

A SIMPLE PRAYER GUIDEBOOK

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Introduction

All of us pray, though we may not always call what we are doing prayer. There are inevitable moments when things are tough and we fire off a quick prayer: 'God, help me find enough money for the rest of this week', 'God make my child healthy', even 'God let me find a parking space'. Most people have had moments of awe or stunned silence as something beyond words touches us to our core. These moments give us a taste of something an echo of a hunger for something more. We recognise a desire to take stock, to slow down and check out if this is where we want to be and who we want to be.

Many of us have had little teaching in how to pray. We might be told of the dizzy heights of our forebears but have no idea how to get there ourselves. We feel unsure of how to move beyond the prayer of our childhood, good in itself, to something that is more meaningful for our lives now.

Having spent years listening to experiences of prayer, three things stand out. Most people have an inferiority complex about prayer. 'Yes', they'll say, 'I pray, but I'm not sure I'm doing it right'. Secondly, no two people's prayer experience looks the same. There is no 'right way' to pray, only the right way for you. Thirdly, many of us have a profound embarrassment about prayer. We would sooner tell friends about deep intimacies, than talk about our prayer lives. Someone once said 'If we talk to God, it's called prayer. If God talks to us it's called schizophrenia'. Although down through the centuries we've been assured that God is actually there to be experienced, God communicates, God speaks, most of us cringe at the idea of saying 'yes, and God speaks to me'.

What is prayer? Prayer is communication with God. Think of all the ways you communicate with the people around you in your life. Some of our communication is verbal. We discuss, we argue, tell off, whisper sweet nothings, sing football chants, plead, tease and debate. Some of what we communicate is unspoken. Silence speaks volumes - companionable silence with a loved one, the awe that falls over us when we see something spectacularly beautiful, moments where there are no words to express the gladness or the sadness. We also have an entirely different store of ways to get our message across. We write postcards and letters, doodle in the margins, leave postits on the fridge, get in contact via facebook or twitter. And sometimes, more than any words, we need a hug, a kind handshake, we need to dance, or clap our hands. If all of these are valid means of communication, then they're valid means of communication with God.

As we explore various methods of prayer the intention isn't to suggest a 'right' way of prayer – there is no 'right way'. Rather the hope is to invite you to explore and experiment. At worst, you might gain an hour or so a week of quiet reflection. At best you might enter a whole new depth of relationship with your God

As we begin, here are a few thoughts to keep in mind:

- You don't need to pretend in prayer. Don't worry about whether your prayer is 'right' or 'like everybody else'. God wants to be with you as you are.
- Speak to God in your own voice. God does not expect Victorian English!
- Set a time and then stick to it – better to aim for 5 minutes and feel good, than aim for an hour and feel despondent because you managed 5 minutes. Better little and often than putting it off.
- Aim for a deliberate beginning and ending, perhaps using a bow or some other symbol.
- Try to find a time or a space where you won't be interrupted. This might mean a little creativity with your schedule – 10 minutes after you put the potatoes on to boil, or leaving early to pick up the kids, so you can have 15 minutes alone in the car. While it can be nice to have a 'special' prayer space, it isn't really that important. More important to find something that fits in with the reality of your lifestyle, and carves out a little space for you and God to enjoy each other's company.

Simple Prayer: Introductory Films

We have also recorded three short films to support your exploration of prayer. You will find the link here:

<https://www.methodist.org.uk/our-work/learning/network-regions/north-west-mann-region/resources/>

You might want to use these films within the context of a worship service, so that the whole congregation takes time to consider aspects of prayer. A small group might want to watch them and use them as a starting point for reflection. Alternatively you could encourage individuals to watch the films and use the reflection questions on their own.

For Use With Groups

This booklet aims to be a straightforward handbook for exploring prayer. The hope is that it is accessible enough to pick up and use. It is not intended to be read all in one go, but to be dipped into. Any one of the eight suggestions can be tried independently, and it may be that one or two capture your imagination that you choose to stay with those. You may also want to join with other people in your family, community, workplace or church to make this journey.

