To Pray Continually and Not Lose Heart

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1. The Person of Prayer

It is well known that the figure of Jesus in St. Luke’s gospel narrative is presented as a person of profound personal prayer. This prayerful portrait is intended to be an example, an encouragement and an impulse to the Lukan ecclesial community and by extension, to ours. Luke is developing a theology of prayer as the vital means for the Christian community to remain faithful, in a hostile environment, to the radical purity of the Christian praxis and message which is constantly being coarsened and corrupted through compromise with life-denying aspects of the culture of such hostile environments (21:34). Luke sees the Church surrounded by an inimical environment where opposition and co-option, whether subtle or direct, eats away at the foundations of Christian life and praxis. For him, a life of prayer is indispensable, as the only means not to lose heart in the face of such unremitting opposition. It will be obvious that in a Church such as ours here in Pakistan, living under the socio-political conditions which co-define its daily life, at risk from without from the hostility of what surrounds it and at risk from within from an underdeveloped ability to distinguish cultural identity from Christian identity, that these Lukan considerations are of considerable importance.

Luke consciously constructs the person of Jesus as a man of prayer. The sustained and deliberate emphasis on this point is rooted in a desire to return his ecclesial community - and by implication, ours too – to an on-going prayerful contemplation in action, of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus as the foundation and goal of all we attempt to be and to do. Luke wants his Christian community to be one which prays profoundly at all points in its faith journey. He paints a picture of Jesus, as the paradigm and exemplar cause of such rootedness in prayer, who prays at all significant points in his journey towards Resurrection and towards God. This becomes all the clearer when under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, Luke reshapes the textual material at his disposal in order to do so. His aim is clear: to point the Christian community towards a praxis that is rooted in profound prayer, rather than in merely pragmatic, political, self-serving maneuvering.

2. Choices and Decisions Rooted in Prayer

(a) Awareness of God’s Initiatives

At the very beginning of the public ministry, in the baptism pericope, Luke writes: “When Jesus had been baptized and was praying (a detail not found in Mark or Matt.), the heavens were opened and
...only the prayerful are attentive enough to realize what it is they are being offered.

...heals the leper, but refuses the lure of culturally defined fame...

*the Holy Spirit descended in bodily form.* Note now the adjective ‘Holy’ is added: Luke’s interest is not only historical but ecclesial; he seeks to address believers who are aware that the ‘Spirit’ is more specifically the ‘Holy Spirit’ who has been poured out on all flesh through the resurrection of Jesus. As Luke will also demonstrate throughout ‘Acts,’ the mysterious sovereign freedom of the Holy Spirit is nonetheless mediated through an attitude of and a practice of prayer. God in unlimited freedom, offers his very self to all, but only the prayerful are attentive enough to realize what it is they are being offered. Active prayer is the condition of the possibility of being aware of the initiatives of God.

(b) Linkage with the Inexhaustible Source of Love

As is clearly implied in the gospel narratives, Jesus was a famous healer. Luke de-emphasizes somewhat the shamanistic aspects of this healing ministry, emphasizing instead, the gentleness, goodness and compassion of the great healer. For this evangelist, to heal and to be healed and to be a believing community that is an instrument of healing, involves first and last, that prayerful linkage to the healing God offers in his eternal ‘now’ which is mediated only through prayer. The healing of lepers is a well known gospel theme. Jesus, having expressed this divine, unconditional and indiscriminate desire to heal, now definitively present to the world through his ministry (*Of course I do, be healed:* 5:14), heals the leper, but refuses the lure of culturally defined fame on account of it. His reaction to his growing reputation and to crowd adulation, is very far from seeking to bask in it, and imagine it to be the measure of his truth, much less be deluded into making praise from others the basis of his self-concept. Instead, he links up with the true and inexhaustible source of love, gentleness and healing, by habitually going off to be alone with God. In a detail not found in the other texts, Luke writes: *But he was withdrawing to the wilderness and praying.* (5:16). The tense of the verbs seems to indicate a customary and routine practice. Luke wants to say that it was what he always did, and what a community interested in being an instrument of healing should always do.

