

Mary lived this simple love in faith. At l'Arche we discover that we, too, are called to live in faith, to grow in faith, and to demonstrate this faith in Jesus when we are with our brothers and sisters who are in need. We must seek times of solitude for quiet prayer, where we can nourish our faith in order to meet Jesus in the poor and in the

weak. We need the presence of Jesus in the sacrament of his body, the Eucharist, in order to live the presence of Jesus in the sacrament of the body of the poor and the weak.

Identifying Jesus with the weak and wounded of this world is one of the greatest mysteries of the gospel. How can God be hidden in those who are broken and disabled? The words of Jesus are clear: he is the poor. This is our faith. And in and through the poor and the broken, he calls us, saying: "Whatever you do for the least of my brothers and sisters, you do for me" (Matt. 25:40).

Prayer is offering

I am always moved when I visit refugee camps, institutions, psychiatric hospitals, and other places of suffering where I meet so many shattered minds, lonely hearts, and broken bodies crying out their pain. Is it useless, wasted pain, or is it broken humanity's cry for love, for a saviour, for God? Is this the revelation of who we human beings really are, in all our poverty; and what we are called to become, a cry to God: "Come, Lord Jesus, come!"?

Each cry of pain becomes an offering when we unite ourselves to the pain of the world and to the pain of the crucified Jesus. A mocked and rejected Jesus cried out: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mark 15:34). Jesus identifies himself with all those shattered minds, lonely hearts, and broken, tortured bodies; with all those who, throughout the world and throughout the ages, feel abandoned by God, by the church, by humanity. I believe that each one of us is hidden in the loneliness and brokenness of the crucified Jesus. All the misery and agony of the world are bound up with his agony. Nothing is wasted; all is offered as sacrifice to the Father to bring life to our world.

I am beginning to touch this mystery, but I cannot say that I have lived it. My faith calls me to discover it in the offering and sacrifice of the Eucharist. Our pain and the pain of the world find meaning ultimately in the rejection and pain of Jesus, lived each day in a sacramental way in the Eucharist. All our tears and our confusion find meaning in the tears of Jesus and in the tears of Mary as she stood by him, the compassionate, silent woman. Our hope is the Resurrection.

This prayer of offering and of intercession enfolded in the Eucharist is lived by many people in monasteries. But it is also lived by many old people, people with disabilities, people who are broken yet whose faith remains alive. I am in contact with a woman who lives with severe mental illness. She goes in and out of a psychiatric clinic. She lives alone in a one-room apartment in Paris. She spends her days in prayer -- a little hermit in the midst of a big city. She and other contemplatives like her are at the heart of our communities and of my retreats. They are hidden pumps irrigating our barren world.

Prayer is being led

Jesus is our friend and our beloved. He leads each one of us. I am always moved by these words of Isaiah: "Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name: you are mine. When you pass through the water, I will be with you; in the rivers you shall not drown. When you walk through fire, you shall not be burned; the flames shall not consume you. For I am the Lord, your God, the Holy One of Israel, your saviour. You are precious in my eyes and... I love you.... Fear not, for I am with you" (Isa. 43:1-5).

Prayer is to trust that in all the dangers and difficulties, in all that overwhelms us in everyday life, Jesus is there, watching over us, guiding us, holding us. Prayer is to live each moment to the fullest, with the lamps of our hearts and our faith burning. Prayer is to be vigilant of the little signs by which God leads us, showing us how to be open

and loving. We do not have to withdraw in fear or be consumed with the need to prove something.

Even in our weaknesses and limitations, we know that the Holy Spirit is there. Prayer is to trust that Jesus will make good on the promise he once made to Paul: "My grace is sufficient for you. My strength is manifested in your weakness" (2 Cor. 12:9).

Prayer, then, becomes an attitude, an inner peace, as we attend to reality and listen to people, as we speak and share with them and make decisions together. It becomes a way of life, listening to the heart of God beating in all that surrounds us, in life, in ourselves, and in others.