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Teach Us To Pray: Presence and Embodiment in Prayer (John 3: 14–21)
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It's a delight to be back with you at Benedictus, and my only regret is that Sarah and Neil aren't with us tonight. But I'm grateful to Sarah for inviting my contribution to your Lenten Series going deeper into prayer, and both to Sarah and to Frances for their fine addresses over the last three weekends, which I've appreciated reading.

My brief tonight is to talk about embodiment and bodily presence in the life of prayer—and so, obviously, the place for me to start is at the Mater Hospital in Brisbane, at the loading dock, back in 1983! I was just about to start theological college and was earning some money over the Christmas break, distributing mail all around the hospital. Each day I'd stop for a chat with the laconic and highly entertaining amateur philosopher who ran the hospital's loading dock. I remember his reflections on attentiveness, for instance, lamenting how some of his workers weren't attentive enough to load 27 boxes onto a forklift pallet in three even layers of nine. I particularly remember some advice to his young teenaged son, who he'd been trying to teach the facts of life. He told me that his son had asked him, "Dad, what's good sex?" To which he'd replied, "Son, it's when they show up!".

Tonight, I want to suggest that good prayer is the same as good sex—the secret is showing up! Or, to put it more formally, embodied presence is essential for good prayer, for authentic prayer. This may strike you as an odd claim, since the Church has regularly forgotten the body in its fascination with the spirit. We've suffered from too much of what Fr Hans Küng called "Platonic, Augustinian, Cartesian body-soul dualism." But these days we've become less fascinated with rationality and more attuned to bodies, while Eastern practices like Yoga and Tai-Chi have introduced us to rich spiritual traditions that never forgot the body.

We're rediscovering the bodily earthiness of the Old Testament, too, while the New Testament has also begun to reveal a world of embodied practice, centred on Jesus' body and his actions—which of course we came to recognize early on as God's enfleshed presence, and God's embodied actions.

In the Catholic tradition of our Church, the sacraments testify to the inseparability of body and spirit for Christians, representing what Father Louis-Marie Chauvet calls "the word of God at the mercy of the body". God and humanity, spirit and flesh, body and prayer, are all woven fine in the Christian imagination, properly understood—that is, when we turn our eyes upon Jesus, as our proven window onto God.

Now, friends, that's what tonight's gospel is about, from John 3. It's a remarkable passage taken from the dialogue between Jesus and Nicodemus, who wants to discover spiritual truth but is directed instead to Jesus' bodily practice. The Jesus who has just cleansed the

temple and turned the water of purification into the wine of celebration knows what he's doing: he's confronting a distorted vision of what it is to be spiritual that centres on the repression of impurity and disorder, with its inherent violence managed by sacrificial catharsis. Indeed, just before tonight's passage, Jesus is portrayed as wisely wary at the time of Passover, because he knows just how deeply ingrained this dangerous mindset is. And so, in tonight's gospel, he points Nicodemus beyond his present understanding of God. And where does he point Nicodemus, and with him all of Israel? He points to himself, lifted up on the cross, where he reveals the poisonous reality, and exposes the threat, just as Moses did when he lifted up a poisonous serpent in the wilderness, as a necessary dimension of Israel's healing.

Friends, in doing so Jesus disowns a God of violence and judgement, of sacrificial ideology, overcoming the false notion of divine condemnation through his own submission to human condemnation. Here we see Jesus' version of God judging the world, which for John's Gospel means shining a liberating light on the way we humans typically do business.

Friends, it's by sacrificing innocent victims that human communities typically make meaning and keep order and ensure that we all get along fine. But rather than pay us back for doing that, God's answer is a human body given up to death for us, and then given back to us on Easter Day and every Sunday thereafter as Eucharistic food and drink for a new Easter life lived in the body. John's Jesus goes on to tell us in today's gospel how we become part of this new life, and it's not complicated: we have seen the light, under the conditions of our life, as the body of Jesus is given for us; our necessary response is for us to come to him, to his light, rather than avoid that light and end up condemning ourselves—that is, shutting ourselves off, preventing God's access to us. God's gift of Godself in person, in the flesh, can only be received if we show up in person, in the flesh. To avoid this encounter might preserve our pride and our illusions, but at the cost of our not being able to find God, and hence ultimately of losing ourselves.

Friends, this isn't about God demanding assent to arbitrary articles of belief. Rather, it's about being drawn into a habituated bodily encounter, in which we show up to meet the God who's already shown up to meet us. This begins our life of prayer, this showing up. And we shouldn't think that it's optional. I want to mention three dimensions of embodied presence that are involved in the Christian life of prayer.

First, some people think that they can be Christian without showing up. But the great tradition of East and West is that by showing up together in the embodied fellowship of word and sacrament, of solidarity and song, we meet the living God and we receive Christ's Eucharistic body and we're reconstituted as that body in the world—a body whose presence and actions, whose wounds and groans and tears, is God's presence for the life of the world.

Second, some Christians think that it's enough to listen, perhaps to sing, while most other bodily actions during worship are best avoided. Here I'm thinking of traditional gestures in our personal devotion, like bowing to the altar, or making the sign of the cross; also accustomed postures in prayer like standing and kneeling; accompanied of course by the priest's long-established bodily rituals at the altar, and indeed the whole physical clothing of our Eucharist in colour and movement. All this can seem unhelpfully external when internal

transformation is surely the whole point. But, of course, authentic internal transformation leads properly and naturally to external expression, while there's some old wisdom suggesting that habits of external expression can also help to encourage internal transformation.

Third, I mention the disciplines of private prayer and meditation that you hear and know much about at Benedictus. There are many techniques recommended in the literature of contemplation and meditation, and these typically involve the body. There's the use of breathing, for instance, and sitting in an upright posture, to facilitate a mood of calm attentiveness. One of today's leading spiritual teachers, Fr Martin Laird, told a class about the ancient spiritual teacher who even recommended focussing all your attention in prayer just above the left nipple, to which one of his students piped up "whose left nipple?".

My point is that, strange or not, the body is important in Christian meditation. And, of course, the most important embodied part of meditation is just showing up. Anyone venturing into the life of prayer discovers that things go better if we stick at it, showing up for our daily times of meditation, and that if we're lax in our showing up, if we don't present our bodies as a living sacrifice, then the God who's there waiting for us at our time of prayer won't be encountered.

Friends, there are many mysteries in the life of prayer, though, as John Donne said about sexual intimacy in his poem *The Exstasie*, "love's mysteries in soules doe grow/ But yet the body is his booke". The body is not left behind in the life of prayer, just as it wasn't left behind when God came among us in the flesh of Jesus Christ. Nor are our bodies left behind when God invites us to show up for worship together, or to enter into worship with our bodies and their senses. Friends, we could conclude that Christian belief, Christian prayer, Christian discipleship, Christian sacraments and the Christian moral life all meet in one place: the body. Indeed, we might go so far as to say that the body of Christ is made out of our embodied lives.