

“Lord, help me.” Late Thursday evening, I received a phone call from the hospital. A man had died. Family and friends were grieving from afar. It is still very hard for anyone to get into the hospital unless they are seriously ill. So, a nurse reached out to me to offer prayers. The request from the family was a simple one. “Lord, help me.” Not knowing what my exposure to the Corona Virus might be, but recognizing the faith behind the request to offer prayers was as heart felt as that of the Canaanite woman, I said a quick prayer to the Virgin for help and protection and headed to the hospital to pray.

Last week, when Peter stepped out of the boat and began to sink for lack of faith, he called out “Lord, save me.” An equally short prayer and an equally effective one.

Throughout the bible, we have many beautiful examples of prayer. One of the disciples asked Jesus, “Lord, teach us to pray just as John taught his disciples.” Jesus teaches the Lord’s prayer. One may simplify the prayer to 3 words as well, Father, food, forgiveness:

- We pray to do the will of the Father – “Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done.”
- Food – the request for daily bread is for what we need, not what we want.
- Forgiveness – we ask for forgiveness of sins and the Lord asks us to forgive others. Each time we sin, we have a choice. We can choose to do wrong, or we can take the temptation, and turn it around. “Lord, help me.” Instead of a word of gossip, we might offer a word of praise. Instead of acting selfish, we can do something self-sacrificing.

How does one pray amidst a pandemic? Over 21 million global cases. Approximately 800,000 deaths. The story of Jonah and the Ninevites come to mind again and again.

Jonah is given a mission to go to Nineveh and preach against it. But he rejects his divine commission. He is tossed about by a storm at sea when he heads in the wrong direction. The sailors pray to their gods, but Jonah doesn’t. “The captain approached him and said, “What are you doing asleep? Get up, call on your god!” (1:6). Like the Canaanite woman, these sailors show more faith than the chosen prophet.

Jonah’s disobedience is the source of storm. His failure to follow God’s commands, has jeopardized the lives of everyone on board. He is cast into the sea, sent into isolation, and the sailors are spared. “Swallowed by a great fish, rescued in a marvelous manner, and returned to his starting point. Now he obeys and goes to Nineveh, the capital of Israel’s ancient enemy.” (Intro to Jonah).

“Jonah began his journey through the city, and when he had gone only a single day’s walk announcing, ‘Forty days more and Nineveh shall be overthrown,’ the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast and all of them, great and small, put on sackcloth” (Jonah 3:4-5). The Ninevites listen, they believe, and they repent immediately. All, from king to peasant, manifest their faith in penitential acts. “Lord, help me.” God’s concern and mercy extends to everyone, to all 120,000 Ninevites. Like the healing in today’s Gospel, God responds to the faith of this people even though they are enemies of Israel.

The global scale of the pandemic seems overwhelming. 120,000 responded in Nineveh. How do we get 7.8 billion people worldwide to listen, repent, and believe? The journey of a thousand miles begins with the first step. Simply and humbly as the mother in today’s Gospel, we cry out, “Lord, help me.”

God’s response in Nineveh very much mirrors his saving actions in Naples, Italy. The plague struck Naples in the middle of the 17th century. 600-700 people were dying each day. The city prayed for God’s help through Blessed Cajetan on his feast day, the 7th of August, and there were no deaths recorded that day. The plague ended soon afterwards.

In closing, let me leave you with this thought from Saint Clare of Assisi, the contemplative nun who spent a life listening to God. “We become what we love and who we love shapes what we become.”ⁱ The Canaanite woman loved her daughter. In that simple maternal love, she reached out to Jesus. “Lord, help me.” The mother prayed on behalf of her daughter; we too should think of others first for we are called to imitate Christ. “This means we are to become vessels of God’s compassionate love for others.”ⁱⁱ

ⁱ [goodreads.com/author/quotes/2981647.St_Clare_of_Assisi](https://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/2981647.St_Clare_of_Assisi)

ⁱⁱ Ibid.