

“What would you like to drink?” is a question we hear when we visit someone’s home, enter a drive-through or sit down for a sporting event. Usually we know what we’d like, and we get what we want. Sometimes, though, we make a bad choice. We choose something that will slake our thirst, but not something as healthy as it should be. We get what we want, but maybe not what we need. If our host or the employee replied to us, “Well, you shouldn’t be drinking that,” and gave us a glass of water instead, we’d probably never go back again.

When we pray, we sit in God’s presence, and God virtually says to us, “What would you like to drink?” But after we speak up, God sometimes gives us something else, something that feels like the wrong menu item. Some people twist that into a complaint that they never get what they want anyway, so why bother to pray?

Psalm 63 comes from a person who is ready to receive whatever God serves. It doesn’t say, “My soul is thirsting for coffee” or “for beer”, but “My soul is thirsting for you, O Lord my God.” “For you my flesh pines and my soul thirsts like the earth, parched, lifeless and without water.” The person singing this psalm is not distracted by other things that would be nice to have; instead, “I gazed toward you in the sanctuary to see your power and your glory.”

We sing this psalm today because the first reading tells how Jeremiah the prophet tried praying this way, but didn’t like the results. So, as we may wish to do when we don’t get what we want, Jeremiah said, “I’m outta here.” Jeremiah the prophet actually quit praying. This is not a guy who got distracted while trying to pray, but a guy who deliberately sought out distractions to keep from praying. When he listened to God, he got the message loud and clear, but he didn’t like the message. So he kept quiet about it. That did not work. He discovered something about his relationship to God. You can never get out of it, even if you try to switch it off. When Jeremiah ignores the message, he says, the name of God “becomes like a fire burning in my heart, imprisoned in my bones; I grow weary holding it in, I cannot endure it.” His soul was thirsting.

We too have probably discovered that if we have not been praying regularly or deeply, it bothers us. It becomes hard not to pray. We know good and well that something is missing from our lives; something has gone off the rails. We get more irritable, we don’t eat right, we make bad decisions, and then we try to defend them. It could be that we have not been listening to God as sincerely as we could.

If you find yourself avoiding prayer, ask this question, “What am I really thirsting for?” Am I thirsting for a drink I shouldn’t have? Am I thirsting for a relationship I’d better avoid? Am I thirsting for an end to a conflict I started? Am I thirsting for a deeper love than I am willing to give? Sometimes we are wrong about our thirst. Because we know what thirst feels like, we think we know what will slake it. But that isn’t always true. Thirst always feels the same, no matter what we use to slake it. The real thirst within us is always a thirst for God. Through prayer, we may find out just what we are thirsting for – or whom we are thirsting for. When we reach to God for the right drink, he will give us what we need, even if it is not the drink we want.