Prayer as Arguing and Listening

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One of the conditions for spiritual growth is honesty in prayer. This involves the expression of our best effort to know ourselves, being grateful for our talents and accomplishments and brutally frank about our flaws and failings. It also means that we express openly how we feel that God is treating us. Perhaps we should admit as well that we often blame God for events when human responsibility is a prominent factor.

Such honesty in personal prayer must be followed by silence, allowing God to speak to us. Then very often the matter will be set in perspective; this listening attitude allows divine graces to mature within us. The Book of Job (ch. 38-41) provides a magnificent example of this dimension of prayer, as does the discussion in Luke 2:48-51. "Son, why have you done this to us?" Mary and Joseph are anxious parents, hurt by a teenager's lack of responsibility. As in Job, the answer comes in the form of penetrating questions that show the limits of human understanding. "Why were you looking for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" St. Luke assures us that, even while understanding would come only years later at the foot of the cross, the relationship between Jesus and his parents was not severed. Indeed, Mary tried unceasingly to incorporate this joyful/painful reunion into her prayer. "His mother kept all of these things in her heart."

Hosea and Jeremiah revealed more than most prophets about the profound impact that their teaching mission had on their personal lives. Jeremiah was a very sensitive man, well aware of his limitations (1:6) and often overwhelmed by the threats of authorities and colleagues. In the prayer cited this Sunday he complained that God had tricked, indeed seduced, him. As a result of his faithful response to the divine call he was persecuted and feared for his life. Yet when he tried to flee from his responsibility, God's words became a fire within him. He could not escape his conscience! Poor Jeremiah looked for solace in his prayer of lament, waiting for a consoling answer. Instead in his silence, God's answer brought an even greater challenge. "If in a level stretch of plain you fall headlong, what will you do in the thickets of the Jordan?" (12:5).

In the Gospel we know that Peter has found his "hero" in the person of Jesus, whom he has confessed to be the Messiah (Anointed One) and the Son of God. Many of his contemporaries hoped for a victorious king like his ancestor David to lead them. No doubt Peter shared something of this image. No one wants his hero to be a failure!

When the disciples heard Jesus describing his future work in terms of persecution and death, they were so shocked that it seems they ignored the promise of the resurrection. Peter exercised his new role as leader and boldly challenged Jesus. "God forbid, Lord, that any such thing should happen to you!" Jesus seemed to be harsh in his response: "Get behind me, you satan
(adversary)!

However, bad advice should be rejected, not merely ignored. Peter would not forget these words. When we would like to re-write the script of our life, it is necessary to recall that human wisdom pales before the way God is guiding our path, often in spite of choices that we and others have made. Peter should have recalled God's words through the prophet: "My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways...." (Is 55:8-9).

Becoming a follower of Jesus demands a drastic revision of our human goals and aspirations, even our definition of life. Rather than mere human, physical existence, true life is communion with the living God. Everything else has value only in relation to this reality. No one should seek pain as a "value" in itself, but maturing involves a succession of detachments so that we can become more Christ-like. Quiet questioning and listening will permit us to sense both challenges and the blessings of Christian life.