

What is Catholic Christianity? What is prayer? Is it perhaps like a flat-pack piece of furniture from IKEA that comes with copious instructions as to its assembly? This, clearly, is what the disciples want. “Lord, teach us to pray, just as John taught his disciples.” They want Jesus to give them the instructions, the manual that tells you all you need to know about being a Christian, an ABC of Christian discipleship.

But Jesus isn't like John the Baptist. In fact, Jesus isn't like any religious leader either before or since. He leaves no written record, no fail-safe method of being a follower, no set of proven techniques for attaining sanctity. Instead, he gives us a prayer – a very beautiful and profound prayer – but still, at the end of the day, only a one-off prayer, and certainly not a full-blown religious system to cover all eventualities.

Abraham's take on prayer and being religious is even more stark. For Abraham is simply *standing before the Lord*. Our preferred posture is usually sitting or kneeling. Maybe like Abraham, we should try standing for a while. What could be more simple? But what, at the same time, could be more challenging? As we stand before the Lord we represent the whole of humanity, the whole of creation. We bring before the Lord the hopes and fears of our brothers and sisters everywhere. “*I am bold indeed to speak like this,*” says Abraham. But that is what he does as he pleads for the people of Sodom and Gomorrah. And it is what we do as we stand before the Lord.

What about St Paul? Paul, too, stands like Abraham before the Lord. But as he stands, as he pleads for the whole of humanity, he knows that he himself is going to have a share in the suffering of all humanity, and in the death of all humanity. For Paul, what prayer requires is a baptism, a burial, an immersion. Only then will our prayer be heard. Only then will we attain the resurrection we so much desire.

Having given the disciples the Our Father, Jesus goes on to provide them with some kind of context. In doing so he echoes, in a remarkable way, the words of the psalmist: *On the day I called you answered me, O Lord*. It is precisely in the searching that we find, in the asking that we receive, in the knocking that the door is opened to us. Prayer has its own rewards – not in the sense of fulfilling a long list of intentions – but in the much deeper and more mysterious sense of bringing us closer to God Himself and entering into His life and being.

So, not a flat-pack piece of furniture replete with instructions, but not a ready-made piece of furniture either, but rather an empty space, an opening on to the divine, a way in the mystery of life, the daily bread that sustains us for the journey, the plea of all humanity for the coming of the Kingdom, the gift of the Holy Spirit.

*“Ask and it will be given to you, search, and you will find. Knock and the door will be opened to you.”*