

SAINT THOMAS CHURCH

Fifth Avenue · New York City

Sunday February 18 2024
The First Sunday in Lent

Solemn Evensong
4 p.m.

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A Sermon by
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Prayer: The Heart of Pilgrimage
from the 2024 Lenten sermon series: “Lord, teach us to pray” - current and former clergy of Saint Thomas explore patterns of prayer.

So many times every day we find ourselves where we are not supposed to be.

I am not referring to places where we go with our body: physically we usually *are* where we have to be – we are up during the day and in bed at night, go to our workplace on time, return home at the end of the day, go for a coffee with a friend, walk in the park once or twice a week. We are where we have to be at the right time.

Imagine what would happen to your life if instead of going to your office say at 9 am in the morning you woke up in the middle of the night, say at 3 am, dressed up, walked to your workplace, reached your desk (assuming you could get in), and sat there. You might be able to do some work, but then you’d be exhausted during the rest of the day and struggle to complete your tasks properly.

When it comes to our body, on the whole we manage to live in the present time. The body cannot be in two places simultaneously: if it is at the dinner table at home it cannot be squeezed in the midst of a crowd in the subway at the same time.

Now think about your heart instead.

Is the heart too – like the body- always where it is supposed to be or at least only in one place at the time? Does it happen to you too to wake up in the middle of the night and finding that your heart is worried about a meeting that has to happen the following day, irritated about a misunderstanding that took place the previous day, frustrated about a failure that happened a month ago, ashamed about something embarrassing I have done years ago, excited about a travel which is planned for the summer, apprehensive about whether I will get a promotion next year?

All too often, the heart is *not* where it is supposed to be.

And this happens not only when you have nothing else to do but also when you are conducting other activities! How many times as I am out for a walk *instead* of enjoying the moment my heart is racing through the scenarios I have just listed – and *instead* of being in the park with my body in the present moment, the heart is somewhere else in the past or in the future, and *instead* of finding peace, it is filled with annoyance, regret, disquiet, and concern.

Our heart is volatile, uncontrollable, always pulling us forwards and backwards in time, often preventing us to be fully present, fully focused on what we are doing now. This is the singular and most important cause of the waves of anxiety that we endure on a daily basis, and age us prematurely.

And yet it should be so easy! If my body always is where it is supposed to be, in the here and now and can't be anywhere else, why should not my heart be capable to do the same too?

Let me suggest a little test to you: whenever you feel troubled in your heart, try to take a step back, suspend your train of thoughts for a moment, and ask yourself where is this trouble coming from. 9 out of 10 times you will find that what is upsetting you now has happened in the past or might happen in the future or - supreme irony- it has not happened at all: it is something you fear or imagine or hope it might happen – which means literally that now, in this moment, you are upset about something that is not real, about a possibility, in a word about *nothing*.

Now, what does all this have to do with prayer?

Well, I would say *everything!*

We spontaneously think of prayer as talking to God, asking him for something, meditating on a passage of the Bible.

The gospel instead invites us to go deeper, it takes another approach to it – we are told that “rising very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus departed and went out to a desolate place, and *there* he prayed” (Mk 1:35).

So little information you might think – nothing about *how* Jesus prayed, what he said in his prayer, how he talked to God. What if, though, this lack of details was intentional? What if Jesus was pointing to something else?

“And *there* he prayed” – we are told! I like to think that the key word in this sentence is *there* – “And *there* he prayed”.

And this is what I can learn about prayer from this sentence: **we are in prayer whenever our heart is where it is supposed to be, *there*** – that is intent on the present moment, on the now, unburdened from the anxieties about the future, the regrets about the past, the lure of the scenarios constantly churned out by our febrile imagination.

You might tell me that this is all very well, but that when you try to pray, even more than at any other time, you have the *opposite* experience: whenever you sit for one moment, close your eyes, and try to stay silent, to be like Jesus simply *there*, well then more than ever you are flooded with all sort of thoughts, distractions – then more than ever everything that worries, frustrates, or excites you starts spinning in your heart.

Again the ever fretful, ever moving, ever uncontrollable heart!

How can we too, when we pray, be like Jesus simply *there*?

Here we might learn something from the practice of pilgrimage – something which we might think belongs to the Middle Ages and instead is more popular now than ever: think of the *Camino* to Santiago de Compostela in Spain. Thousands of people walk it every year!

So how can we describe what a pilgrimage is.

A pilgrimage is the realigning of the body with the heart: I am on a road, the destination is set, I am away from the place where I usually live and work, that is the place where I experience my joys but also my sorrows, where I find my motivation but I am also constantly exposed to all kind of worries. I take a distance from my everyday life for one or more days – and all I have to do is walk, one step at the time, give myself permission to leave behind everything, and just be *there*, and keep going. As always, the heart pulls me to go elsewhere, but the body keeps walking in the direction I have chosen, and keeps bringing the heart back to each of the steps I am taking now, to the road I am walking, to the scenery I am surrounded by.

We do not need to go to Spain to do this. Whenever we pray with the intent to be *there*, like Jesus, we can experience the same level of alignment between the body and the heart, the same reprieve from anxiety and from worries, the same freedom.

Since I have been here at Saint Thomas, whenever I am at the back of the church after a service to greet people, I can't tell you how many persons have related to me the same experience: they were busy going somewhere else, happened to pass by our church, were intrigued by the façade, stepped in, and the sudden transition from the chaos and noise of the street to the dimmed light, the silence, and the beauty of the church had a powerful effect on them: their heart was arrested somehow, raised above everything else, it was *there*, if just for a moment. They might not have known it, but they had done a mini-pilgrimage. They had experienced a little taste of the peace that comes from this alignment between body and heart, the gift of being totally present to something in the here and now.

Prayer does not always nor necessarily require us to say things to God. I would say that sometimes it is not even required of us to have the intention to pray.

Prayer truly begins when we start **to take care of our hearts**, to make sure that there are moments in our lives when our hearts are rescued from being tossed here and there, unmoored, adrift, at the mercy of hypothetical scenarios, of imaginary threats, of past sorrows, of future fears.

Praying in this way can be learnt and it is immensely beneficial to our heart, our health, our relations, and our faith.

The truth is that we spend most of our days swimming against the stream, getting frustrated and exhausted in the process – and then suddenly we discover that it is all right to simply let go and follow the stream. This way of praying does not just align our heart with our body – it also aligns us with what the 'universe'. It gives us permission to let things be and simply trust that the Father knows and takes care of us.

Prayer is our heart in pilgrimage.

Prayer is our heart finally finding the peace it craves.