

Twentieth Sunday A

What a woman! When the going gets tough the tough get going. Tough in perseverance, that is. In the end her petition, a prayer, was finally granted. The message is very clear that we should never give up on our prayers. Even a prayer poorly said is better than one not said at all.

Prayer is nothing other than a conversation with God. In this case it is a vocal conversation. Overall there are four kinds of prayer: sorrow, asking, loving, thanksgiving. That gives us our prayer acronym SALT. Of course the greatest prayer is the Mass which can easily be divided into these four groups. The penitential rite at the start is one of sorrow. Then the Gloria is a prayer of praise or love. While the General Intercessions are clearly asking or prayers of petition. The last form of prayer is the Eucharistic prayer which is one of thanksgiving. In fact that is the Greek meaning of that word – to give thanks.

Prayer is also divided up into vocal and mental prayer. The former can be public or private, while the latter is a personal meditation. Gradually people are becoming more aware of meditation for overall well being. Mental prayer is further divided into ascetical and mystical. The former is our efforts while the latter is God's. Any contemplative knows the profound efficacy of prayer. Only in the next life will we see how much good was done by the prayerful people in monasteries and convents.

Another aspect of this woman's plea that makes us wonder is the fact that Jesus chose to ignore her, whilst knowing her needs. One would not be incorrect after hearing this Sunday's Gospel in thinking that God may have favourites! But does he? I know that we should treat all people the same. Aren't we all equal, after all. Everyone is a child of God, are they not? So, would it be wrong to favour some at the expense of others? It sounds plausible except for the false premise. That is, not everyone is a child of God. Be careful here. Only those who are baptised are true children of God. Everyone is loved by God. We are all equal in as much as we possess the same human dignity being created in the image of God which bestows on us basic human rights and duties. In that respect we are equal. But we are not all equal in our abilities our talents or physique. We all differ and the person who may be good in sport may be hopeless in chess. So being different means we are treated differently by others. Also we should be careful not to project onto God our terms of reference concerning relationships. How we relate to God and how God relates to us and how we relate to each other are all diverse scenarios.

However, from our petty perspective it does seem that God has favourites. Were not the Jews in the Old Testament the chosen people. Thus the Egyptians or the Syrians were not up to scratch. God selected his people and adorned them with his actual graces so that they would fulfil his will. So the patriarchs such as Noah, Abraham, Moses and David were called by the Lord to fulfil specific tasks of divine revelation. Then when Jesus came we read in the New Testament that he had favourites too. Of the vast numbers that followed him, he encouraged 72 to become disciples (what about the others), of which he chose twelve to be his apostles. Then again, of those in the apostolic band three were specifically favoured at times – Peter and the two brothers James and John. Only they were allowed to be present at the transfiguration and on other occasions, not to mention in the Garden of Gethsemane on Holy Thursday evening. Remind yourself that if God makes someone a favourite then it's for his glory and not for their sake. We always think that it's all about us. Indeed it's all about him and his plan. If he wants to favour a young man called Francis in Assisi to begin a new movement in the Church, what is it to anybody else. If he wants to give special graces to a Capuchin Monk called Padre Pio to convert hard hearted Italians in the confessional, that's his call.

Also, be careful how you digest this reality. Generally, God is very tough on his favourites. As it was once said: He is easy to please but hard to satisfy. He has high demands. Just ask a Joan of Ark who was burnt at the stake by fellow Catholics or Maximilian Kolbe who was starved to death in a concentration camp, what it's like. We may think that it seems unfair because we seem to miss out. That's our bent perspective. God does not ignore anyone. As the Creator he wants everyone to be a winner – that is to enter heaven and daily he gives us actual graces to achieve that goal. If they are not effective or we fail to meet the grade of sanctity in the next life the fault is ours.

Upon arrival in heaven will we find that others seem holier than us? Yes, there is a hierarchy of favourites there, too. But we won't be disappointed or jealous. Because our capacity to love will be full. We shall be utterly perfect and nothing shall be wanting in us. Yet, we will note that others have a greater capacity because in this life they loved God more. In the words of Saint John of the Cross – all that remains is love!