The material can be adapted to shorter or longer meetings – from 45 minutes to an hour and a half. When working in a group it's important to have an agreed length for the meeting and to set agreed time limits for each section of the meeting. To dispel any sense of an 'expert' leader, it's good for the responsibility to facilitate circulates the group, or one person might agree to be facilitator throughout. The facilitator's role is to:

- Remind the group that the focus is on experience rather than intellectual knowledge
- Gently lead the group through the process.
- Lead the group in the week's prayer practice
- Keep time to agreed boundaries (setting a reminder on your mobile phone might help if you're concerned about interrupting people)

The facilitator leads the group through the following five stages:

Gather

Begin by simply becoming aware of God's presence with the group. You can use a short piece of meditative music (a Taize chant is perfect for this), or simply hold silence together for a few minutes, asking people to be attentive to God's presence.

If you are following this material over a series of weeks, you might then allow time for people to share their experience of prayer over the last week. Again, try to stay with personal experience ('I found x helpful but y difficult) rather than generalisations or judgements (this is a good/bad way of praying because...). Remember that different approaches will work best for different people, and one person's tender new discovery can easily be crushed by another's dismissal.

Pray

The facilitator leads the group in the session's chosen way of praying. It will be helpful if the facilitator has read the material, and perhaps thought about timings for the session. Sometimes the facilitator can simply read the material aloud, slowly, sometimes they will need to choose where to focus. If you are nervous, it helps to jot down timings and what you want to say at particular points. Remember, slower is almost always better. There are lots of resources on the internet to help, but it's also fine to simply stay with the material in the booklet.

Notice

Allow a few minutes of silence as a 'buffer' between prayer and sharing. Not everyone can move quickly between prayer and conversation. For some, the prayer experience may have been particularly moving or challenging, and they will need a few minutes to gather their thoughts. It is often helpful to make notes at this stage, while the experience is fresh in the mind. The following questions might be helpful:

- What did you find helpful?
- What touched your emotions?
- What did you notice about how God was present in your prayer?
- What do you want to remember from this experience of prayer?

Share

Allow an opportunity for people to share their experience. Begin by remembering how God continues to be present as we reflect, and by reminding people that the group is for sharing, not discussion. This means that, when someone speaks, the group listens, allows a couple of moments to reflect quietly on what has been heard, then moves on to allow the next person to speak. It is also fine if anyone does not want to share. When everyone who wishes to speak has had an opportunity, the facilitator ends the sharing with a simple prayer such as 'we thank you God for being with us in our sharing. Amen'.

Look Forward

If this booklet is being followed over a number of weeks or months, take some times to think about how you will engage with the material in the coming week. It will help if everyone commits to practicing, at least once in the coming week, the form of prayer they have just experienced. Like learning a musical instrument, picking something up for the first time can feel awkward and uncomfortable, but, with practice, it begins to feel more natural.

Lectio Divina

Psalm 119 describes God's word as a 'light for our feet and a lamp for our path'. Scripture is a gift to us, and spending time with it hugely important for us as Christians, but it is not always clear how to approach these ancient texts prayerfully. At one level, it is good to gain a deeper knowledge of the Bible. There is much richness there in a book composed by 40 writers over at least 13 centuries, around a central theme of God's relationship with God's people. Scripture helps us understand who God is, how God loves us, and who we are as God's people. Studying this will inform our prayer and deepen our knowledge. There is, however, a difference between academic study, and contemplation. If someone says 'I love you', we can analyse the phrase and take it apart, asking what exactly love means, in this socio-cultural context. Or we can let the words settle deep within us, reverberate in us, and somehow profoundly change us.

