

I went to the Holy Land just before COVID closed the borders,
And I remember our *tour* guide offering us a reflection on *prayer*.
It was atop Mt. *Tabor* –
Where Jesus' *Transfiguration* took place –
Jesus didn't really change on that mountaintop –
But His *Apostles* did.
Jesus' brilliant and glorious light was *always* shining –
Because He was *connected* with His *Father*.
But the *Apostles* –
Like you and *me* –
Are *not* always feeling that *connection* on that *mountaintop*.
We have to climb *down* –
And we carry our *crosses* –
Those *things* in our lives that can *shake* our faith in God's *constant* care for us.
So, Jesus *radiated* the light of the *resurrection* atop that mountain,
To *steady* the hearts of His followers when they're in the *shadow* of His *cross*.

Oddly enough,
My tour guide's name was Chris Cross –

The name *Christopher* – means one who *carries Christ* in his heart –

Along with the *Cross* it *entails*.

True to his *name* – Chris bore *witness* to His faith in Christ –

Chris *tragically* lost his son –

Which only made his testimony *more* powerful.

Like today's Scripture,

Chris *urged* us to have *faith* in prayer.

He spoke to those who *doubt* the effectiveness of prayer.

Even my *mother* speaks like the persistent *widow* in today's Gospel –

Saying: “I have so much to pray for all the time,

God must be *sick* of hearing from me.”

Of course, God *never* tires of hearing from us.

And our very *longing* for God in prayer,

Is but a response to the longing in *God's* heart for *us*.

Our very *desire* for God is *itself* a prayer that never *ceases*.

Chris's take on prayer goes like this:

He said, “God **doesn't** really say **no** to our prayers –

Even if we don't get what we think we want – like when **I** wanted my **son** back.

God *answers* our prayers in one of **three** ways.

Sometimes the answer is **yes**.

And **other** times the answer is: **not now**.

But **most** of the time, the answer is: **I have a BETTER plan for you**.

We can be *painfully* frustrated that God's plan,

Is *not* made to *our* specifications –

Like *Chris*' plans for his son's *future* –

But *Chris* *believed* that God was giving his son a more beautiful life

Than *Chris* could *ever* provide *without* faith in God's restorative *love*.

He was *freed* of anger and *doubt* –

Even though his heart will *always* ache –

But even the *ache* is experienced as a reminder of *God's* aching for *us*.

This is *hard* to see in the throes of *grief*.

And *God* grieves when we close ourselves *off* from His love.

Jesus encourages us to *persist* in prayer – like that annoying *widow* –

Representing one who is among the most *vulnerable* in society –

One who is *needy*.

And the *unjust* judge just wanted to shut her *up*!

The original *Greek* of the Gospel paints a *humorous* image –

This poor, weak little figure of a widow –

Standing up to the powerful judge –

Who's being *worn down* – after going the distance in a *prize* fight –

In which he's afraid he'll get a black *eye!*

He was not changed in his *heart* –

He *still* had no love for either God or the human *person*.

He simply *capitulated* to be free of a *nuisance!*

But *God* –

God *never* tires of hearing from us –

And He *never* stops working to *change* our hearts to be more united with *His*.

In *prayer*, we do not change *God* –

Who is *always* loving us.

Prayer changes *us* –

Just like those first *Apostles* were changed – *transfigured* on that mountaintop –

Healing their hearts –

And *strengthening* them for their way to the *cross*.

May we never *tire* of turning to God.

Also in the Holy Land,

I visited the River *Jordan* –

And I was *impressed* with how *unimpressive* it was!

So *narrow* and *muddy*.

Yet I saw a man from the region there with his *child* – maybe *two* years old?

And he waded into the river with his *son*.

The boy held *out* his arms so his father could pick him *up*.

And the father *plunged* his son into the *water* –

And he *held* him *under* –

And he held him under some *more!*

I *started* to wonder if I was witnessing a beautiful *baptism* –

Or a heinous *crime!*

Well, he *hoists* the boy out of the water and *raises* him *heavenward*,

And the boy *gleefully* shouts *Abba! Abba!*

And he submerges his son two *more* times –

Each time the boy more *fervently* cried out in joy: *Abba! Abba!*

So, he's either using *Hebrew* or a descendant-tongue of *Christ*, which is *Aramaic*, for *Father* –

But *not* really so *sterile* a term – as *we* have translated Jesus' prayer to His Father,

As *Our Father*:

It *loses* the sense of *endearment* – of the *child* in us, crying out to our *papa*, or *daddy*!

My friends,

Jesus *certainly* is urging us to *persist* in prayer to Our Father.

But even *more* deeply He urges us to hold *onto* to Him as our *life* –

And our *joy* –

Just as that little *boy* did.

Christianity *celebrates* what the world *hates* –

It celebrates our *neediness* –

Like the poor widow, or the little child –

Our hearts' fullness depends *completely* on our *faith* that *God* is our life,

And *His* plans for us to be made *whole* in His love will *always* outdo our *own* designs.

The Gospel *closes* with Jesus *wondering*:

When He comes again, “*Will He **find** faith on earth?*”

Will we *let* Him love us and *save* us?

*Faith **opens*** our hearts to *receive* His *fulness*.

To *receive* God – to *trust* in *Him* – is what will win the victory –

As when *Moses* held up *his* arms in prayer amidst *his* battles.

He adopted the stance of the *needy child* –

And his arms grew *tired* in that *faithful* posture –

So, his *friends* held *up* his arms.

Let *us* be friends *too* –

Encouraging one another to hold *up* our hearts in the *faith* –

A faith meant to be *shared* as God's *little* ones –

Stronger together –

Both on the *mountaintop* in this place of prayer and worship, and *receptiveness* to *communion*.

And when we go *down* the mountain – into the *depths* of human *need* –

In a world that *wants* to chip *away* at our precious gift of *faith* –

A faith more life-giving than the air we *breathe*.

When I came *back* from the Holy Land –

COVID closed the churches –

Which only in *retrospect*, do I think was a *terrible* mistake –

But people were so *afraid* – as was *I*.

But *someone* painted a flat *stone* – not much bigger than a *saucer plate* –

And it was like a *light* in the darkness – placed outside the church *doors*.

The stone *urged* us with just three words:

FAITH over Fear.

May we be *freed* of the *burial* pall of our fears *cling* to *faith* –

Worth even *more* than those *ventilators* in those inundated hospitals in the early Spring of 2019.

FAITH over Fear.

My friends, we *gasp* for breath in these days of our *distress* –

May we *let go* of fear, and *embrace* our FAITH –

That God *does* have a better plan for us.

Like that little *child* in the River Jordan –

With arms *outstretched* – to hold *onto* his daddy –

May we cling to the God who *loves* His life into us –

Stretch out our arms to Him in faith and prayer –

Boost the arms of *faith* in those who are growing *weary* –

And *together* let us *gleefully* cry out: *Abba! Abba!*