(c) Contemplation as the Context of Choosing

Luke’s apostolic journeys with Paul, the establishment of primitive Christian communities and the appointment of presbyters to lead them, the on-going questions about the qualifications and suitability of these presbyters in the early church, and by extension, in the modern Church too, provide the backdrop to the manner in which Luke presents Jesus at the moment of his choice of the Twelve, as a man of profoundly contemplative prayer. *He went out to the mountain to pray and all night he continued in prayer to God.* (6:12). Once again, this is a redaction particular to the Lukan text. What Christ is seeking in his choice of disciples, and what he expects
of them, becomes clear only in the context of what is happening between Jesus and the Father in prayer.

From the point of view of Jesus’ human journey, Luke here opens up the vista of the dynamic unity in purposefulness and nature with the Father, that the later theology of the Church will develop, using categories drawn from Greek philosophy. Here we catch a glimpse of the union of will in love, mutual self-gift and common purposefulness which forms the existential basis of what later theologies of circumincession will speak of as a total in and wish and for each other. In terms of Jesus’ human experience, this takes place unceasingly in his fidelity to the Father, but reaches a higher intensity and focus in sustained intimate prayer. While this experience has been paradigmatic during the course of Christian history for many mystics and saints, it has nonetheless, a specific referent here. Luke’s point is that the choice and missioning and pastoral reflection of the presbyters of the Church, has to be rooted in the potentially surprising fruits of sustained prayer, and not merely in the servicing of culturally conditioned, institutional arrangements.

(d) Quality of Presence: to God and to Each Other

In constructing the context of the Petrine confession of faith, Luke omits a large Markan section (Mark 6:45 – 8:26), on the miracle and healing ministry of Jesus. John too will deal with the miracle tradition very selectively and, as with Luke in this context, will emphasize less the multiplication of such experiences, as much as the inner meaning of them. Central to Luke’s concern here, is the issue of how the individual believer as well as the believing community, think and choose and act – in contrast to the ‘crowd,’ suggestive of the generality of persons, public opinion, or purely cultural assumptions. His point is that the question of who Jesus really is, cannot be answered on the basis of socio-cultural assumptions alone, but only in the context of prayer. Now it happened that as he was praying alone… (9:18).

This peculiarly Lukan text, again highlighting the dimension of prayer in the praxis of Jesus and the Church, invites the reader to grasp that Jesus is fully present to his disciples then as now, because he is totally present to God in an attitude of contemplation. He is alone - or ‘all-one’- with God in order to be present to us, thereby disclosing the nature of real presence to the other. By operating at this different and deeper dimension of human relationality, he is pointing towards that dimension of human experience where the question of who exactly Jesus is, may be faced and answered. The Church cannot know who he is, except in an on-going experience of profound prayerfulness, nor can we be truly Church, except in developing the quality of presence to each other that this kind of prayer makes possible.
(e) The Disciple at Prayer is a Transfigured Disciple

Prayer, according to Luke, is thereby disclosed as the key to understanding both the transfiguration of Jesus and the transfiguration that occurs in the believer through faith and baptism. It has often been remarked that Luke's transfiguration narrative differs so much from Mark's that he must have had a different source for the tradition. But perhaps the real reason for these differences lies in Luke's particular intent. The disciples' glimpsing of his glory (9.32), contrasts with their blindness at the prediction of his passion. As Luke will later demonstrate in the Emmaus narrative, their eyes can be opened only when they see that the real Jesus of present and future glory is the Jesus of the Passion: and make the link between his presence in the breaking of the bread, and in the breaking down of all that obstructs our journey to true humanity (24:31).

In both the life of the individual believer and the life of the community, Luke makes quite specific the conditions under which such an experience is possible. "He went up on the mountain to pray and as he was praying……." (9: 28f.). This double reference to prayer as both the means and the goal of the ascent of the holy mountain is not found in either Matthew or Mark. Luke's sub-text is proposing prayer itself not only as a key to understanding the Transfiguration, but as an actual experience of Transfiguration. The disciple at prayer is a transfigured disciple.5

Such a disciple is appropriating in freedom and love and in an informed personal choice, his or her fundamental, ultimate and life-defining option as someone who proceeds from God, is oriented towards God and finds his or her finality only in God. In no way can this be construed as an escape from committed socio-political praxis in history. Luke's Jesus and Luke's Christian community are unswervingly on the side of the poor. The point at issue here is that sustaining such an option in the face of the hostility and disappointment it inevitably engenders, is possible only through prayer. This emphasis on prayer may also explain the change from the Markan six to eight days as a way of giving these reflections a liturgical context. If so, participation in the Eucharist would be seen as an experience of Transfiguration: the community celebrating the Eucharist would be a transfigured community.6

