

Experience the Intimacy of Alone Time With God

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August 19, 2019 Fr. John R.P. Russell



Jesus was a man among the people. He is God become man and come to save us. And so he dwelt among us – he spent time among us – he was present to us. This is an important model of ministry – but every bit as important is something that he does today.

After much time among the people — teaching, preaching, and feeding the five thousand — Jesus dismisses the crowds (Matt 14:13-22). He dismisses them and goes by himself up the mountain to pray (14:23). He even sends away his closest disciples — telling them to go before him to the other side of the Sea of Galilee. There is much to learn from this, I believe.

Some of us like to be always among people — or at least among friends. These extroverts are inspired and energized by the company of others. And they quickly get lonely and long for companionship if left alone. Others of us *prefer* to be alone. More introverted, these find energy and inspiration in times of solitude. And they are emotionally drained by being too much around people.

But whether we're introverted or extroverted, and whether we consequently seek God more readily in silence or in our neighbors, I think we must learn from Jesus the need for both of these aspects of our lives. He teaches us that when we pray, we ought to go into our inner chamber, shut the door, and pray in secret so as not to make a show of our prayer (Matt 6:5-6). He *also* teaches us that whatsoever we do to the least of his brethren that we do unto him

(Matt 25:40, 45), which means that serving others, attending to their needs, and spending time with them is *also* a means of prayer – of communing with Christ our God. And Jesus models *both* of these behaviors himself – both ministering to the people *and* taking his leave of them to spend time in undistracted prayer with his father.

I believe it is important for us to imitate Christ in both of these ways.

Even if we prefer to be alone, we should also devote some of our time to working out God's mercies among his people – feeding the hungry, consoling those who grieve, visiting the sick, defending the faith, and in all those countless ways God has given us to love one another – face to face and heart to heart with one another – with the image of God in each other person.

And, on the other hand, times of solitude with God are also essential, even if we prefer the company of the crowd or our friends and even if we get uneasy when we're alone – when anxieties soar & restless thoughts and passions disturb us – even waking us up in the middle of the night.

My mother used to say that, if you wake up in the middle of the night, it is because the Lord wants you to pray. The middle of the night can be a good time to be alone with God. My father therefore, who woke in the middle of most nights with anxiety, would pray, "What are you doing, Lord, waking me up in the middle of the night?"

The Lord's purposes are not always discernable to us and it is good, I believe, to be frank with him.

Sometimes, he just wants to be with us.

I once heard a story of a young man who, after some time away, returned to his father's house to borrow some money. His father greeted him joyfully and quickly agreed to give him the desired sum. 'But first,' he said, "come in and sit with me and talk for a while." And so the son came in and they went to the sitting room and sat and spoke with each other for a while. After some time had passed, the son again brought up the question of the money. The father said, "Yes, yes, of course, but now it's time for dinner. First, let us eat together." And so the son agrees and they go into dinner together and they eat and drink and talk. And after dinner, the father suggests that it is getting late and that perhaps the son would like to stay for the night. At this point, the son becomes irritated with his father and says, "why do you keep delaying? Why don't you give me the money as you agreed?" The father answers, "My son, of course I will give you the money and whatever else you desire, but I love you and it has been so good to see you and to be with you, and I don't want you to go."

Sometimes God just wants to *be* with us. Don't go to the Lord our Father only when you need something, but make time every day simply to be with him – to dwell consciously in his loving presence.

There is nothing more intimate than this time alone with God. You will never see an icon of Jesus praying alone on the mountain. There are many modern paintings of this theme, but no icons, as far as I have seen. How can we depict Jesus alone with his father? It is a scene of unutterable intimacy, not to be looked at. The same is true of *your* time alone with God.

Even if it is difficult for us, we must devote some time daily, I believe, to being alone with God. We must find some moment of silence in which the still small voice of the Lord may be heard over the din of the thousands and millions and billions of distractions that vie for our attention, especially in our ever noisier technological world with the endless beeping of our “distraction machines” which call for attention and away from attending to the one thing that matters – to the voice of God, which, came to Elias upon the mountain not in the wind, and not in the earthquake, and not in the fire, but as a still small voice (1Kings 19:11-12).

To hear this voice, both Elias and Jesus went up the mountain alone to pray. The Lord wishes to speak to each of *us* also and we too must seek a quiet place if we are to hear him. *I assure you*, if Jesus and Elias need to do this, we need to do this as well. None of us are above this need.

“For what purpose does [Jesus] go up ... the mountain?” St. John Chrysostom asks. “To teach us that solitude and seclusion are good, when we are to pray to God.... We find [Jesus] continually withdrawing into the wilderness. There he often spends the whole night in prayer. This teaches us earnestly to seek such quietness in our prayers as the time and place may afford. For the wilderness is the mother of silence; it is a calm and a harbor, delivering us from all turmoil,” (John Chrysostom, The Gospel of Matthew, Homily 50.1).

Speaking of turmoil, what is happening while Jesus is alone praying on the mountain? All night, his disciples row against the wind in toil and turmoil in the sea (Matt 14:24). Then, in the fourth watch of the night – that is, just before dawn – Christ returns from his time alone with his father and he walks on the stormy water to his disciples (14:25).

I don't think his walking on water is unrelated to his time alone with his father on the mountain. The mountain is like heaven and the sea is like the world. We must spend some time on the mountain if we are to weather the storms of the sea – if we are to be able to rise above the waters of this life forever threatening to drown our faith, our hope, our love for God and one another in so much evil and emptiness. Only by going occasionally to the mountain to pray alone can we keep the faith needed to walk on water.

If Jesus needs periodically to pray alone, so much more do we need to do the same. To maintain connection to God in the midst of this sea of distraction and turmoil, to know inner peace even as strife rages all about us, seems impossible. It is like walking on the windswept water of the sea.

In Christ, all things are possible (cf. Matt 19:26; Mark 10:27; Luke 1:37; Phil 4:13).

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