

*Ask, and you will receive, that your joy may be full.*

St. John 16:24b

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Whenever things work the way that we expect them to work, we so easily take those things, whether small or great, for granted. And whether they're small or great, when we come to take those things for granted, we cease to be amazed. By things that really ought to amaze us.

So, I want to ask you to think about something that ought to amaze us, every day of our lives. Something that we almost certainly take for granted; that is, unless we start having problems. I invite you to think about your lungs. Yup! Your lungs. I want you to think about your lungs; and about what they do. Every day of your life.

As Fr. Nicholas reminded us a few weeks ago, your lungs breathe in and out more than 22,000 times every day; more than 8,000,000 times every year; maybe nearly 700,000,000 times in your lifetime. Breathing in; and breathing out. More than 9000 litres of air every day. In and out. In and out. More than 3,000,000 litres of air every year. Perhaps more than a quarter of a trillion litres from the day when we take our first breath to that moment when we take our last. Drawing in air; extracting from it the oxygen that our bodies need to survive; and delivering that oxygen to our bloodstream; where it is rushed off to the tissues and organs that need it to function. 22,000 times every day.

And, after our body has used that oxygen and converted it into carbon dioxide, the lungs then make our survival possible by exhaling all of that gas; removing from our bodies that which would kill us if were just there to accumulate. Over and over again. More times than we could count if we wished to do so. So often and so regularly that most days we never give it a second thought. Unless, of course, something threatens that intricate process; and our lungs don't work as well as we need them to work; and maybe our lives are put at risk.

Well, for a moment I want you to think of your lungs, and that whole process by which they deliver the oxygen that we need to live and remove the carbon dioxide that would kill us, as a metaphor. I want you to think about breathing as a metaphor for prayer. And I hope that we can start to see how prayer acts as a kind of respiratory system for our spiritual lives.

I hope that we can begin to see how that two-fold process of drawing in what we need to live and breathing out what would kill us; that two-fold process that our lungs go through more than 22,000 times every day, is what prayer does for our souls and bodies. Breathing in the Spirit; breathing in the wind; breathing in the breath of God; breathing in the life-giving breath that we need to survive and thrive. And breathing out those thoughts and words and fears and anxieties and resentments that, if we let them accumulate, will destroy us. In and out. In and out. More times a day than we can count.

Today is, as you know, Rogation Sunday; which, as you might also know,

draws its name from the Latin word for asking. So, on Rogation Sunday we not only spend our time in prayer, as we do each and every Sunday of the year, but we also think about what prayer is all about. And what prayer might do for us.

In some ways prayer is the most difficult things to understand; that amazingly intricate way in which finite, created, mortal humanity communicates with the infinite, uncreated, immortal, creator. So, thought of in that way, prayer is one of the most challenging things that we will ever try to do, especially when we pray and pray and pray again, and nothing seems to change; especially in those moments when it becomes hard to know whether or not God is listening.

But, in other ways, prayer is as natural as the air we breathe; when we face those moments of terror and fear, of grief and sorrow, of doubt and confusion, and we pray because there seems to be nothing else that we can do.

But there are, I think, two common misunderstandings about prayer, which we all face from time to time. First, prayer is never just a matter of letting God know what's going on in the world or in our neighbourhood or in our church. Pray is never just a matter of telling God something that he doesn't already know about our families and friends. God already knows our needs even better than we know them ourselves. In fact, it should be said that prayer is all about reminding ourselves of what God already knows; it's really a matter of helping us to remember rather than helping God to remember. And secondly, prayer is not about trying to convince God to be gracious or kind or compassionate or loving. Because, as we are reminded over and over again, God is love; and we will not make him love us more by our prayers, no matter how urgent or sincere they may be.

In the end, prayer is all about relationship; about being in the presence of God every moment of our lives; and slowing down long enough to acknowledge that amazing gift. So prayer is never just about the words. Words are only a small part of what it means to pray. And sometimes words get in the way of our prayers, when what might be better is to just sit and be still in the presence of God.

So, at its heart, prayer is really about presence; making ourselves present with God because God freely makes himself present with us.

And being aware enough of God's presence that we're willing to listen to the Word that God speaks to us.

But James also reminds us in this week's Epistle that, if prayer is really going to make a difference in our lives and in our families and in our very fearful world, we must be 'doers' of that Word, and never just hearers.

So the last step in prayer has to be the commitment to do what God calls us to do and be what God calls us to be; the commitment not just to speak our prayers but to live out the prayers that we speak.

In the end, we'll likely discover that God has all along been giving us the answer to our prayer; and that the answer may very well depend on what he's calling is to do.

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