

St Frances of Rome
(Judith 8:2-18 / Luke 2: 36-38)
09.03.2021

On this Solemnity of Saint Frances of Rome we are led to the temple in Jerusalem. There, along with Jesus, Mary and Joseph, we meet with a woman who was waiting for their arrival... waiting for their coming, in prayer! The text tells us: *When Mary and Joseph brought the child Jesus to Jerusalem, there, in the temple, there was a prophetess – Anna, the daughter of Phanuel (...) she never left the temple, but stayed there night and day, worshipping God by praying.*

In light of that Gospel word, I would like to reflect with you this morning on the importance of prayer. I want to draw attention to the fact that prayer is vital for the good health of our Christian lives – *a fortiori*, our lives as Benedictine monks, and, on this day, aware that many of our oblates will be praying in communion with us, so important for the lives of those associated with our abbey by the bond of oblation. The reality, of course, is that we can all pay lip-service to a discourse on the importance of prayer, without actually engaging ourselves in its regard – at least, not to the extent that we could and should.

In my reflection this morning, I would like to consider with you, more precisely, the link between prayer and the prophetic dimension of our Christian vocation. (We are told, after all, that Anna that she was *a prophetess*. For us monks there is very clearly a prophetic dimension to our way of life, the particular witness we are called to live in the heart of the People of God. This is something Magisterial Teaching of the Church on our vocation constantly reminds us of.)

At our Baptism, when we were anointed with the Oil of Chrism, we were all of us consecrated prophets. I am not sure very many of us retain the profound significance of the anointing with the Oil of Chrism we received on the day we were *Christened*... the day when, quite literally, we were *made one with Christ*. I expect most of us think primarily, and perhaps solely, of the pouring of water upon our heads, accompanied by the words: *I baptise you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit*. Few of us recall that we were also anointed. But, our anointing with the Oil of Chrism remains greatly significant. The words spoken by the celebrant to accompany that gesture are worth recalling: *As Christ was anointed Priest, Prophet and King, so may you live always as a member of His Body, sharing everlasting life*. Our being *Chrismed* is also our being *Christened: made one with Christ*. The notions of *living always, being united to Christ, sharing in His life* (all of which are contained in the liturgical formula which accompanies the newly baptised's being anointed with the Oil of Chrism) recall for me the emphasis today's Gospel passage placed upon Anna's *constancy in prayer*. In the text read this morning, we are told that *Anna never left the temple... praying day and night*.

Through prayer we enter into and express our communion with the Lord. In and through prayer we are made one with Christ; we share in His life. In and through prayer we open our hearts to the Lord, so that He may enter into our lives and become well and truly part of them – well and truly part of us! Prayer is all about communion with the Lord; striving to become, actually being, one with Him. It is all about opening the door of our hearts to allow the Lord to enter into our lives... we could say, it is all about allowing Jesus Christ to be our life! In and through prayer we live union with the Lord. We know communion with Him and He with us. We become one with each other in an intimate encounter of love which is comparable to the physical union of a couple who give themselves to each other in a total and deeply personal way... in a way which is an expression of genuine, unselfish giving of self, and sharing of life. In the same way as the physical union of a couple is an expression of their love for each other, so too a person's prayer is an expression of his or her love for God.

Prayer is also time and space which a person opens up in his or her heart, offering it to the Lord, so that He may come to express His love for them.

Saying that, a memory came back to me. Let me share it with you. Many years ago a camera team came to the Abbey of Bec to spend some days with us at the abbey. They were doing a documentary on the life of the community in preparation for the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, during which an Ecumenical Service would also be broadcast from the abbey church. This television crew followed more closely one monk within the community, asking him questions about monastic life, depending on him to introduce them to what is important for a monk and his community. There were various shots taken of monks in the church celebrating the liturgy, or again eating in the refectory, serving each other at table, preparing meals in the kitchen, labouring in the ceramics' workshop, reading in the library, walking in the grounds... the usual cinematographic stuff that would serve as a backdrop to the interviews that were to be part of the television programme. At one point the producer asked if the crew could film the monk in his cell engaged in personal prayer. The monk was hesitant, but the abbot okayed it and so the monk led them to his cell. The television crew let the camera roll as the monk sat at his table with his Bible open doing his *lectio divina*. The crew then noticed the prayer-corner in the monk's cell: the place where he would pray personally. The producer asked him if he would kneel in that place and pray as would do normally. He was to behave as if they weren't there, she stressed. He did as instructed. He lit a candle, knelt down, closed his eyes and began to pray – as he had been asked to do, as if the camera crew were not there. I can still recall the film director's reaction. All of a sudden she cried out: *Halt! Cameras, stop rolling!* She was visibly moved. There and then she declared: *We can't do this scene. This guy is praying. What is being lived here is an intimate encounter of love.* Rather bluntly, she said: *I wouldn't want you guys coming into my bedroom at home, shooting a film when my spouse and I unite to express our love for each other. It just isn't right that we plant ourselves here with a camera. I can understand now why this monk was reticent about this scene; about us invading his prayer-space in the way we had asked to do. This isn't a composed scene. The guy isn't acting. He is not faking it. He is praying. Out of here, all of you. Out of here. Now!* She turned to the monk and said: *I am so sorry. We should never have asked that of you.* That producer was right. The monk in question was praying – maybe not every well, but really praying nonetheless. He was actually praying for the television crew – although they did not know it.

