
The Kingdom

1. After I have accepted God's loving gaze on me, I offer my whole self to Him.

2. Then I remember Jesus accepting God's loving gaze on Him, as He moved around His homeland. I let my imagination move me into the little towns He was in, the synagogues, the roads He walked.

3. Now I am ready to ask God for what I want: Here, I want to be the kind of person who will hear when Jesus Christ the King summons me, and not be shy or hang back, but quick and persevering in following His lead.

The First Part is a fantasy.

Imagine a grand nation with a tremendous people. See how they have been troubled and tested. For their nation's affairs have gotten badly botched. They feel tense and worried. Now imagine that they get a new leader. This leader sounds solid. A person who seems to have been handpicked by God for this people. The leader has unsurpassed charisma, is a physically beautiful person, shows tremendous political adroitness, makes people believe that good times are definitely on the way. Imagine that the people grow very, very content.

Then imagine for yourself the program that this fresh, excellent leader proposes for the people. With care and resoluteness, the nation's enemies can be overcome or won over. The economy needs careful overhauling—but it will be painful. Civil rights have eroded. Education stumbles along in disarray. Any program that could possibly succeed will require a lot of belt-tightening, and many groups will have to work through some very tough questions together.

Then, imagine that the leader gathers a special group. To this group, the leader gives a personal invitation. He gathers you and stands before you. Imagine that you sit right in front, listening. "I am going to inaugurate this program. I am going to see that it suc-

ceeds. Anyone who wants to work with me on it will have to put up with what I will put up with—extravagantly long hours, pitilessly hard work, going without not just luxuries but even without basic comforts, getting battered by public opinion and the media, and actually running the risk of being assassinated. But I can tell anyone who listens: This program will succeed and make millions of people's lives vastly better."

Change the fantasy and imagine that everyone has left. You sit alone. You wonder, What kind of person could reject such an invitation? What kind of person could accept it? Would I accept that invitation? Would I want to work with that kind of leader? Suppose I left that special group and walked away from the charismatic leader—what would I feel about myself later on? And you imagine accepting the invitation. What do you do? After a while, gently end the fantasy.

The Second Part uses the imagination but remains rooted in the real. I just apply my fantasy to Jesus Christ.

If a charismatic secular leader could demand loyalty (and many less excellent ones get unquestioning loyalty from their friends), what about Jesus Christ, whom God has made eternal King?

I let my fancy roam. I imagine Jesus surrounded by 72 disciples. They sit on a hill. Jesus talks with them, saying something like this: "It is my will to win over the whole of humankind. No enemy can defeat me or finally interfere with my Kingdom. I will draw all to myself. I will stay with my friends and we will labor and struggle, watch and pray. No one will have to go through anything that I do not myself go through. Whoever works with me and suffers with me will also share the glory of the Kingdom with me. I assure you, I will see my project crowned with total success." After feeling how wonderfully attractive Jesus' invitation is, gently end the fantasy.

The Kingdom (continued)

Then consider that anyone with any sense at all will follow Jesus Christ. Consider this: some might want to walk more closely with Jesus Christ in this enterprise, though they cannot explain their desiring. If you feel inclined to do so, formally say this prayer to Jesus Christ:

ETERNAL LORD OF ALL THINGS

I feel Your gaze on me.

I sense that Your Mother stands near, watching,
and that with You are all the great beings of heaven—
angels and powers and martyrs and saints.

Lord Jesus, I think You have put a desire in me.

If You will help me, please,

I would like to make my offering:

I want it to be my desire, and my choice,
provided that You want it, too,
to live my life as You lived Yours.

I know that You lived an insignificant person
in a little, despised town;

I know that You rarely tasted luxury and never, privilege,
and that You resolutely refused to accept power.

I know that You suffered rejection by leaders,
abandonment by friends, and failure.

I know. I can hardly bear the thought of it all.

But it seems a toweringly wonderful thing
that You might call me to follow You and stand with You.

I will labor with You to bring God's reign,
if You will give me the gift to do it. Amen. ❖

Contemplating the Incarnation

• I come to the moment of Jesus Christ's conception in my humanity. As always, I enter into God's presence and feel His gaze rest on me, and I offer to Him my whole self. Then I do three things:

First, I remember the "history" that I am praying about: The Holy Trinity knows the whole world of humankind and sees how we are ravaging the earth, making life terrible for one another, and turning many of ourselves into ruins. Out of God's infinite and eternal love, the Father sends the Son down to enter into all this, to save it. And then they send the announcement to our Lady Mary.

Second, I compose myself, as I have done before, in this real world. I am utterly embedded in humanity and in all that goes on. And after seeing the whole of earth, I bring myself to Nazareth in Galilee, where Mary stays.

Third, I ask for what I want. What I want right now is a deep and intimate knowledge of Jesus. I want a strong love for Him. And I want to follow where He goes.

• Then I cover these three points in some way or other—by fantasy, meditation, or contemplation—and after I have worked through

them, I consider what it all means to me, to my life world, and to the whole of the human race.