(f) Jesus at Prayer: the exemplar cause of the prayerful community

This same emphasis on Jesus at prayer, both as a key to understanding who he is, as well as to how the community must be, if it is to follow him, is also evident in the Lukan introduction to the Lord's Prayer (11:1). "He was praying in a certain place and when he ceased, one of the disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray."" The living paradigm of Jesus at prayer is the exemplar cause...
of the prayerful disciple and the prayerful community. Imaging Jesus in prayer invites the disciples to request that he teach us how to pray! This is all the more evident in that Luke seems to leave aside a theologically elevated and pastorally pertinent teaching on prayer preserved in the Matthean narrative. This is as if to say, that the actual practice of prayer is more important than any teaching about it, however lofty. Luke is re-emphasizing the actual practice of prayer for a church that tends to de-emphasize it: a point of no small relevance to our Church which consistently values a dissipating *josh* (energy excitement) over a purposeful *hosh* (intelligent awareness).

Relative to the Matthean redaction, which has shaped the liturgical form of the prayer, Luke simplifies the actual prayer. To this way of thinking, prayer itself – as distinct from theories about prayer - need not seek too strenuously to be textually coherent, methodologically rigorous, or lengthy in composition. What matters is the heartfelt devotion, sense of dependence on and confidence in God’s providence with which it is done. This is illustrated by the immediately following parable of the ‘Importunate Friend.’ What counts is not the method of our prayer, but the persistence with which we pray, which is to say, with an unwavering hope in God’s care and providence, despite any appearance to the contrary.

(g) Christ’s Continual Prayer Offers the Church the Grace of Fidelity

Luke’s Jesus continues to pray for the Church and its leadership precisely because its faith is continually in danger of failing. In order to immerse itself in a given social reality, the Church has to compromise with the power structures in the culture, at the inevitable cost of losing something of its radical, primitive character. This is already evident in the deutero-Pauline epistles and increasingly so ever since in the history of the Church. Recognizing that it is so here in Pakistan - as a first step in surpassing it - is a pressing need. As discussed elsewhere the Church is constantly tempted to take on to itself the ideology and cultural trappings of the power structures it finds in the societies it seeks to evangelise. Not only is the Petrine ministry a permanent feature of the structure of the community inaugurated by the Paschal Mystery, but so too are the dynamics of enthusiasm, weakness, failure, repentance, restoration and re-commissioning that we see in its foundational unfolding. This is true not only of Peter but of all Christian institutions, each one of which is being constantly: ‘sifted like wheat.’ So Christ repeats to the leadership in the Church of every age: “I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail you and when you have turned again, strengthen your brother” (22:32).

Humanly speaking, the faith of the Church is always in danger of failing. Faith is pure, unmeritable gift: it is constantly
offered, to be constantly received in humility and gratitude. It is never possessed once and for all in the manner of an object, but has to be permanently and personally re-appropriated as a graciously given gift in order to be fruitful. The community and especially its leaders, thus becomes a community in constant prayer for the grace of fidelity. Its awareness, that what it has been gifted with is something on which it has an all too fragile hold, leads it to pray continually for the very faith whose fruit is the capacity to pray constantly for fidelity.

(b) Who is Included in Our Prayer

The Lukan genius for having Jesus pray at all significant moments in his life continues right up to his death. Certainly, Matthew and Mark have Jesus on Calvary pray the opening line – if not indeed the whole text - of Psalm 22. Luke too, has Jesus pray the Psalms in this decisive moment of his unconditional solidarity with humankind, even in its ethical ambiguity – thus establishing for all time, that the Psalms are also Christian prayer. Our evangelist however, consistent with what we have seen in these pages, wishes to highlight the death of Jesus as a moment of profound communion with the Father and turns to Psalm, 31:5 to do so: “Into your hands I commit my spirit.” This psalm too, is a prayer in time of ordeal. It is not difficult to see how it could express the vulnerability of a small Christian community – or any beleaguered individual - surrounded by a hostile world and constantly in danger of losing the purity and focus of its own spiritual inheritance.

