

Introduction—Metaphors for Faith

This little book is not about prayer. It is, rather, an invitation into a way of prayer. It's not the only way. I would never claim that it is the best way. But it is a way I have found helpful and I invite you into it. Let us begin by looking at Luke 11:1-4.

He was praying in a certain place, and when he ceased, one of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples." And he said to them, "When you pray, say:

'Father, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come. Give us each day our daily bread; and forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone who is indebted to us; and lead us not into temptation.'

After being with Jesus, after seeing him pray, the disciples gradually come to see that really they do not know how to pray. And so they go to him, the one who knows how to pray; and he teaches them. I think this was true of the first disciples and that it remains true for all of us who have followed in their place. We really don't know how to pray; and yet somehow we, like Peter and John, know we have to pray. So we, too, must go to Jesus and let him teach us. As I think back on my own life I can see that first he taught me through my parents. My mother knelt down beside my bed with me when I was a little boy and taught me the words of the "Our Father." She taught me Jesus' prayer. I'm sure that once I had gotten all the words down I assumed I could now

pray "like all the big people." But her teaching didn't just reach to the words. Really she taught me more by the way she said them. The trust and simplicity I experienced beside me taught me more than the words. From her I learned that I had to give my very heart. In a sense, two things were going on. I was being invited into a form of prayer, the words; but on a deeper level I was also being drawn into the very heart of prayer: surrender to God. This deeper rhythm is at the heart of all prayer. It is the moment of transforming grace. That moment when our hearts catch fire and we know that our true destiny is to give them away to the Beloved who calls us.

This twofold dimension to prayer seems to be a constant. There is the form, the words, the place, the whole symbolic and ritual context. There is also the deeper rhythm; there is surrender to God. As a disciple I must go back again and again to the form, to the rosary, the eucharist, or some kind of meditation, for there Jesus is gradually teaching me to pray. He is opening up my heart and yours to that deeper rhythm of his own life, surrender to the Father. He is teaching us to pray the "Our Father." This little book, then, will invite you into one of these ways of prayer, one of those places where the Lord might teach you to pray.

This entering into the deeper rhythm of prayer can be understood as a deepening ability to listen. When people talk to others they have a tendency to listen almost exclusively to themselves. Their own feelings and needs are so intense, so demanding that they can hear little else. So they engage in conversation, but when they are not speaking they aren't really listening, for they are thinking about what they will say next. Or they are listening for what they want to hear, not what the other person might be trying to say. But something else can happen, as with real friends

or loved ones. Here the love we have for our friends can lead us on to discipline ourselves so that we are very careful to listen to what they say. Years of such careful and loving listening can deepen this so that we come to listen in a new way. We don't just listen to the words, though we find we are doing that better and better. Rather, we listen right through the words to the people themselves. We come to discover that we are constantly listening to discern what is going on in them. So you have: hearing mostly one's self, listening to what another says and listening *through* what another says to who they are.

This seems to be very similar to what happens to us when we pray. At first we listen, but mostly we hear ourselves. We hear our fears, our loneliness, our need to be loved and loving. And out of that we listen to hear how God will help us. This is very much like the little boy who accidentally breaks a window and at night prays that God, "who always hears our prayers," will make everything all right by the morning. Now there can be a real element of faith here, one that is quite appropriate for a boy of 6 or 7. But this is not as appropriate at 17 and even less so at 37. Just as we can grow to the point where we can really listen to the words of those we love, so we can come to listen to the words of Jesus in a deeper way. This is what meditation is all about. The point is to listen to the words of Jesus as if my whole life depended on it—and indeed it does! It is to listen to God in utter simplicity without defending myself against him in any way.

To listen like this, I find I have to be more than silent. I have to wait until I become still, until I become totally quiet. That stillness, in faith, in hope, is the very stillness of God. This is what it means, I think, to put one's self in the very presence of God. At the same time each day I go to my quiet place. I know a woman who does this in her car after she has

done the day's shopping and a man who does it as he commutes to work on the train. Wherever it is, I sit down and try to open my heart to the mystery of God's presence. Gradually I become still. But it seems that I do not create the stillness. I empty myself of noisy chatter. I lay down the preoccupations of the day, and the stillness comes upon me.

