

# LENT - A time for prayer



Some, maybe many members of our community, like to pray with arms extended. This gesture of prayer is the oldest in Christendom, it is known as the *orans* (praying) posture. There is a painting in the catacombs in Rome of a female figure standing in prayer with outstretched arms, representing perhaps the praying Church or may be a soul that has entered heaven and is praying in adoration before God. It is a female figure because the Church is the bride of Christ. Christ is symbolically married to the Church as he was to the People of Israel (see the prophet Hosea).

Praying with open arms has a depth of meaning. Open arms are first of all an expression of non violence, we greet loved ones with an open armed embrace, we open ourselves to another person. In prayer we open ourselves to God, the hidden God, seeking and hoping. Extended arms in prayer may be compared to wings, we seek to be carried upwards on the wings of prayer to be with God.

Further for us as Christians extended arms in prayer remind us of the extended arms of Christ on the Cross. This gives this posture of prayer a new depth of meaning. By praying with arms extended we too can resolve to pray imitating our crucified Lord, wishing to be one in mind with him. The outstretched arms of Christ on the Cross have a two fold intention. First the human will of Christ is united to the divine will of the Father and secondly those outstretched arms are there to embrace us, to draw all to himself, as John says in his gospel, "When I am lifted up from the earth, I shall draw all men to myself" (Jn.12:32). Here we can see the greatest commandment being fulfilled, loving God 'with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind and with all strength' (Dt.6:4-5) which is what Jesus is doing on the Cross and at the same time the second commandment is being fulfilled also loving one's neighbour, for Christ's arms on the Cross are open for each and every one of us to be enfolded in his loving embrace. In accepting Jesus loving embrace we are at the same time surrendering ourselves to the love of God. The two commandments cannot be separated as John says in his letter, "Anyone who says I love God and hates his brother is a liar" (1Jn.4:20), and as Paul says, "In your minds you must be the same as Christ Jesus" (Phil.2:5).

A second prayerful gesture is praying with hands joined. This gesture may have come from feudal times when a tenant placed his joined hands in the enfolding hands of his liege lord promising loyalty and fidelity and trusting in his lord. It is a wonderfully symbolic act allowing my hands to be enclosed in another's. At priestly ordination the newly ordained places his hands in those of his bishop and promises obedience and reverence and through his bishop to Christ himself. In joining our hands in prayer we can place our hands in Christ's in love and fidelity trusting in Christ's gracious and merciful love.

Lent is a time to get back to basics. When we pray in this season of Lent there is much for us, like Mary at Jesus' birth, to treasure and ponder in our hearts. We must love our God with all our hearts and minds and soul and strength and at the same time have our arms extended to embrace our neighbour lovingly. This is the message coming from the Cross.