

## Growing close to Christ

I'd like to share some simple thoughts today about coming close to Christ.

In the very last verse of Matthew's gospel, Jesus says:

"Remember, I am with you always, yes to the end of time." (Matthew 28:20)

This is Christ's promise to us. In the deepest sense possible we are not alone. He is always there with us - in every experience we have, every situation we meet, every moment of our lives. "I am with you always, yes to the end of time."

He invites us into relationship with him, to live our lives with him.

There is a beautiful verse in John's gospel, where Jesus says: "Make your home in me, as I make mine in you." (John 15:4) *He has already* made his home in us and he invites us to find our home in him.

I remember once being at a dinner where one of the guests was a religious who had to do a lot of travelling. At a certain point in the meal one of the guests unexpectedly asked: "Do you not get lonely, constantly travelling from place to place." The response was immediate, natural: "But why would I be lonely, I am not alone."

"Make your home in me, as I make mine in you."

But how do we do that? How do we make our home in him?

We tend to imagine that it has to be difficult. That we will surely have to fulfil some special conditions, put on our best suit so to speak, present ourselves well, become our very best self, learn some special technique, find some zen-like calm within ...

It's actually much simpler than that, **much** simpler. **Talk to him. That's it.** Simply talk to him. Open the door, invite him in, share your life with him, make him part of it. When you're feeling happy about something tell him, when you're struggling with anger talk to him

about it, why you are angry, who you are angry with. Let him be part of it. Share it with him. If you're joyful over something, frustrated, afraid, worried – share it with him. Let him be part of your life as you are, *exactly* as you are. Share with him how you feel, what you think, hope for, fear, long for, love. Tell him the things you might tell loads of people, and the things you might tell no-one else. Open wide the door of your life and your heart *as it is* to Him, without fear, without pretence, without hiding. That is prayer.

He wants to be part of your life exactly as you are – that's what it means to love someone. "Know that I am with you always, yes to the end of time."

Thomas Merton once said that he didn't like talking about prayer because prayer, in a sense, is the most natural thing in the world, and he didn't want to mess with that. So be yourself, not as you think you should be. Every person is unique, and every relationship is unique. Look around at all the relationships you know - all incredibly different, each with their own way of being close. There are as many ways of relating as there are people. You relate in your own unique way. That is as true of your relationship with Christ as any other relationship – in fact, even more so. St Teresa of Avila once said: "God is the partner of your most intimate conversations." Prayer is when you can be *most* yourself. So as someone very wisely said: "Pray as you can, not as you can't." Get to know him as *you*, pray in a way which is natural to you.

Another temptation is to think that really knowing Christ is only for contemplatives, people with lots of time, who have chosen a very particular vocation. But there are many vocations and many different ways of knowing him. As St Francis de Sales very wisely points out, it would not be good or right for the parent, or the doctor or builder to want to be a contemplative and to spend hours in prayer every day. In fact, the world needs him or her to know their craft and make their contribution. Each and every one is called to find a way of being with Christ that fits their particular path in life. One woman, in particular, comes to mind, incredibly active and engaged, full of enthusiasm and

love and care for others. I'm not sure she found too much quiet space, but she certainly knew Christ. She radiated his presence to all she met.

It is ultimately a relationship of love, lived in numberless different ways, as many as there are people. What matters is to open your life and your heart to him – to allow him to make a difference to your life.

If there is a rule for prayer it is the one given by Evagrius, and it's very simple: "God gives the gift of prayer to those who pray." Or as St Isaac of Nineveh would put it: "Comfort and ease with him are born of frequent conversation with him." Spend time with him. Prayer doesn't have to be long or complicated. In fact, in the early desert tradition, often the advice was to keep prayer "short and pure". It reminds me of one of my classmates in seminary - whenever we were going out he would always just "pop in to say hello to Christ" in the chapel on the way out.