In that stillness, I read the gospel stories, but this is not at all like my usual reading. I do not attack the text with my mind. I listen. Deeply I listen. That listening comes out of direct and simple faith. "What is *he* saying to me now?" Slowly I turn the words over, holding them in my heart. I go back to them again and again. Sometimes I try to climb into the stories by using my imagination. I picture the whole scene so that I can better hear what the story is really saying. Sometimes this prayerful, simple reading catches me so deeply that I cannot go on. I stop and the imagining that accompanies the reading seems to pause and I am just *there*. I am held *there*, but I cannot say where or by whom, though I hope and trust it is God, even in God. Much more passively, yet much more attuned, more peacefully receptive, I wait. When I wander off, I read again. Gradually the spaces widen out. I drift off less and less; and the stillness, the waiting, the listening is deeper. I am beginning to listen right through the words. Because of that I am not quick to search for a word to express what is being spoken to me. Sometimes ideas are crucial; but mostly he speaks to me in a way deeper than words. I sit there listening and listening. Sometimes I read; more and more I wait. More and more the waiting, the listening is given to me. Always I try to keep still.

This listening to the words of Jesus, this prayerful but disciplined entrance into the gospel stories begins to change our lives. It is as if it were a mirror held up to my life and I

can discern there what is happening and not happening in my life. Now, there are two poles to this. There is a coming to know one's self. But there is also a coming to know Jesus as he is presented in the gospels. As we move into these stories and we hear what they are really saying we are confronted by the Lord and what he has to say about us and our lives. For if we are really faithful to the gospel stories, if we don't impose our meanings on them, but slowly learn to let them disclose their meaning to us and in that illumine and transform our lives, then the Lord of the gospels will have become the Lord of our lives.

This ability to transform human living is written into the stories of the gospels and the structures of our lives. The facts of most peoples' lives are often similar, more so than we usually notice. For all of us there is birth and death, loneliness and tragedy. There is waiting, remorse, disappointment, confusion; and sometimes there are moments of illumination when we know it is all worthwhile. There is work and hope and quite often fidelity. Those who learn to live their lives within these stories of the gospels seem to be gifted with an ability to see a huge meaning in these facts of human living. For them marriage is not just living together; it is a sacrament. Death is not the final calamitous end; it is a kind of birth. Waiting is not just passing time, for it can be transformed into a way of sharing in the way God holds us gently in his hand. This is to transform the often confusing and painful facts of our lives into mysteries by discovering the deep meaning that underlies them, but which we usually tend to miss.

To do this we need images, symbols, metaphors, stories that disclose this deep meaning, that help us glimpse it, and so let it surface in and transform our lives. This is what the gospel stories do. The evangelists collected and developed

stories and images that carried and unleashed the startlingly new way Jesus had of living and dying. These stories and metaphors were handed on and accepted in faith in such a way that there was a transformation of the images by which and within which people lived. Further, this is something many people have experienced. For example, recall, for a moment, one of the times when a gospel story really came alive for you, when all of a sudden you knew it from the inside, when you could discover yourself in the story, where you *were* Peter or the woman taken in adultery. Wasn't it because you had really connected with the basic symbols of the story; and they had let you see, in a new way, who the Lord was calling you to be? Still, we must be careful here. This must not be an attempt to make up images that appeal to us, but to hand ourselves over to the images that come from Jesus and are presented to us in the gospel tradition: the grain of wheat, the lavishly generous father, Jesus' choice of powerlessness before Pilate.

We have been talking about transforming the facts of our lives into mysteries. When you do that, you both disclose a deeper dimension of reality at the same time that you open yourself up to that reality. The two always go together. It is only as I change that I can see what was always there, but never recognized and so what was lost on me. But I change by living in the image, the metaphor, the parable. It is precisely the image that gradually frees my imagination so that I can see and live what I never noticed before. We will, then, be involved in a study of Christology when we try to discover some of the underlying images and metaphors of the Jesus tradition. When we push on and try to see how those images echo in our lives we will be involved in an exercise in Christian self-discovery.