Yet this intense union with the Father is also developed into a profound communion in solidarity with humanity which extends beyond any tendency toward exclusiveness, by privileging his torturers and executioners: “Father forgive them for they know not what they do” (23:34). The prayer quite consciously includes the whole of humanity in the sacrificial meaning of what he is doing. It includes all by praying first for those who have wronged us. That Luke clearly intends this as a model of Christian prayer when unjustly treated, is evidenced by Stephen’s prayer for his murderers in Acts 7:59-60. “Lord Jesus, receive my Spirit. Then he knelt and said aloud: ‘Lord do not hold this sin against them.” Luke is clearly constructing an amalgam of the prayers he has put on the lips of the crucified Jesus.

3. Prayer Discloses That God is On the Side of the Poor

The Prologue or Infancy Narrative-Gospel of the Lukan text is repeatedly enriched by the prayerfulness of the main characters, notably Mary, Elizabeth, Zachariah and Simeon. So much so that the prayers Luke places on their lips have become highpoints in the Daily Prayer of the Church down through the centuries. Zachariah is acknowledged as a person of prayer (1:12), but equally, as one
who worships a God who hears the prayers of his lowly faithful ones. “Zachariah do not be afraid, your prayer has been heard.” Elizabeth can speak in prophecy (1:42). Zachariah too, like his wife, can be filled with the Holy Spirit and can pray in prophecy a prayer which has become the cardinal point in the morning prayer of the Church (1:67). Mary’s prayer, at once revolutionary, exquisite and mystical, tells us much about the concept or notion of God operative throughout the Lukan gospel narrative: the God who is on the side of the poor.

If prayer implies an image or concept of God, then the concept of God underlying Mary’s *Magnificat* – and by implication the Lukan theology of prayer - is of a God who is loving and partisan in favour of the weak and lowly. It is a notion of God who intends a revolutionary upheaval of all structures of injustice and inequality. It speaks of a God who is bountiful to those who hunger for justice and who hunger for Him, but will remain inaccessible to those with an imagined sense of self-sufficiency. Many elements in the Church – and not a few would-be spiritual directors - have still a long journey to make in allowing the theology of the *Magnificat* to shape and structure the dynamics of Christian prayer. In praying like this and in personally exemplifying the faith attitude necessary to do so, Mary actually magnifies God. Through her and through all those small, humble, struggling faithful ones who live, believe and pray like her, God is magnified and more palpably involved in human affairs, His loving designs more effective, more present. Simeon too is prompted by the Holy Spirit to pray in prophecy (2: 27 & 2: 29-32). God has fulfilled all the promises made to the poor; to those who wait with active patience and joyful hope, for the moment of deliverance.

As he will throughout his gospel narrative, and even more explicitly so in ‘Acts,’ Luke puts special emphasis on the personally active role of the Holy Spirit in the praxis and prayer of these paradigmatic personalities. This is most particularly so in the case of Mary. “The Holy Spirit will come upon you” (1.35), and even if less dramatically so, also in the case of the others. Zachariah will prophesy in the power of the Holy Spirit (1:67) having already been promised that his son, whose birth, beyond human reckoning, and representing God’s fidelity to those who hope against hope, will be filled with the Holy Spirit even from his conception (1:15). Elizabeth when she responds to Mary’s greeting with an ecstatic utterance which has also become part of the popular daily prayer of the People of God, in the *Ave Maria*, is praying in the power of the Holy Spirit (1: 41-42). Simeon, a personification of the stubborn hope of God’s faithful little ones, is such because “the Holy Spirit rested upon him” (2: 25) and the very hope and
expected from which apparent failure cannot distract him, is itself something given by the Holy Spirit.

Luke is sketching an intimate interconnection between the mysterious sovereign presence of the Holy Spirit, and God’s fidelity to his divine, eternal covenant to establish communion with humanity, through re-shaping social reality in favour of the poor. These two sides of the same divine coin find their connectedness in that obdurate hope which is sustained only through prayer. Luke rounds off this theologically poetic tour de force by having the heavenly messengers, who first bring this message to the socially impure and excluded shepherds, themselves join in the prayer of praise (2:14).