First, I look at all the people on the earth—races and ethnic groups; some at desks and some at wars; they laugh, play, weep, struggle; they are infants, grown, dying. I watch God watching all this, and I wonder what God feels. I see Mary staying in Nazareth.

Second, I listen to the riot of sounds—music and machines; friends chatting and enemies reviling; typewriters and hand grenades; mobs and riots. I listen to God's thoughts: "Let us save all these people . . ." And I hear the announcement to Mary.

Third, I move into the frantic activities of earth—speeding, constructing, fighting, playing, blowing up buildings, riding horses, flying jets, all too often destroying human life or the humanity in living persons. I see God working busily, initiating the Incarnation, laboring among humankind. And I see the angel announce the message and the Lady bow in acquiescence.

At the end, I will consider what I ought to say to God the Lord, or to the Lady, or to Jesus, who now lives forever in my humanness. As I always do, I close with an Our Father. ❖

The Birth of Jesus

I meditate and contemplate the Birth of Jesus, His first moment of independent human life. As always, I enter into God's presence and feel His gaze rest on me, and I offer to Him my whole self. Then I do three things:

- First, I recall for an moment that I am going to think about sacred history: A young girl, nearly nine months pregnant, came down from Nazareth because the Roman Emperor levied a tax on a population that we have records of. Joseph her spouse walked with her and they spent the night in a cave just down the hill from the little town of Bethlehem, overlooking broad historic fields.
- Second, I compose myself in that cave, waiting for Messiah to be born.
- Third, I ask for what I want: I want to know Jesus intimately, friend to friend. I want to share great love with Him. I want to go where He goes and do what He does.

Then I will enter into the event of Jesus' birth. I can do this in a number of ways.

- Sometimes, I just watch the people: Mary, and Joseph, and others. Or I catch something of what they say, and feel the emotion in it. Or I see what they are doing and everything that is going on. Whatever I contemplate, I let speak to me about my life world and myself.
- In some prayer, I might just start in the middle of what is going on. Or I might move around in the event, just watching it happen around me.
- Or thirdly, I might just stay with one or other person there, entering into their feelings and perceptions, while the events themselves go on their way.

At the end, I try to gather myself together and then tell the Lord what I have to tell, or perhaps talk with the Lady Mary or with the Infant Jesus. As I always do, I close with the Our Father. ❖

Two Standards and Two Value Systems

Jesus Christ's norms for action and values for judgment differ so starkly from all others that those others seem all the same when compared with His. So you put yourself to work, with God's help, asking what values move the world around you, what standards does it judge by, and what values and standards does Jesus use.

- I come into God's presence and feel His loving gaze, and then I offer myself completely to God.

- First, I recall for a second that I am going to think about sacred history. Here I just recall that St. John's Gospel keeps repeating how darkness fights against light, the Liar against Truth, and death against life. More important, Jesus Himself plainly talks about two kingdoms, fighting to the death. His teaching is that there are two titanic forces at work in the world, both driven from within to dominate.

- Second, I compose myself in this embattled world. I could imagine Jesus Christ and His followers on a splendid green plain, with wonderfully colored pavilions and bright flags billowing in gentle breezes. And then I could imagine the Liar with his followers in a deep ravine, all grays and shadows with the air dead still. But I must not let this imaginary geography obscure the real geography. That shapes the heights and deeps of my own heart, where dark and light, evil and good, still battle.

- Third, I ask God to give me the courage to see clearly the face of good and the face of evil. I ask Him to teach me to understand intimately the way the Mind of Christ works—and also the way people who have chosen only this life make their decisions and value things.

FIRST PART

- First, fantasize something that novels and films have portrayed: Here is a person totally

depraved. Inside is roiling anger, keen desire to destroy, vicious hatred for life. Now, imagine that that interior comes to the exterior: What will the person look like? How will the face change? the hands? the eyes and mouth? Well, that's what the Liar looks like, if you really see him.

- Second, consider how the Spirit of Evil wishes to clasp every one to itself. Evil wants to elicit evil; evil people want other people to share their evil. It's like radioactivity: whatever it touches, it radioactivates and poisons. It's like the plague caused by a highly contagious virus; open yourself to living contact with a victim, and you have contracted the plague. Whether you believe in a personal Prince of Evil (as Jesus surely did) or not, you know that evil spreads itself.

- But third, how about those who want to serve God and keep good? How does evil touch them? Consider this: Time is money, and with money you can buy anyone's time. Money means privilege, and the privileged can always get money. Money means power because you can simply buy what you want done, and the powerful are without exception rich and getting richer. The monied can buy the best health care, and indeed absolutely demand it. They require attention whenever they want it. They acquire authority whether they have inner worth or not. You have to recognize that the mechanisms of disorder among people are lubricated by wealth.