The point I want to draw out from the story is that the television producer in question actually said an awful lot about prayer that day. She blurted out what she was given to understand. She had come to grasp how intimate an experience genuine personal prayer is. That woman had grasped – simply by seeing someone begin to pray before her eyes – something that the reading of many books or the following of multiple courses on prayer might never have managed to convey to her... something the monk himself probably would not have been able (certainly would not have dared) to explain to her in the interview which would have followed on from the shooting of that scene had it gone ahead.

The whole thing was all the more striking given the style of the television producer in question. She had gone about the abbey all throughout the previous days behaving a bit like an elephant in the china shop. She had ploughed through people... being a little bit more than directive in her approach, let's just say. She had shouted out orders here, there and everywhere in a rather brusque manner, appearing to all of us as anything but sensitive and delicate in her approach. Indeed, coming across as quite intrusive really. But, at that moment, when she saw a monk kneel in prayer, to encounter His Lord in the intimacy of a heart to heart meeting in the prayer-corner of his room, she *copped on* to something. She spoke to all who were in that cell about prayer – including the monk himself!

So, while I set out to speak to you this morning about prayer: continual prayer, constancy in prayer, intimacy of encounter with the Lord in prayer, becoming one with Him in prayer, His becoming one with us... the Lord sharing His life with us in and through our prayer, our sharing our lives with Him in that way... and this within the framework of the prophetic dimension of our Christian vocation, lived in and given expression to in prayer... I have ended up leaving that television producer the task of explaining something I would not have managed to convey with my own words.

The true story I recounted – simply as it happened – illustrates so much. That being said, I am aware that there is so much more that could be said. What comes through in the story I shared with you is, above all else, the intimacy with the Lord that a person is given to live in prayer... the intimacy with the Lord that we are given to live in prayer, albeit that, much of the time, we are actually quite unaware of the depth of love that we are experiencing when we pray.

When I think of it, my story has not brought me that far away from where I thought this homily should go this morning: that's to say, towards a reflection on the prophetic dimension of our Christian vocation lived in prayer. Perhaps I could unpack that statement a little. Let me just conclude by saying a word about the great prophets of the past – those of the Bible and those of Christian history, like Saint Frances of Rome, a saint of our Benedictine Order and Olivetan Congregation, whom we celebrate today.

The prophets of all the ages have been men and women who have lived in communion with God in prayer. Prophetic witness will always bear testimony to the importance of living in intimacy with the Lord, being one with Him, sharing in His life... allowing Him access to our lives. Prophetic witness – Christian prophetic witness – will always be about following Christ in a radical way... another way of putting that would be to speak of it as always being about the way of the heart. For Christian prophets nothing can come before personal love for Christ – which finds expression in a genuine care and concern for His people... not just a willingness to, but a real commitment to hold God's People upon one's heart. All the great prophets of the Old Testament (to begin with Moses) lived in close intimacy with the Lord, communing with Him, as Moses did, conversing with Him *as a friend might communicate with a friend*. Of another great Old Testament prophet (Elijah) it was said by St Athanasius in his *Life of the Father of Monks, Anthony the Great*, that he (Elijah) was *a courageous prophet and friend of God. He lived in God's presence and contemplated His passing by in silence, as he boldly interceded for God's people.* (Athanasius would say the same thing of Anthony.) This was something we can also apply to St Frances of Rome as she lived her prophetic witness in the Church of her day. By a special gift of the Holy Spirit, the saint we celebrate today, Frances, lived a genuinely prophetic ministry, speaking in the name of God, even to the Supreme Pastor of the Church, Pope Eugene IV, urging him to work for the well-being, and, not least, the unity, of all God's People. Frances' prophecy – like all true prophecy – was born of intimacy with the Lord in prayer. She heard God's word spoken to her day after day in the dialogue of prayer, to which she was constantly faithful – as faithful as the prophetess Anna was... Anna who *never left the temple night and day, praying all the time*. Frances' prophetic witness was especially lived in her oblation: her total self-giving. May ours be lived in like manner! May Frances' example inspire us to renew the offering of our lives as we bring the gifts of bread and wine to the Holy Table this morning, asking that they may be transformed into the body and blood of Christ. May we become more fully Christian – more fully Christ, by our participation in this morning's Eucharist. Through our encounters with the Lord in prayer – through the transformation such meetings bring about within us – may we all be graced to give others a little glimpse into God. That is what all the saints do for us. They give us a little glimpse into God. For the apostle Paul to remind us that *we are all called to be saints*. May we be windows into God for our brothers and sisters. Seeing us live our life

of prayer, may others be accorded the grace of insight. May they be led to understand what is going on behind the scenes, as it were.