

7th Sunday Easter

Year C

The Spirit and the Bride.

*The Church is wedded to Christ in the love of the Spirit
and looks forward to the final fulfilment
of that love in the glory of heaven.*

*(Readings: Acts 7: 55-60. I can see the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.
Apocalypse 22: 12-14, 16-17, 20. Come, Lord Jesus.
John 17: 20-26. May they be completely one.)*

Most of us have at least one heirloom safely put away somewhere in our homes. It may be an old watch that once belonged to our father or grandfather. It may be a wedding ring, or perhaps a collection of old family photographs, now yellowed and stained with age. Naturally we are deeply attached to these, very personal items. They may, or may not, be worth very much in the purely monetary sense, nevertheless, we keep them for sentimental reasons.

Chances are, we also have some 'emergency equipment', such as smoke detectors, or a burglar alarm, a fire extinguisher or two, and that, all important, first aid box. We don't often use these things, but we keep them handy, just in case.

It occurs to me that this is often how we use prayer, as a sentimental heirloom or a piece of emergency equipment. We know that prayer is part of our heritage, handed down to us by the apostles and the saints. We know, too, that in an emergency we can always fall back on prayer, when all else fails, but it isn't something we take up and use regularly.

I think many of us tend to have the wrong idea of prayer. For example, how many of us think of prayer as a way of getting special favours, like praying to win the national lottery? Or we may think of prayer as a way of changing God's mind and getting him to do what *we* want done. The result, of course, is that authentic prayer never really becomes a meaningful, vital part of our daily lives.

From today's Gospel we see that Jesus had a totally different concept of prayer. He did not try to change God's mind about anything. Nor did he ask for any special favours. The first thing he did was simply to place himself in the presence of his Father. He said, "Father, you are in me and I am in you." He remembered the love that his Father had for him before the foundation of the world. That has to be the start of any real prayer.

God is with us, everywhere and forever, so we can pray, "Father, today, help me to be aware of your presence, whatever happens."

Our faith helps us put our trust in God's care, and to draw us into his life. We can open our eyes each morning and simply say the two words, "Our Father." In saying those words, we can remember that we have a Father in heaven who cares for us. We may have fears and worries, but he will give us the strength we need to face whatever the day brings.

The second element in this prayer of Jesus is to express the desire of his heart. Three times he asks that his disciples may be one and that they would truly love one another. This was clearly something that he deeply longed for, and he shared that longing with his Father. That's how we should pray. And we must make sure that our desires are the right ones, that they are honest and are worth praying for.

Picture a man who has a burning desire for personal wealth. He works hard all week, makes a lot of money and hangs on to most of it with a tight fist. He is a good Catholic. He so goes off to Church every Sunday morning. And he gets down on his knees, and he prays for the poor. Yet, he never puts his hand in his pocket to give them even a small donation. True enough, in a sense he prays for them, but is his prayer real?

Or again, picture another man who goes to Mass every Sunday and prays for a happy home. During the week, at work, he is having an affair with another woman in the office. – How can his prayer be real?

Prayer is a time for honesty! When we talk to God about what is really in our hearts, it is then that we give God a chance to show us what we need to do to achieve our desires. But, as we all know, such honest prayer is not easy.

A third element in Jesus' prayer is a readiness to do God's will and not his own. Indeed, all Jesus ever did was to put himself at the service of his Father, making himself ready to do whatever his Father wished. His prayer can be summed up in the words, "Not my will, but thine be done."

Prayer is not a magic means, whereby we control God. It is a humble means, whereby God controls us. We don't pray to bend God's will to ours, rather, we pray to submit our will to his. We pray, not to alter God's purposes, but to release his power.

So today let us take an honest look at the way we pray. Let us try to pray like Jesus, placing ourselves in the presence of God, expressing the honest desire of our hearts and being ready to do God's will and not our own.

Such honest, heartfelt prayer eventually becomes a part of our daily lives, and is not used like a sentimental heirloom or a piece of emergency equipment. Such prayer gives honour and glory to God.