



Ash Wednesday: Reflection on the Deepening of Prayer Life

My name is Gina Bennett, and I am currently living in the town of Hope, British Columbia. I've been an Associate for at least seven years and still keep in touch with my Associate buddies in Cranbrook, BC. As a semi-retired educator, I can't seem to say no to the occasional teaching opportunity. I'm also a compulsive walker and I enjoy a little sewing on the side.

The Gospel reading for today offers us three tried-and-true activities to focus on for our upcoming Lent: almsgiving, fasting, and prayer. I notice that Jesus is not just suggesting that we DO these things -- in fact, he supposes we are already practising these in some way. He is recommending that we examine our practice and ramp it up a notch; aim to make our practice less about advancing our reputation and more about deepening our relationship with God.

I have no problem understanding the value of almsgiving; we are all called to be charitable, and in these times of COVID there are more opportunities than usual to be generous with our money and resources. I also understand the value of fasting, how abstaining from some indulgence or habit enables us to re-examine our dependence on things or to sharpen our senses for increased relationship with God.

But my connection to prayer is a little more conflicted; like they say, prayer and I have "history." I had an average sort of prayer life until 14 years ago when my husband's health issues deteriorated quickly. He spent almost 5 months in hospital, battling a serious long-term illness, undergoing very aggressive testing and treatment. His state of health went up and down although the overall trend was downwards. I prayed profusely. I prayed fervently for God to make him better; I prayed with joyous gratitude when he seemed to be improving; I prayed full of furious, foot-stomping anger when things got worse. I have never had a more intense prayer life.

Regardless, my husband died. Spiritually, I was left wondering: what the heck was that all about? Why did he have to die at such a (relatively) young age? What was the point of all that prayer? How did that intense prayer develop my personal relationship with God? Or did it?

I have since figured out a few things. I understand at a deep level that God is not Santa Claus and that not all my wishes will come true whether I pray for them or not. Remember the little joke? - "Prayers are *always* answered. The answer is often (or usually?) no." Perhaps most important, I learned that not everything has to happen for a reason, and although I don't doubt that God plays a part in every aspect of my life, some things will never make sense to me. When bad things happen, it's not necessarily because I have sinned or I need to be taught a lesson or I'm being prepared for something better in the future. God's involvement in my life is good, but mysterious and I need to trust in the process. A bit of faith helps too.

So I plan to use this Lenten season to further my prayer life. Jesus advised: "...when you pray, go to your inner room, close the door, and pray to your Father in secret," and this seems like a good place to start. More recently, Father Larry Gillick, a Jesuit blogger in Nebraska, said "Pray with your doubts; they are holy invitations." I am reassured by such a friendly, generous welcome to prayer life. I don't have to limit my prayer to specific wants or thanks: I can bring my honest doubts, too, and just sit quietly with God. There is a lot of unexplored territory for me in the world of prayer and Lent seems like a good time to explore.