

Friendship with the Lord

By Catherine Cavadini, PhD

January 17, 2021 – Second Sunday in Ordinary Time

Readings: 1 Samuel 3.3b-10, 19; 1 Corinthians 6.13c-15a, 17-20; John 1.35-42

The readings for today are about the life of prayer. Put differently, they give us an image of what friendship with God looks like, and how to enter into this friendship. Out of this friendship a life of prayer develops, placing us “habitually” in God’s presence, and helping us to introduce others to our Friend.

Recognizing the Lord

In 1 Samuel 3, God calls to Samuel while he is sleeping in the Temple. In fact, the text tells us that “Samuel was sleeping in the temple of the Lord where the ark of God was.” Yes, Samuel was asleep near the Holy of Holies—the inner sanctum where God’s presence was believed by Israel to dwell invisibly on the “Mercy Seat,” the area just about the ark. There, Samuel could be ready at any moment to do the Lord’s service, in which he had been employed since he was a small boy. Hannah, Samuel’s mother, had promised Samuel to the Lord, even before his birth: “I will give him to the Lord for all the days of his life.” Thus, Samuel lived and worked in the presence of God.

And yet, Samuel does “not yet recognize” the Lord.

We might wonder how this could be. How does someone who spends his nights by the Holy of Holies, having been gifted by his own mother to the Lord’s service in the Temple, not recognize the Lord?

Well, this is true for many of us, actually. Our parents hand us our faith, initially when we are but babes at the baptismal font. Over time we learn to say the Creed at Mass. Hopefully, we continue to grow up in the service of the Lord, entering more and more fully into the dialogue of belief. Thus, we make the faith our own—that is, we come to know the Lord, Our God, about whom our parents, our church, and our faith tell us.

We are meant, as Samuel, Paul, and John will show us, not just to recognize the Lord, but to become friends with God!

Now we might wonder how we are to do this. How do we become friends with God? The readings for this Sunday give us an answer.

Samuel: Revelation and Response

We can begin again with Samuel. Scripture tells us that Samuel did not yet know the Lord because “the word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him.” Perhaps you also noticed in this first reading that it is God who calls to Samuel. When it comes to friendship with God, God always makes the first move. God initiates this friendship, revealing his love for us.

Once Samuel comes to recognize the voice of the Lord, he is able to respond to God, saying, “Speak, Lord, your servant is listening.” We must pay careful attention to this word, “listening.” Listening is the first thing that constitutes

our response to God's offer of friendship. Listening is not a passive activity; it is not the simple hearing of a sound or a voice. Rather, listening is active. It includes acting upon that which we have heard. Listening, then, is a first response to the Lord, and Samuel shows he is ready, saying: "Speak."

Thus, Samuel, who had lived so long in the presence of the Lord, now comes to know the Lord, "listening" to Him and asking Him to reveal Himself to Samuel. With the word, "speak," Samuel seeks God's further revelation. In mutual conversation, or prayer, the relationship unfolds: Samuel grows in knowledge of the Lord as he seeks to know Him, and God reveals Himself more and more to Samuel. The Catechism calls this the "life of prayer." Prayer is simply a word for our relationship with God. In the words of the Catechism, Samuel's life was now constituted by "the habit of being in the presence of the thrice-holy God *and* in communion with him" (CCC, ## 2565). They were friends!

Paul: Developing the Analogy of Friendship

Elsewhere in the Old Testament, the friendship with God that Samuel comes to enjoy is also described as a spousal relationship. This language captures the intimacy of friendship with God that comes with the life of prayer. The heart is the place of encounter with God—the place of truth and communion (see CCC, ## 2558-2565). God desired this relationship with every Israelite. Indeed, the image of marriage in the Old Testament is of God with Israel.

St. Paul's letter to the Corinthians makes use of this analogy of marriage. However, Paul now speaks with reference to God and the Church, and, through the Church, to every human heart that longs to encounter the Lord and live in communion with Him. Paul's language is quite intimate: "The body is meant for the Lord, and the Lord for the body." He explains this statement, however, via the negative: "Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? Should I therefore take the members of Christ and make them members of a prostitute? Never!"

