

See how the flowers of the field grow...

Part 3: ASKING

“When you want to pray,” writes Henri Nouwen, “the first question is: how do I open my closed hands? To pray means to open your hands before God.” There are many reasons why our hands might be closed. Past hurts, present suspicions, a deep unspoken belief that we won’t receive anything. Or we might be holding tightly on to something we don’t want to let go.

Nouwen goes on: “Often feelings arise even before thoughts can be formulated. Something deep inside of you has already tightened up: ‘Watch out, plan your tactics, and hold your weapons in readiness.’... How can you expect a gift in such a mood?”

And yet, according to the Jesus of Matthew’s Gospel, we are to expect gifts. More than this, we are invited to ask for the things we need, as naturally as the child might ask for a piece of bread. And to be open to receive much more than we expect or imagine.

I invite you now to come into a time of stillness, and invite you to move consciously into that, having set a little time aside. Take a few moments to feel present in your body, and listen to what your body is telling you: how am I feeling today? Am I carrying around stress or tension in my body? Do I need to stretch, tighten a muscle then loosen it, shrug my shoulders up, let them gently fall.

Pay particular attention to your hands - you might want to put aside anything you’re holding. And notice, are they clenched and tight? Are there things you are holding on to inside, whether or not you are immediately conscious of them? Sometimes, a gesture is a prayer. We can express something with our bodies which we don’t quite feel able to say. Is it possible to open your hands, as a gesture to say I am open and ready to accept the gifts that might be offered today?

St Ignatius would advise his followers to ask for a grace at the beginning of a time of prayer. It could be something you feel you need in your life today, or in your walk with God at the moment. What would you like to ask for? And, as you ask, would you like to lift up your open hands to God as a sign that you are ready to receive his grace?

PAUSE

Listen to these words again from Matthew’s gospel:

Which of you, if your son asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake? If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him?

Jesus is painting a picture here with words.

As you listen, can you see a child asking for something to eat? Can you see the child’s face?

What are they feeling?

What of the parent, the adult who is being asked - how might they feel?

Which of you, if your son asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake? If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him?

How do I feel about asking God for something I need?

Does the act of asking make me feel vulnerable, weak, exposed?

Do I hesitate because I fear being let down?

Or because I don’t feel I have a right to ask?

Do I hesitate because I feel I am approaching God with a list of requests.

Henri Nouwen makes the distinction between a prayer of little faith, as he calls it, and a prayer of hope. The prayer of little faith clings to concrete requests. There is often some fear and anxiety around because much is invested in these prayers being answered. If they do not appear to be answered, there is disappointment, even bitterness. The prayer of little faith focuses more on the request than on the person being asked. And it doesn’t leave room for hope. It doesn’t have open hands.

This is what he says about the prayer of hope. “When we live with hope we do not get tangled up with concerns for how our wishes will be fulfilled. So, too, our prayers are not directed towards the gift, but toward the one who gives it. Our prayers might still contain just as many desires, but ultimately it is not a question of having a wish come true but of expressing an unlimited faith in the giver of all good things. You wish that... but you hope in...

“In the prayer of hope, there are no guarantees asked, no conditions posed, and no proofs demanded. You expect everything from the other without the binding the other in any way. hope is based on the premise that the other gives only what is good. Hope includes an openness by which you wait for the promise to come through, even though you never know when, where, or how this might happen.”

Does this help to shed light on this tricky subject?
Can you talk to God about what has come up for you in this time of reflection?

We finished with ‘Praying’ by Mary Oliver.

Praying

It doesn't have to be
the blue iris, it could be
weeds in a vacant lot, or a few
small stones; just
pay attention, then patch

a few words together and don't try
to make them elaborate, this isn't
a contest but the doorway

into thanks, and a silence in which
another voice may speak.

MUSIC