To pray over the gospel stories in the way I have been

trying to describe changes us. But I have found that if I stay with the same story the confrontation gradually becomes deeper. I'll go back to the same story every day for a week or ten days. Gradually it seems to sink deeply into my heart. When I get up in the morning, it is with me. If I'm taking a walk or driving somewhere, it will come upon me. It is, kind of, all around me, present to me, helping me see myself in terms of the story, or even in the story. The images flood over me, overwhelm me; and right there I discover who I am, who the Lord is making me.

Or, I'll spend a whole day, my day in the desert, going back to a story again and again. I'll pray over it for an hour then go for a walk and then come back to it again. After mass I'll try to submerge myself in it again, slowly letting the images seep into me. I'll do this four or five times. As this happens the story comes alive in me. I don't just understand Zacchaeus (Lk. 19:1-10); I become him. I have his fears, his illusions. "I'm desperate, but he can't be interested in me. I'm a sinner." And then Jesus calls out, "It really is you I want," and then I'm not just dealing with ideas. I'm confronted by the Lord. I can hear the unexpected, the unheard of, that he wants me. My world crumbles. Right here, in this revelation of the Lord's love for me, I am freed from some of my illusions. Or I can listen to the same story from the vantage point of those who think they are so good and are so hard that they can't rejoice that a man has been touched by God. My self-righteous world crumbles, and I sit there stunned.

Let me try to illustrate this. Luke 5:1-11 can serve as example.

While the people pressed upon him to hear the word of God, he was standing by the lake of Gennesaret. And he saw two boats by the lake; but the fishermen had gone out of them and

were washing their nets. Getting into one of the boats, which was Simon's, he asked him to put out a little from the land. And he sat down and taught the people from the boat. And when he had ceased speaking, he said to Simon, "Put out into the deep and let down your nets for a catch." And Simon answered, "Master, we toiled all night and took nothing! But at your word I will let down the nets." And when they had done this, they enclosed a great shoal of fish; and as their nets were breaking, they beckoned to their partners in the other boat to come and help them. And they came and filled both boats, so that they began to sink. But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord." For he was astonished, and all that were with him, at the catch of fish which they had taken; and so also were James and John, sons of Zebedee, who were partners with Simon. And Jesus said to Simon, "Do not be afraid; henceforth you will be catching men." And when they had brought their boats to land, they left everything and followed him.

To enter into this, imagine something you have done of which you are profoundly ashamed, something that reminds you of your ingrained selfishness. Now, holding that in your memory and painfully aware of it, imagine yourself in the presence of Jesus. It becomes very awkward, doesn't it? Could not Peter's words become your own? "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord." If you can understand this; more, if you can enter into and live it, you can enter into and live half of the story. But to stop here, to think this is what the story means is to radically misunderstand the story. It is not to be imaginative enough. It is not to have a Christian imagination, because in the story Jesus sees things in a radically different way than does Peter.

Jesus sees the waywardness, the fear, the illusions, that characterize Peter and his whole way of living. Actually he sees them much more clearly than does Peter. But he also loves Peter and sees what he could be, what he needs to be; and he calls him to that. He asks Peter to follow him, to trust

in his vision. and in that to be healed and transformed, so that he can be sent to heal others in Jesus' name. Gradually it happens. Now, to be a believer is not just to accept the credal statements about Jesus, though they have their place. Nor is it to be able to understand what Peter feels in this story. It is to feel what Peter feels and then to realize that there is more to it than that. It is to recognize that Jesus' view of Peter is the only truly real one. Furthermore, it is to turn this story over and over again in one's heart until one knows Peter from the inside, until one hears Jesus' saving, healing, word that is addressed to Peter, addressed to one's very self and to accept it, trust in it and live on it. Then the word of God ceases to be a word unheard and explodes in its transformative power into my life and yours.