Modern exegesis correctly emphasises the Christological rather than primarily historical nature of this infancy Gospel. But that does not take away either from the exigencies of Luke’s ecclesial situation, or his implied ecclesiology. The high doctrine of the personally active, divine, Holy Spirit unfolds in the intractable hope of the little ones of today who remain faithful despite all cultural predispositions to the contrary.

4. The Holy Spirit and the Hope of the Poor

These theological lines are continually drawn throughout the Lukan text as he never lets up from contextualizing all significant events in his story, with the dynamic of prayer. In the post-Easter Johannine redaction of the miraculous draught of fishes narrative, the text leads on to the triple Petrine confession of love and devotion, leading to a rededication to his mission. In the Lucan account, more closely knit into the struggle of the community to remain faithful, it leads on to a spontaneous confession of human inadequacy and into a heartfelt prayer for forgiveness and self-acceptance. “Depart from me for I am a sinful man O Lord” (5:8). Even the demons when they are being rebuked into silence, make – as must the Church when it silences its own demonic attraction to the powers of the world – a prayer of faith: “You are the Son of God” (4:41). The question of fasting found in the other synoptics, is also rephrased by Luke to pose the question of prayer for the local community: “Why do John’s disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees fast and offer prayers” (5:33). Luke is asking his community why it needs to pray, thereby directing it to its need to do so as well as to the faith-basis and focus of such prayer.

The introductory line to the Lukan text of Beatitudes: “fixing his eyes on his disciples” (6:20) may also be indicative of a prayerful-liturgical contextualization. It has a certain resonance with (24:16) especially as complemented by (24:31), indicative of a Eucharistic significance and even more so with the phrase: “He looked up to heaven” (9: 16) - also found in Matt. 14: 19 and in Mark 6:41 - though in all cases, with a clear liturgical inference.
Such a liturgically constructed and contextualised proclamation of the Beatitudes is disclosed then, as a prayer for the disciples and a structuring parameter of Lukan prayer. The emphasis on the beatitude of the actually poor is entirely consistent with what has been said above about the God of the Magnificat.

The emphasis on the Spirit of God, present more specifically and identifiably as the Holy Spirit, poured out on all flesh through the Resurrection of Jesus, is also apparent in several Lukan redactions. Matthew’s “The Spirit of the Father speaking through you” (Matt. 24:20), becomes in Luke (12:12), “The Holy Spirit in that hour will teach you what you have to say.” The context of a vulnerable Church in a hostile environment, such as in present-day Pakistan, is also made more apparent. Yet even more far-reaching are the implications of the insertion of the phrase: ‘The Holy Spirit,’ into the logion given by Matthew 7: 11 as: “how much more will your Father in heaven know how to give ‘good things’ to those who ask him.” In Luke it becomes: “How much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him” (11:13). The redaction is all the more significant as it is the punch line in a very significant teaching on effective prayer. For Luke the purpose of prayer is never mere petition in the sense of self-interest: ‘darkhast’ (request), or ‘faida’ (benefit, profit). The commonly understood ‘good things’ for which one might all too easily wish to pray, are interpreted very negatively by Luke. They are sought and stored by the Rich Fool and point him on the path towards self-destruction (12: 18-19). Dives indulges in them to the exclusion of Lazarus, and loses his very self in the process (16: 25). Attachment to the ‘good things’ is in fact, what chokes the growth of the word of God in the life of the believer (8:14).

The intense and confident prayer of petition according to Luke, has nothing to do with trying to pressurize or cajole God into giving us more material benefits, or socio-culturally defined advancement. The purpose of prayer is not to change God but to change ourselves. Our very desire to communicate with God is already His gift. It is an opening of ourselves to an invasion and restructuring of our perceiving, imagining, understanding, valuing, choosing and acting by the same Holy Spirit that filled Jesus throughout his ministry and who filled Mary, Zachariah, Elizabeth and Simeon, enabling them to remain uncorrupted in the face of all opposition and disappointment or apparent failure – refusing to compromise their hope for the sake of a culturally approved ease that would dilute their true humanity.