This may seem like a jarring explanation, but, if in the Old Testament marriage is an analogy for the particularly intimate friendship between God and Israel, then adultery is the fitting analogy for breaking our relationship with God. To commit "adultery," then, would be to place any other thing above God, to love anything more than God. This, naturally, hurts our friendship with God! Our communion is broken.

Yet, we can also hear in Paul's negative statement something positively beautiful. As Christians, he says, "our bodies are members of Christ." The Lord, again taking the first step, made the Church his Spouse. Not only did God become human, "bone of our bone and flesh of our flesh," but he even invited us to look into his heart upon his death, when his side was pierced, and his heart was opened. In his sermons on the Song of Songs, St. Bernard of Clairvaux speaks at length about Christ's spousal love for the Church. Bernard describes Christ's wounds as the intimate "dwelling places" of the Church. If we join ourselves to Christ, through his opened side—that revelatory entryway into God's love—we are one Body with Him. We are, again, intimate friends!

The Gospel and the Eucharist

Unfortunately, the word "again" can be a chorus in our lives. We often find we have broken our communion with God, hindering our friendship. But perhaps we tend to break this communion because we do not yet understand just how much God loves us. The Gospel reading for today, therefore, offers us a different chorus. John seems to call to us with a chorus of "Look!" and "Come and see!" The invitation from John is to come to know the Lord, our God, better. And so, this chorus of "Come and see" never grows old: we can always come to know the Lord better. We seek and He responds, revealing Himself to us. Indeed, in this short passage, we encounter the chorus of "seeking" three times.

The first chorus comes when John points to Jesus and tells us, "Look, here is the Lamb of God." John introduces us to Jesus as the one who can take away our sins, as the Mercy Seat Incarnate, who came to offer Himself to us and for us. To put this in the analogy of friendship, Jesus came to bring us back into communion with God. He came to befriend and even espouse us. He came to persuade and convince us of God's love for us.

The men who heard John saying "Look!" responded. And here is our second chorus. Jesus asks these two men, "What are you looking for?" They respond by calling Jesus "Rabbi" and asking where Jesus is staying. Jesus says, "Come and see." And so, they do. With this response they become like Samuel, staying in the presence of the Lord all that day, and letting Jesus teach them about God.

Indeed, the new disciples are then able to go out and tell others, namely Simon, to come—a third chorus! Because they remained in the presence of the Lord, they are able to say they have seen the Messiah, the One who, as God’s Mercy Seat, will bring them back to God. They have encountered the One who will “lay down his life for his friends.”

We are meant to join in this chorus—to live a life of prayer in God’s presence. We could even do so in this Mass we are celebrating today. “Come,” the Lord invites us, “and see me in the Eucharist.” In the Eucharist, God makes the love of his sacrifice for his friends on Calvary sacramentally present to us again. This love heals us and puts us in communion with God. We respond to this revelation of love with the great “Amen,” and, a little later, with the words, “Lord, I am not worthy that you should enter under my roof, but only say the word and my soul shall be healed.” By responding in these ways, we are recognizing not only the voice of the Lord, but also looking into his heart, and saying “Yes” to an intimate communion with our Lord. In receiving the Eucharistic Lord “under our roofs,” we are drawing even closer than Samuel, or even Simon Peter. *We* become God’s temple and mercy seat; God’s friend. It is then through us that God will cry out to others “Come!” “Look!” “The Lord wants to give his heart to YOU!”

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For Further Reading

- [***Bernard of Clairvaux, Sermon 61 on the Song of Songs***](#)
- [***Catechism of the Catholic Church #2558-2565***](#)
- [***Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, Introduction to Christianity, Chapter 1***](#)

In Short . . .

- *As we grow in the service of the Lord, we make the faith our own.*
- *Listening is the first thing that constitutes our response to God's offer of friendship.*
- *Prayer is simply a word for our relationship with God.*
- *For Paul, to commit "adultery" would be to place any other thing above God, to love anything more than God.*
- *In making the Church his spouse, God restores his intimate friendship with us.*
- *We are meant to live a life of prayer in God's presence and to invite others into that relationship. "Come and see!"*