

Then the centre of my heart can become the place where God can hear the prayer for my neighbours and embrace them with his love.

Henri Nouwen

From the earliest days of Christianity there has been a wonderful tradition of praying for one another. There are numerous references to this practice in the writings of the Christian Scriptures and we often hear Paul for example, asking for prayers and exhorting the early church communities to pray for one another. When we pray for others we enter into communion with them. We meet them, and their lives and ours become entwined as we hold them there in prayer.

There is a beautiful film SBS television has screened a few times over the years. It is called *'Letters to Father Jaakob'*. Set in Finland, it is a glimpse into the heart and spirit of an old, blind priest, Jaakob, who receives letters from people requesting his prayers. As the film opens we see Jaakob, serene in his suffering, gentle and patient. He is a man of profound faith and his presence radiates the obvious communion between Jaakob and God.

The requests he receives range from seemingly trivial things to those we would judge to be very serious. But Jaakob makes no distinction. These are all people in need of grace and, in prayer, he takes them to God. Jaakob has also memorised great portions of the Scriptures and as he gently and serenely enters the world of each of those requesting his prayers, he places them in the heart of a text, which he brings to mind and which speaks directly to their need and situation. The film explores many aspects of this man's faith and spirituality as his path crosses with that of Leila, a woman who has been in prison but who has been granted mercy and an early release and is offered a job working for Jaakob, reading the letters to him and writing his response to those who include an address. Leila is hardened through suffering and guilt, but slowly she is affected by Jaakob. The film also takes us into Jaakob's own realisation that just as he believes he has been doing God's work and carrying out God's will in his prayer for others, so, in fact, has God been carrying him and giving him what he needed as he leads him home.

It is a deeply moving film, both sad and uplifting, challenging yet deeply affirming of the power of faith, so beautifully filmed, taking us into the depth and intensity of each moment. There is a stillness in it. As I watched the film and the very tender scenes of Jaakob going deep within and touching the lives of those people in need, it made me think of that story in the Gospel of Luke where some people bring a paralysed man to Jesus (Luke 5:17-20). Jesus is teaching in a house and there are so many people crowded in there that they can't get through the door, so they go up onto the roof of the house and lower the man, right in front of Jesus. Beautiful! What a wonderful scene. They take their friend, in his need, to Jesus. It speaks of the power of

faith, of trusting that there they will find the healing, the life, all he needs. They do for that man what he is unable to do for himself.

Each of us too is invited to take the suffering, hurting world into that place of healing, to hold it there, to be a channel of grace for that particular need. But bringing others to God in prayer doesn't just happen. It touches us and involves us in a profound way, and it asks something of us. Of course, it is a powerful statement of our own faith, but it also asks of us that we prepare our own hearts and minds. When we ourselves are anxious, angry, resentful, preoccupied, we are certainly unable to really take others to God. We ourselves must be free enough to open ourselves to others. Henri Nouwen, in his book, *My Sister, My Brother, Life Together in Christ*, reflects on this:

“Today I imagined my inner self as a place crowded with pins and needles. How could I receive anyone in my prayer when there is no real place for them to be free and relaxed? When I am still so full of preoccupations, jealousies, angry feelings, anyone who enters will get hurt. I had a very vivid realisation that I must create some free space in my innermost self so that I may indeed invite others to enter and be healed. To pray for others means to offer others a hospitable place where I can really listen to their needs and pains. Compassion, therefore, calls for a self-scrutiny, that can lead to inner gentleness. If I could have a gentle ‘interiority’ – a heart of flesh and not of stone, a room with some spots on which one might walk barefooted – then God and my fellow humans could meet each other there. Then the centre of my heart can become the place where God can hear the prayer for my neighbours and embrace them with his love.”

So we see that holding others in prayer is a spiritual path for us. We are invited to open our innermost being to God's healing and presence, so that we can reach out, meet others and take them there too. In prayer we make ourselves a place of hospitality in order to receive the pain of another person, to treasure that, and to take it to God.

The six weeks of Lent invite us into thinking more deeply about holding others in prayer. This is a time when we meditate on the suffering of Jesus. The traditional Catholic practice of praying the Stations of the Cross takes us along the Via Dolorosa, the way of suffering. And as we walk that path in prayer with Jesus, we open the doors of our hearts to those who, at this very moment, are walking their own Via Dolorosa. We see the suffering of Jesus in their suffering as they endure unjust treatment and condemnation, bear heavy burdens, fall, and fall again.

There are two of these Stations of the Cross which give us powerful images of prayer. One is biblical in origin and the other developed over time in the Tradition. The biblical one is the account of Simon of Cyrene, just come in to Jerusalem from the country, a bystander, watching the proceedings as this badly beaten man stumbled under the weight of the cross beam. He

was pulled in by the soldiers and made to help Jesus carry his cross. We can never know what was in Simon's heart. Perhaps he was afraid, afraid of being caught up in the unfolding execution, perhaps he wanted to run away, or perhaps he was willing to step in and help the condemned man. But whatever was in his heart Simon has become a symbol of what it is to bear another's burden, to ease the pain and walk alongside the one who is suffering. Of course there is the practical aspect of helping those in need that we see in Simon's story too, but that real sense of seeing a fellow human being suffer and reaching out to him or her, is a vital part of what it means to pray for someone.

The other story, not based on any real account, is that of a woman, Veronica, wiping the face of Jesus. This has a beautiful tenderness about it: a woman sees the intense suffering of this man and she reaches out, and she wipes the sweat and blood from his face. It is a momentary gesture, but its beauty, tenderness and symbolism have come down to us through the centuries. And again, this is what prayer is. In prayer we wrap the tenderness and solace of God around the one whose suffering has touched us.

There is another image of prayer which we see in the story of the crucifixion of Jesus and that is the heart-wrenching image of his mother, Mary, holding the body of her dead son in her arms. Depictions of this in art are known as the *pieta*, and they never fail to move us. After the agony, the pain, the crying out, the brutality, there is a stillness in this scene. The tenderness of Mary is a shroud of sorrow and love. And again, this is what prayer is. As she cradled her son, so too in prayer we simply hold another. It is a silent gesture, beyond words, and its stillness is filled with presence.

You may have seen the film '*Shadowlands*' which tells the story of C S Lewis, the Oxford professor who in middle-age married an American woman, and not long after that found himself agonising through her illness and death. Lewis spent many hours in prayer as he watched his wife die. When one of his colleagues asked him whether it changed God, whether it changed anything, Lewis replied that no, it didn't change God, but it changed him. To appreciate what this change might have been, Nouwen's words give us some insight. It is about developing that interiority, that softened inner space where we hold the pain of another, and as we do that, the lines between us become blurred, we grow into a deep sense of oneness, we meet at a level and in a place beyond what divides us. In prayer we indeed become the body of Christ, that beautiful image which speaks of the reality of our shared identity, our shared humanity, as sisters and brothers, beloved of God, the place of Christ's dwelling now on earth. And there too as we hold others in prayer, God speaks into our own hearts. As we place the pain of the world at the feet of Love, we see ourselves and life itself, in that greater context.

Every day we come face to face with the stories of those who are walking the way of sorrow. They may be people we know or those we have never met and never will, and yet as we hold

them in prayer, they become present to us in a very intimate way. As we do this we give a precious gift to others. It is also a precious gift we receive when we are called to pray for others.

I will always remember the beautiful images of Father Jaakob, a channel of God's grace, witnessing to a reality often ignored or at best only wished for in this preoccupied world. And, as we see at the end of the film, there is a profound affirmation of the power of this prayer!

Ms Kerry McCullough

Spirituality and Liturgy Coordinator