For each of us the language we use, the type of relationship we develop will be an expression of who *we* are and the particular way our prayer grows. Some people find using physical gestures and postures is a very natural part of their prayer, others a particular place in the house, a particular time of day, an icon and candle, a walk outside, nature, the stars at night, music, a book of reflections. I know people who pray best when they are jogging, or ironing, or cooking, and so on... For each person it is different and often quite unique. But that is as it should be.

It's fundamentally about choosing not to be alone... to let another in, really let them in. And then everything is possible.

So, don't keep him out, don't sanitize your relationship with him. Share everything with him. The most precious thing you have to offer God is that sharing. Yes, he knows everything, yes, he made you, yes, your life comes from him every moment – but only you can *choose* to let him in, to open your life to him. This is the ultimate freedom he wanted you to have, the freedom that defines you as a person, a

freedom he will never violate. So the most precious gift you can give him is to choose to share your life, all of it.

It's as you share your life, in all its ups and downs, that your relationship with Christ becomes richer and deeper. It begins to dawn on you gradually that he has always been there, from the first moment of your life and that he will always be there. He is your true life and home. You thought you were seeking him, but you discover that all along he was drawing you to himself. And as time passes you grow into each other, and your relationship with him will change you as you allow him to be at work in your life.

Every significant relationship demands faithfulness and commitment; demands the generosity to make space for the other person. It needs time and space to grow, to deepen and become richer. This is the sort of relationship we are being offered to have with Christ, where you slowly grow into each other, come to belong to each other. That is his invitation.

“Make your home in me as I make mine in you.”

### **Three brief final thoughts.**

The first is about trust. No relationship can grow or thrive without trust. He is with us and he is faithful, but we need to trust him for the relationship to grow. The book of Wisdom gives good advice: “Seek the Lord in simplicity of heart; since he is to be found by those who do not put him to the test, he shows himself to those who do not distrust him. (Wisdom 1:1-2) So trust him, because trust allow him to act in your life.

The second is this. Christ promised us, in Luke's gospel (11:13), that, if we ask, he will give us the gift of the Holy Spirit. That Spirit is a spirit of love, joy, peace. You welcome him by making a space for love, joy, and peace in your heart and allowing them to grow within

you. As Evelyn Underhill once said: “Love is not just something you experience; love is something you become. So, make space for Him, for love, joy, peace. Invite Him in, and follow the nudges He will send you, be responsive and he will lead you and fill you.

The third thought is very simple. If you are willing, you will receive. This again is His promise in the gospel of Luke.

“Ask and you will receive, seek and you will find, knock and the door will be opened to you. For the one who asks always receives, the one who searches always finds, and the one who knocks will always have the door opened to them.” (Luke 11:9-10)

### **Some suggestions for today**

1. You might like to reflect on whether you carry any images of God with you that are unhelpful.
2. Or again are there any images of yourself that are unhelpful. Psalm 118 says: “It was your hands that made me and shaped me.” God has made you *you*.
3. What are the ways of relating to Christ that come most naturally to you? Is it mornings or evening, indoors or out, conversation or silence? Know what nourishes you? Find time today to do what nourishes your relationship with him.
4. Are there times in your life when you have felt Christ’s presence particularly strongly? Why not take time to remember them and be grateful for them? It is your history with the Lord
5. Who are the people who have taught you something about God’s love? Again, take time to remember them and what they taught you, and to give thanks.

**Luke 11:5-13**

Ask, and it will be given to you

Jesus said to his disciples:

‘Suppose one of you has a friend and goes to him in the middle of the night to say, “My friend, lend me three loaves, because a friend of mine on his travels has just arrived at my house and I have nothing to offer him”; and the man answers from inside the house, “Do not bother me. The door is bolted now, and my children and I are in bed; I cannot get up to give it you.” I tell you, if the man does not get up and give it him for friendship’s sake, persistence will be enough to make him get up and give his friend all he wants.

‘So I say to you: Ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened to you. For the one who asks always receives; the one who searches always finds; the one who knocks will always have the door opened to him. What father among you would hand his son a stone when he asked for bread? Or hand him a snake instead of a fish? Or hand him a scorpion if he asked for an egg? If you then, who are evil, know how to give your children what is good, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!’