

Publicus Antiquus was a 3rd century Christian convert who wanted to become a martyr. He got his chance one cloudy summer day under the persecution of Diocletian. Arrested for being a Christian, Publicus was brought to the Colliseum as food for the lions. Before his turn came he saw other Christians fighting hopelessly as the lions tore them to pieces. He was just beginning to lose his nerve when the soldiers seized him by the neck and threw him into the arena, where one lonely, hungry lion stalked. Publicus wanted to be a martyr, but now he was scared out of his wits. In his weakness, he fell to his knees, lifted his hands to the heavens and prayed, "Lord, make this lion a Christian." Then, a miracle happened. A beam of light broke through the clouds and shone on the lion. The lion walked up to Publicus, knelt down in the sand, lifted its eyes to heaven, opened its mouth, and prayed, "Bless us, O Lord. . . ."

Prayer is part of the life of a Christian. It nourishes our discipleship. We all know it's best to make prayer a daily habit, especially during Lent. Just as you might do other activities daily--watch the news, put on your makeup, feed the pet--you probably also make prayer a daily habit. It's part of our life.

But, what is the purpose of our prayer? Prayer has many purposes: It gives praise to God; it gives us peace of mind. But prayer is more than something private. It can drive us to action.

I think many of us are tempted to hold prayer in as our very own. Imagine an old man whose favorite possession is a music box he keeps in his attic. Every day when he is alone, he goes to his attic, opens the box, and listens to the tune. Or a woman whose favorite recipe is for a bread she bakes only for herself to enjoy. Now, there is nothing wrong with having our private joys; in fact, they help us keep our sanity. But if there's a danger about prayer, it's that we make it completely private.

Prayer is more like Popeye's spinach. After he eats a can, it drives him back into the world to separate right from wrong. You could never imagine Popeye eating a bowl of spinach all alone and then settling down to read a book. It drives him back into the world. That's what our prayer can do.

At the Transfiguration, Peter, James, and John were swept up in prayer. They saw the glory of God. It so moved them that Peter said, "We gotta set up 3 booths here to mark the spot." You can almost hear him. "Maybe we need a plaque, or a statue." His prayer was so intense that Peter looks for something to do.

Now, prayer like Peter's is rare. And what's maddening is that he didn't even have to work at it. He didn't take a course in how to pray. He didn't read a book for pointers. He didn't practice it hours a day for years and years. All he did was wake up from sleep, and the vision was just given to him. Prayer like Peter's is rare, but any of us can go deeper.

As we finish praying, a good practice is to ask God, "What do you want me to do as a result of this prayer?" Then wait for a reply. It's like sitting at a bus stop. Just because you're there doesn't mean the bus is going to come, but if it does, you'll be at the right place. And our prayer will drive us to action.