Jesus himself, exulting in faith and joy and thanksgiving at the gift of faith from the Father to the little ones who go unrecognized by the pride of the world, is for Luke (10:21), expressly an exultation in the Holy Spirit – compare Matthew 11:25. Given
the context of the Lukan church, a Trinitarian reference is implied. What is equally clear is Luke’s suggestion that the believer at prayer – considered specifically as an openness to being guided by the Spirit, to live and act in unbending hope for a transfigured world in favour of the poor – enters into that very Trinitarian life in which Jesus here exults. All the more so since Luke prepares his readers for the teaching on effective prayer: “Ask and it shall be given to you…” (11:9-13), by the parable of the importunate friend who gets what he wants by impolite, dogged insistence (v.8). Luke is inviting the believer to pray for the Holy Spirit with the ‘not-taking-no-for-an-answer’ attitude of an insensitive, demanding, opportunist.

This invites further reflection. To pray doggedly for the gift of the Spirit of Jesus implies at least an implicit recognition, that living in consonance with the dynamics of this Spirit corresponds to the dynamics of one’s deepest and truest self. At the same time, it means not only praying as Mary does in the Lukan Magnificat, but addressing – both in prayer and in praxis - the same God with the same hope for a transformed world in favour of the poor and lowly.

Luke gives other examples of prayer each of which fits in with this overall scheme. The publican (18:9-14, v.13b) who prays: “God be merciful to me a sinner,” is one who despite what he may or may not have done, has not been corrupted by: “the leaven of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy.” (12:1).

5. To Never Lose Heart

The parable of the unjust judge (18:1-8), which is particular to Luke, begins with what may be described as a title verse, so obviously a direct, didactic, catechetical composition that it tells us much about Luke’s theology of prayer. It is titled: “A parable to the effect that they ought to pray continually and never lose heart.” There is a clear echo here of a theme repeatedly emphasized in the Pauline corpus. This reflects Paul’s – and his missionary companion Luke’s – struggle to continue as heralds of the gospel despite hardships, setbacks, opposition and failure. It further focuses on the necessity of not compromising the radical message of the gospel through self-serving, cultural accommodation. In the never-ending struggle to hold on to this vision, the community of disciples is continually faced with the ‘peirasmos’ or temptation of losing hope: of allowing the call and the task to seem impossible – to give in and to give up! As in the earlier passage on ‘the importunate friend,’ so this passage is an invitation to prayer as the life source and motor force of that dogged persistence in the face of apparent failure.

In the same vein, in his Gethsemane narrative, Luke redacts the Marcan: “Stay here while I pray” (Mark 14:33 & Matt. 26:37), to read as an instruction to the disciples and by extension, to the...
Church of all ages: “Pray that you enter not into temptation.” It is addressed in Lukan theology, to his own community and to our Church today. In Luke’s construction, as we have seen, there is no doubt about the prayer of Jesus: it is we who must pray that we may not be seduced by and compromised with the forces of darkness diluting the primitive revolutionary force of the praxis and message of Jesus. We will be praying that we may not be put to the test, as He instructed us when he taught us to pray. Jesus himself experiences this temptation or peirasmos; is apparently crushed by it; but so makes it his own free loving act, even as Luke emphasizes, forgiving all sinful humanity in the process, that he makes it not simply a ‘passion’ to be undergone, but his own sovereign, free act of union with the Father and solidarity with humankind, even in its moral ambiguity.

He knows the peirasmos that awaits him and instructs his disciples, now as then, to pray to be delivered from it. Since this prayer changes us rather than God, it means that prayer itself, understood as a receptivity of mind and heart to the promptings of the Holy Spirit, implies an openness to become in however minor or ordinary a manner, an instrument of that Spirit as the paradigmatic characters in the Lukan narrative did. Being led by this Holy Spirit is itself the deliverance for which the disciples pray. Not in the banal sense of no longer experiencing difficulties, failure, hostility or insecurity, but in the more profound sense, classically articulated by Paul in Romans 8: 35-39; that none of these things can separate us from the power to seek to live as Jesus lived.

For Luke, Jesus is always praying: from the beginning to the end of his ministry and life. This is presented as the pattern for the faith life of the community which in turn, seeks to pray always, to root its decision-making and praxis in this prayer and to remain united among themselves in and through prayer (Acts 1:14): “They were all continuing steadfastly with one mind in prayer.” Like Jesus, by immersing themselves in prayer, they can also immerse themselves in a praxis of fidelity to the kingdom. Luke is always interpreting and actualising the prayer of Jesus, thinking about it and transmitting its significance in the context of the Sitz im Leben of his local church. A contemporary reading of Luke seeks to do the same in our church of today here in Pakistan. What happens in and to Jesus during his life in the power of the Holy Spirit, happens in the life of the community through continual prayerful openness to the Spirit. What is accomplished in the life of Jesus continues to be accomplished in the life of the community. (24: 47-49).

