

Sermon for Easter VI – John 16:23-30

In the Name of the Father and of the Son ✠ and of the Holy Spirit. Amen

Our Lord's disciples asked Him to teach them how to pray. And if there's anything we need right now, it's that. As we deal with anxiety, lost jobs, fear of illness, and an uncertain future, we see how weak we are. We need Christ. We need to know how to pray to Him. So our Lord gives us, His prayer, the Lord's Prayer. And in today's Gospel, He expounds on that even more for us. Today our Lord shows us four things that every prayer requires:

First, every prayer is prayed in response to God's promise.

Second, every prayer is prayed in confidence that God's promises are true.

Third, every prayer contains requests or things for which we ask.

Fourth, every prayer is prayed in Jesus' name.

First, every prayer is prayed in response to God's promise. Our Lord gives us His promise. He says, "Truly, truly, I say to you, whatever you ask of the Father in My name, He will give it to you." Prayer begins with God's promise. It doesn't begin with us. It begins with God. Without His invitation to pray and His promise that He will answer our prayers, we would have no right to pray. We could expect nothing. Why is that?

The true God – the only God who exists – lives in unapproachable holiness that no mortal man can enter. No one can see Him in His unbounded glory and live to tell about it. Who would dare to come before the holy God and make demands of Him? And yet this is the same God who promises to answer our prayers. He binds Himself to His promise. He has given His word. He never goes back on it.

That's why prayer needs God's promise. Without God's promise there can be no true prayer. How can we pray with confidence unless we first know that God has invited us to pray and promises to hear us and give us those things for which we ask? We can't. Those who presume to pray to God as if they are God's boss don't really pray with confidence. Only those who trust in His promise can pray. Prayer needs God's promise.

Second, every prayer is prayed in confidence that God's promises are true. Faith is confidence. It's trust. It knows that God can't lie. When He gives His Word it's as good as done. St. James warns us about praying apart from faith: "But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for he who doubts is like a wave of the sea driven and tossed by the wind. For let not that man suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord."

To doubt God is to distrust His Word and promises. It's to take His name in vain. It's to misbelieve His faithfulness. The problem is we base our trust on what we see. We may or may not see that God has answered our prayers. So we need to base our trust on what God says. We believe that we will receive from God the things we ask because He has promised to give them to us. Jesus said, "Whatever you ask of the Father in My name, He will give it to you." He makes no limitations. This is Christ's promise. It's true. We believe that God's promises are true, even if it doesn't look like it.

Third, every prayer contains requests or things for which we ask. The perfect prayer, the Our Father, contains seven petitions. But we may pray a prayer with a single request. Or we may pour out our heart to God and list as many things as burden us. But prayer, by definition, asks God for something. When we pray, we ask for specific things. A child is sick or in trouble. A marriage is suffering strain. Money is tight. Health is bad. Death looms. Depression and sadness overwhelm. So we pray. We ask God for all sorts of specific things, relying upon His mercy for every concern we have.

Now when we ask for specific things we need to be ready to receive something perhaps a bit different from what we specifically asked. Why is that? Why don't we get exactly what we ask for from God? Because we simply can't know as God knows. He gives us what we ask, but He must often revise what we ask to fit into what is best for us.

Country music singer Garth Brooks once sang, "Sometimes I thank God for unanswered prayers." It's a catchy tune, but not entirely true. God ALWAYS answers prayer. When we pray according to His will, God translates our specific requests into things far better than we could have put into our words.

True, at times it seems as if God isn't paying any attention to us at all. But what seems so isn't so. His promise remains firm even when appearances conspire to contradict it, especially when it appears that God is absent and we must be untiring in our prayers. This is perseverance. We discipline ourselves to tell God those things that we see as our specific needs. We fight against doubt as we do this. We go to God's Word. God's Word will mold and shape us. Through His Word, He teaches us to pray with more confidence and boldness. Prayer and God's Word go back and forth and form a conversation that lifts us up from our troubles and gives us true joy.

And this is why prayer and God's Word go together. God's Word without our prayer is like God talking to a brick wall. Our prayer without God's Word is empty words without any understanding. In our prayers, God joins His promises and our response to His promises in a beautiful way. St. Peter tells us to cast our cares on Him because He cares for us. So we do. We tell Him what bothers us, what troubles us, what brings us doubts. We confide in Him when we feel that nobody else could possibly understand. And He always hears us. He always understands. He always answers us.

Fourth and finally, every prayer is prayed in Jesus' name. And this is not just tagging on the phrase "in Jesus' name" to a prayer like some sort of magical incantation or spell that must guarantee success. In fact, true Christian prayer doesn't even need to have the name of Jesus mentioned. The Lord's Prayer doesn't have it.

To pray in Jesus' name means to pray in such a way that we receive Christ and all that He wants to give us. It's to pray WITH JESUS as our Brother and our Mediator before God as He intercedes for us. It's to pray that by Christ's blood, we have peace with God, access to His throne of grace, and eternal life. Now that's confidence. To pray in Jesus' name is to pray knowing that Christ has brought us into union with God, by bearing our sins on the cross. He made us acceptable to our Father in heaven. God's Son gives us the right to pray. This is what it means to pray in Jesus' name.

What's the purpose of prayer? Why do we pray? What is the goal, the reason, the end for which we are praying? Christ tells us: "that your joy may be full." When we pray to God He answers our prayers and gives us the fullness of joy.

Christ promises that through prayer our joy will be full. This is genuine joy. Not the joy of accumulating useless things that will waste away with this world. Not the joy of sinful pride that places us over and above others. Rather, it's the joy of sins forgiven, of true peace with God and in true fellowship with one another. Prayer is the heartbeat of our life, drawing its existence from the promises of God's Word. God's always ready to hear us. He's always ready to answer us. He's always ready to give us more than we can ask. Not because we deserve it, but because He has promised to do it for Christ's sake. It's not the good that prayer does. It's the good that God does to whom we pray for Jesus' sake. He is our true Father and we are His true children. So that we, with all boldness and confidence, ask Him as dear children ask their dear father. Amen.

The Peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen. ✠BJF✠