

## God is There Before We Pray

I would see him every day on the main street waiting for the bus. He would always get to the coffee shop just before me in the morning and cross the street with two small coffees to his post at the bus stop. One morning, I got there a little early and he was right behind me in the line. I could not resist and so I introduced myself, learned his name was John, and asked him about his morning routine. He said that the bus would take him two miles down the road and leave him right in front of Meadows Nursing Home where his wife was a patient. Arriving just after breakfast each day at Meadows, he would greet his wife, set her coffee on her hospital table, and sit beside her while he enjoyed his coffee and related the events of the previous day to her.

She never touched the coffee. She never acknowledged him or even uttered a word. You see, she was suffering from Alzheimer's and could no longer recognize him or form words. Nevertheless, he would go each day and spend the morning with her. Watching him cross the street with the two small coffees, I thought to myself, that is God. That is God and us.

So often we think that God is only present and active when we are aware of his presence. We think that we bring him into the picture when we invoke him in our sometimes-desperate prayers. The fact is that God is always there, sitting beside us, as it were, like John, trying to communicate his life to us, offering us gifts, waiting for our response. Even when we, like John's wife, are unaware, unresponsive, he remains. God is faithful, God perseveres, God has no intention of giving up.

God is eager to hear from us. I think this makes it easier to pray. The spiritual life is not like a magic act. It is not our responsibility to summon God. In magic, the result of the trick depends on the magician. The magician must make things happen by his conjuring: the "magic words," the wave of the wand. That is not the case in the spiritual life. We do not control God. We do not conjure him up by our words or rituals. He is already there. Our prayer does not activate God. He does not need our prayer. Prayer is for our own sakes. The purpose of our prayer is to open ourselves to God.

I do not know the origin of this saying and so I cannot ascribe it to any source, only that a friend gave me a photograph of a stream with these words written on the back of the photo: "To pray is to be a bed for the stream." That pretty much captures the purpose of prayer. Prayer is an openness to God, allowing God to share his life with us and to allow his presence to flow to others by way of how we live our lives. To accomplish this does not require a great effort. God is already there beside us. If we turn our eyes to him, if we acknowledge his presence in the people we love, in the causes about which we are most passionate, in the people who draw compassion from us, in events that cause us joy, in the unexpected gifts of goodness that we receive or observe each day, and then speak to him a word of recognition, a word of gratitude, a word of wonder at what he envisions for us and for his creation, we have prayed.