The God who hears the prayer of the disciple is in Luke’s theological construction, the God who is on the side of the poor. He is the God of the little ones who through their fidelity and
unswerving hope, intends to turn upside down the idolatrous power structures that divide and exclude them. This is no less true now than in Luke’s time. The God of Lukan prayer pours out his Holy Spirit on our humanity as on the humanity of Jesus. He is a God who wishes his faithful ones to immerse themselves in the dynamic, mysterious yet revolutionary love which the Holy Spirit is, so that all our experiencing and understanding and concrete action is rooted in, shaped by and finalized through this revolutionary love.

This alignment of the directionality of our perceiving and choosing and acting with the divine impulses of the Holy Spirit, takes us far beyond socio-culturally determined ego-ideals. The disciple doggedly begs God to listen and respond; not to increase his ‘zar zan zamin’ (gold, women, land), but rather the revolutionary love of this Holy Spirit. The patience, doggedness and hope in the face of the always-looming destructiveness and defeat which marks this prayer on the part of all Luke’s faithful ones, and on our part too, arises not because God is distant or capricious. It arises because we are constantly refining our true and real desires, continually responding to the invitation to desire the Holy Spirit and not lesser things, continually growing in the knowledge of who we are and what it is we truly desire, as we limp and crawl, though occasionally walk purposefully and even joyfully, towards that purity of heart which may make it possible for us to know and love “the one thing necessary” (10:42).

6. A Prayer That "Cries to God Day and Night"

Does Luke propose a method of prayer in the sense proposed by devotees of discursive meditation, imaginative contemplation, mental prayer, centering prayer, practical union, Christian Zen, or apophatism? He proposes none of these but rather the attitude of spirit which underlies all of them. The prayer of Luke is fundamentally an attitude of profound trust and hope which confronts a painfully immediate sense of our need of God but equally, is planted in an unshakeable hope that God remains faithful to the poor and lowly. It is a prayer that: “cries to God day and night” that we will not lose heart. It is a prayer that is steadfast, unswerving, dogged and tenacious and as such is heard and vindicates the faithful (18:7).

It is ‘heard’ not because in some primitive, materialistic sense it ‘forces’ or ‘maneuvers’ God into responding; since our very desire to pray is already God’s gift and proof positive of His attentiveness, but because those who pray like this, gradually come to see reality with the mind of Christ. The disciple has to learn to pray like this and the shortened staccato-like verses of the Our Father in the Lukan version, by their very unadorned simplicity, point towards
this unrefined, total trust of mind and heart upon the mercy of the God who fulfils the hope of the poor, which is the stuff of such prayer. This prayer is an ever-unfinished project. It is the attitude of those who: “stay awake at all times praying that they may have the strength to escape these things and to stand before the Son of Man” (21:36). And ‘these things’ include all the hostility engendered by fidelity to the original vision; the creeping compromises with unreconstructed cultural norms; the coarseness of spirit that chokes the Word; and the sheer entropy of successive setbacks.

The word usually translated by “praying” in this passage is ‘deomenoi,’ more exactly, ‘begging’ or ‘imploring.’ Here Luke, although he stresses the blessedness of the actual poor in his redaction of the Beatitudes, rejoins the Matthean first Beatitude. The disciples or community at prayer, are people who know their need of God and they know that this need is an identity-defining need that is radical and permanent. They know this down to the very ‘basement of their souls,’ and beg God to give them the Holy Spirit, so that they may attain their own being. Their need for this Spirit is never far from their direct awareness, just as their willingness to embark on the implied inner journey, is permanently proposed by the personal consequences of their fidelity to their options. They have come to know the God of the poor and in so doing, are becoming evangelically poor themselves, never ceasing to beg for the grace of fidelity to the vision and project and person of Christ.

