

Prayer

From the upcoming novel, "Monk On The Road." Brother Jesse writes.....

Another grey morning. As I sat alone in the chapel after breakfast ... more rice and lima beans ... I got to thinking about prayer. We have our chapel prayer, of course, occurring throughout the day and night hours. But I try to have a time of personal prayer too. I can't tell you why I always do it in the morning. I've often thought I wanted to start my day on the right side of God, or maybe to arm myself with some sort of manufactured holiness with which to face the day. Maybe to swear an allegiance, to put on the helmet of righteousness or the armor of a soldier of Christ. All those things were taught to me at one time or another down through the history of attempts on the part of others to inspire me to pray, to lead a good Christian life and to fulfill my vows as a brother servant.

Other than what I can read in the Divine Office, the Liturgy of the Hours, or even the Baltimore Catechism ... you never thought to use THAT as a prayer book, did you? ... my personal prayer always begins "Dear Lord," moves quickly into deal-making promises and always ends with "So Thanks very much." On some morning in the future I expect to hear a voice say, "How boring!"

"Excuse me," I'd say, "but I'm just trying to—"

"Hey, I've got a universe to run here," He'll say. "Sure I'll take time out for you, but you

really need new material. Can't you think of anything new?"

"Well, no, I guess I can't."

"Good. Because there isn't anything new."

"I have to say I've sensed that," I said.

"You are trying to invent prayer when I already created all the prayers in existence and gave them to you."

"You mean, like, in the Bible."

"Look around you. The tall mountain, the winding stream, the sunset, pretty girls, cooing babies, cool and splashing lakes, thunderous skies. They are prayers already written. All you need do is acknowledge them, sit with them, let them lift you up. But go easy on the pretty girls."

"Don't praise with your lips. Use your heart to feel what is behind all these things. Become one with them. Forget words. They were invented mostly to help you communicate with each other, not with me."

"If you like mornings for a time of prayer, fine. Rise with the sun and watch out your window for the world to arise. Doesn't matter if outside your window is a gorgeous scene of nature, an ocean or a suburban back yard. Or an air shaft, for that matter. There is light, always playing with shadows. Glorious light. Read the astronomer George Abell. He got it right about the 100,000 years of nothing but light while I created the universe. Too bad he didn't believe in me, but I've been insulted by better scientists. And look for life. There is life everywhere. And don't forget the miracle of your existence. That should be more than enough to contemplate, to feel thankful for and to allow your amazement to seep through to your consciousness and down to your soul."

"Of course. some of my children take a while to get it. Let's hope you can quickly get up to speed."

Someone was shaking my shoulder. Wow! A visit from the Almighty, and it included Him roughing me up!

"Wake up Jesse," said Harpo. "If you lean any farther forward you'll fall out of the pew."

"Sorry," I said. "Falling over during a Beatific Vision is one of the hazards of becoming a saint."

"You wish," said the old priest.

I told Harpo the dream.

“Interesting,” he said, “but I don’t think it will count toward your canonization.”

“And if it did,” I said, “I’m still down a thousand points for past sins.”

Harpo sat down on the pew next to me and arranged himself, crossing his legs in anticipation of a conversation I wasn’t sure I wanted just yet. I would have rather thought about my dream before anyone else analyzed it.

Nonetheless, Harpo was my Spiritual Director and he should have an early crack at it. He soon commented.

“It always leads back to the pleasant, doesn’t it?”

“Yes, it does. Is that right or wrong?”

“It must be OK if we believe God didn’t exactly put us here as a tortuous test.”

“Some people believe He did.”

“Many people believed the world was flat.”

“And many,” I said, “believe they know God’s will.”

“Well, maybe they do. But, Jesse, I don’t.”

We sat quiet for a few moments. I could hear the wind play with the halyard and brass snaps against the metal flag pole outside. Inside, voices echoed down the hall from the kitchen, the last to be heard as the day’s Silence began. In deference to our Rule, Harpo, the good soldier, would soon drop his voice to no more than a whisper

“Jesse, exactly *why* do you pray?”

“I’m not sure,” I answered.

“Good answer,” he said. “A better answer would have been the truth. I think most of us pray so we can say we prayed, to feel better about accomplishing our spiritual life.”

“Probably true, Harpo. And maybe to get a kind of high from the simple act of grounding myself when praying. But I suppose my reason for praying *ought* to be to seek guidance.”

“Yes,” said the old priest. “So now we know we can be asking for directions and doing so without words? I wonder how that works.”

I knew he meant his question rhetorically. He continued. “Do you ever remember being with your father or mother when you were a youngster and just knowing it was OK or not OK to do something?”

“I guess so, yes,” I said. “I probably knew from hanging around them and maybe past times where I learned the hard way.”

“Exactly,” said Harpo. “By hanging around them, you had at least an inkling of what they would have you do.”

“So I should hang around with God?”

“Of course, but how does one do that?”

“My daily prayer.”

“No, not exactly.”

“Why not? It’s the only personal time I reserve for Him, to be honest.”

“Of course it needn’t be. And if your daily prayer time consists of you making up words to say to Him ... well, you heard what he just said in your dream.”

“Yes, why invent prayer when He has already made it for me.”

“We just need to hang around with him, watch the sunrise and feel the creation and love and care in it. As much as possible become a part of it. Then maybe we’ll get an inkling of what He would have us do next.”

Something else occurred to me.

“Next, not forever,” I said. “It’s always next. He doesn’t seem to want to tell us everything in advance. Probably because—“

“—we don’t know why, Jesse.”

What a perfect answer to the mystery of God, His will and intentions.

“Yes, you’re right,” I said. “We really don’t know. We’re left with nothing but trust.”

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