- Well, the Prince of Darkness—who always works by deception and in the dark—gets at the good person through that reality. First, you acquire something and you say to yourself, "Look at what I have." Then you grow convinced that you are someone special because of what you have, and you start talking to yourself in these terms: "Look at me with all this stuff!" You have shifted your focus from all the stuff (for which you might at first

have been grateful to God) to your own self. In time, you grow convinced that what you have, you have by right—you have in and of your own self the right to all this stuff and to a lot more. You now think of yourself this way: "Look at ME!" You have begun to grow into pride, which is the conviction that you can decide what will make you happy and what values you ought to serve. In the end you say, "Look at me! Listen to me! I have a right!" Up to this very point, you may have done nothing sinful, but you have utterly forgotten how all comes to you as gift (not came, but comes), and have grown convinced that you are the origin and source of your own values. Once the Prince of Darkness has led you to that position, you have no defense against any opportunity to sin, even deadly sin.

You may find it difficult to think about all this, but beg God the Lord to teach you how an evil spirit can get hold of good people.

SECOND PART

- This requires less space and time. First, imagine Jesus leading His friends. How does He command? Does He tell them the truth? What gestures does He use when sending a friend on a mission? what tone of voice? He claimed to be a king—what kind of king?
- Second, notice that He explicitly and publicly told His disciples that they were to go throughout the whole world announcing Good News. They are to help, always—the outcast, the poor, the imprisoned. They are to heal and to feed, to clothe and to house. They are to speak openly and to invite all to believe and repent.

- Third, Jesus also has His program: First, invite each person to live as though all were gift and they owned nothing of themselves. Even when they are rich, invite them to live so as to show that all they have is gift. Then next, help them to treat privileges, honors, and fame as the smoke that they are. Help them to see that the only legitimate power is that exercised for the sake of serving those over whom it is wielded. Help them to see that a life of frugality and powerlessness, freely embraced, brings tremendous safety and gives great authority. Then, finally, they will come most securely to know that they are totally created, momentarily, from nothing, by God the Lord. They will live convinced that God sets their values for them and decides what will make them happy. So they will have grown humble. Once humble, no temptation will throw them and they will live the Mind of Christ Jesus.

AT THE END

First ask our Lady to beg Jesus for these gifts for you: to be received under His standard, and to have the courage to buy into Jesus' value system wholeheartedly. Ask, if you can, that if God the Lord wants it, you will live a poor and obscure life, the way Jesus did, thought little of by the rich and powerful as He was thought little of. (In all this, of course, you would yourself want to do nothing to offend God, and you would want no one else to do anything that would offend God.) End with the Hail Mary.

Then ask Jesus Himself for the privilege of standing with Him under His standard. End by repeating the Jesus Prayer for a while.

Finally, turn to the Father and ask for these gifts. End with an Our Father. ♦

Three Couples

- First, I recall this little fantasy:

Three good and deeply faith-filled couples happen to pull off a business deal that nets each of them a million dollars. Now, these three couples are good people, with strong consciences, and they did nothing wrong in the business deal. After a few weeks, at one of their regular get-togethers, they rather shyly begin to mention a feeling that they have each noticed. They do not feel entirely comfortable about having that money. This is a spiritual matter, for their consciences remain clear and firm. But they notice changes in their spirits. They are no longer eager for Sunday Mass (and the homilies vex them as never before). They feel differently about the bishops' pastoral on the American economy and the Pope's letter about communism and capitalism. They no longer feel in harmony with the Church, somehow. They admit feeling exultant that they made the deal and got the million dollars. They like having the money and are doing great things with it. Still . . . maybe they want it too much or something? It seems to be tainting their lives.

- Second, at this juncture I set this fantasy aside and turn to God. I go and stand before the Blessed Trinity, with our Lady there, and the apostles, and in fact, I stand before the whole heavenly court.

There, I ask the Lord God Almighty for what I want: Lord, I ask to want, to desire, whatever will show in me Your holiness, Your power at work in the world and in me—whatever will make me more certainly Yours.

- Then I take up each couple as they go back and live out their way of dealing with this spiritual disquiet they feel, and I reflect on myself to see

whether I would be with any one of the three couples.

First, this couple really want to get rid of the disquiet. They talk a lot about it, at least in the beginning. But years later when they die—still rich—they have done nothing at all about it.

Second, the next couple can't sit still in the disquiet. They want to keep the money and can't figure why they ought to get rid of it. Still, they do not want to live with uneasy spirits, a little tentative with God. So they take some steps. Systematically, they give money to the poor and the dispossessed and the underprivileged, mostly through the Church. In this way, they try to bargain with God: "If we give this to the poor, You ought to give us peace." When they come to die, they have done good things, but they have not reached solid inner peace.

Third, the final couple considered keeping the money and they also considered just giving the money away. But they had to admit that they did not really know whether either one would solve their uneasiness. Why would they keep it? Why would they give it away? So this is how they acted: They decided that they would not determine definitely to keep the money or definitely to get rid of it. They would wait to see what this disquiet really signified. Then, when they knew, they would act. In this way, they generously said to God: "Either way. Show us and we'll do it."

At the end, having reflected on yourself, use the triple prayer to Mary, and Jesus, and the Father. ❖