7. Conclusion:

Meditation on, and actual communion with the prayerful Jesus of Luke’s gospel text, invites our local Church in Pakistan – and all Christian communities at whatever level - to root their prioritizing, decision-making and action in a contemplative spirit rather than a merely functional, much less crassly political one. The Church’s leadership and ministers are thereby drawn into a new quality of presence to God, to each other and to the people. This in turn, can liberate us from the frenetic pursuit of izzat (face, human respect) and self-advancement. Moreover, the personal development that each person naturally desires, finds its inexhaustible source only in yielding to this invitation to climb that holy mountain and to be transfigured into the likeness of Christ. The desire to yield to this is coextensively the desire to be faithful to God’s project to create communion with humanity and to fill the hungry with good things.

Endnotes

1 Unless otherwise stated, the references are to Luke’s gospel.
2 Some translations e.g., ‘The Jerusalem Bible’, give “hills” instead of “mountain” for ‘horos’. This risks losing the mystical resonance of the term “mountain” throughout the Scriptures, as a ‘holy’ place – a place of theophany – evocative of the soul’s journey to God.
3 Note the parallelism and the contrast between: “Who do the crowds say I am?” (v.18) with “Who do you say I am?” (v.20).

4 For example, in the number of days after the first prediction of the passion; the emphasis on the ‘face’ of Jesus (the aspect of his face was changed); Elijah and Moses speaking explicitly about his ‘passion’ - a coded comparison with the Gethsemane pericope; the ‘title’ “beloved” changed to “chosen one” - a Messianic Title, cf. Isaiah 42: 1 (first Song of the Suffering Servant) and used later by Luke at Calvary (23:35).

5 Communicating with the risen Christ ‘transfigures’ us: “Did not our hearts burn within us……” the experience in turn, leads to a reconfiguring of the community and its mission (24: 32-33).

6 Cf. note 5 above. In the Emmaus narrative, the fleeing disciples are initially unable to set their foot towards Jerusalem, but when they make the link in the Eucharist, between the breaking of the bread and the breaking-down of their fears, they are transfigured.


8 In Luke’s presentation of the betrayal controversy at the Lords’ Supper, the discussion about who is the traitor immediately leads out into an argument about who is the greater (a familiar Gospel theme cf. 9.46). Luke’s clearly implied answer is that the one who betrays Christ (this is the reason Judas is not named) is the one who seeks to be greater/est. This, says Jesus, continues in the Church because of the desire for power and the exercise of it in the manner of the Gentiles. He by contrast: was among them as one who serves. Cf. ‘The Danger in Dining with Jesus’ FOCUS 22, 3, (2002), 258-276, p. 272.

9 ‘hymas tou sinisasai:’ the ‘you’ is plural (unlike the verse following). All of us and all our institutions are being ‘sifted.’

10 That this rich inheritance from Judaism is also seen as something incorporated and not abrogated is clear from the tradition of the Church not least in the Divine Office, but also in including the singing-recitation of a Psalm as part of the Eucharistic Liturgy. It is regrettable as well as liturgically impoverishing, that in a local Church which excels in its ability to sing the Psalms (The Punjabi Zabur), the Psalm in the Liturgy of the Word is so often replaced by a song of little theological and virtually no liturgical value.

11 More recent translations such as ‘proclaims the glory of’ seem slightly off the point. While certainly not a co-mediatrix of the grace of redemption, Mary does more than proclaim the greatness of the mystery of salvation and of the saviour. Her participation in divine providence, within the effective causality of Christ, and as the recipient rather than the donor of grace; and that within the order of redemption, in which she herself is redeemed, though completely so, is such that she co-effects - albeit in a subsidiary way - the transition from ‘verbum incarnandum’ to ‘verbum incarnatum;’ allowing the mystery of the Trinity to become part of human history from within that history, since without ‘woman’ it could not have been; thus actually magnifying God in the profound sense of making Him to be within the actual historical process - as distinct from being its transcendent cause and finality - what He was not theretofore.

12 This may seem an exception since the ‘Father’ of Lukan prayer is certainly a ‘Thou’ who seems absent from Zen. But in Christian Zen there seems to be a Thou, even if a somewhat formless one, who in a sense not dissimilar to Anselm’s “being than which none greater can be conceived” [id quo maius cogitari non potest], is implicit in every deconstruction of the partial. The ‘nada’ of apophatism, moreover, certainly calls forth the total trust we are speaking of here.