In Lectio Divina (or sacred reading) we listen 'with the ears of the heart' as St Benedict put it. This form of prayer is usually associated with the monastic tradition, with a history stretching back to the third century. In monasteries it has traditionally been a form of community prayer, and takes its place alongside liturgy and labour as a building block of the Benedictine day. The language of Lectio Divina reflects its history with four stages called lectio (reading), meditatio (meditation), oratio (prayer) and contemplatio (contemplation). In the words of Saint John of the Cross: 'Seek in reading and you will find in meditation; knock in prayer and it will be opened to you in contemplation.' We are guided in each stage, not by a desire for more knowledge, or by our curiosity, but by the Spirit of God.

Lectio

The first step is to become still. In order to really hear, we need to stop, stand still and listen. This can be particularly difficult for those of a generation where we are constantly bombarded with noise and visual images. It can help to go to a quiet place, light a candle, become aware of our breathing, and bring our minds to this moment. Then we read the passage of scripture slowly and gently. There is no rush. It is wise to select a short passage to pray with, to avoid the temptation to read on.

Meditatio

As you read, allow yourself to pause at a word or phrase that moves you. Stay with that phrase without being in any hurry to move on. Hold it in your heart and mind, savouring it and relishing it. Allow it to reverberate inside you. Although this stage can be difficult to explain, you will recognise it in the sense of this word or phrase somehow finding a home in you.

Oratio

We then allow ourselves to respond to this experience in prayer. Be with God with what has happened in your heart, telling God how this phrase has touched you, what it means for you and how you are feeling. Allow God to respond to what you have expressed.

Contemplatio

This final stage moves beyond words. It is the kind of loving silence that we fall into with someone we know very well when we have said all that needs to be said. Simply be present, resting quietly in God's presence.

In practice, you may find yourself spending more time on one stage than another, which is entirely natural. You may also find that you move about between different stages several times during one period of prayer. Again, this is normal. The important thing is to continue to approach the prayer slowly and gently, not moving on until you have really marinated in the previous stage. There are no targets to be achieved, and there is no requirement to get to the end of the passage. The idea is simply to allow the words to lead you into the presence of God.

Some possible texts for Lectio Divina:

- Psalm 46
- Psalm 62
- Psalm 131
- Psalm 139
- Jeremiah 29: 11-14
- John 15: 9-17
- Romans 8: 35-39
- Choose a favourite hymn or song and use this method to pray with the words.
- You may want to try praying with poetry – RS Thomas, Gerard Manley Hopkins and Mary Oliver can be good choices.
- Passages of spiritual writing or favourite prayers can also be prayed with in this way. This text, for example, from Julian of Norwich, lends itself well to gentle, meditative reading:

*The fullness of joy is to behold God in everything.
God is the ground, the substance,
the teaching, the teacher,
the purpose, and the reward for which every soul labours.*

Imaginative Contemplation

In the prayer of imaginative contemplation we enter into the gospel accounts to meet Jesus, and experience him as his first followers encountered him. The gospels tell us who Jesus is and so when we pray with the gospels in this way we're engaging with Jesus' life, actions and words. Ignatius of Loyola, the most famous advocate of this form of prayer, asks us to begin this kind of prayer, asking that we might 'know Jesus more fully, so as to love him more deeply and follow him more closely'. Imaginative contemplation helps to know Jesus in a more intimate way. The more we know him, the more we love him. The more we know him and love him, the more we find ourselves inspired by him and modelling ourselves on him in our day to day lives.

People sometimes ask 'how will I know if it is really Jesus speaking and not just my imagination?' Firstly, it's good to always begin prayer by asking God to guide us. Jesus says 'who among you, if your child asked for bread would give him a stone?' We can trust that when we ask for good things in prayer, God will not trick us. Secondly we need to approach all prayer with a dollop of common sense. If prayer is not leading us to love, joy and peace then it is unlikely to be of God. It is helpful to remember that this way of prayer is not 'new-fangled'. Although often associated with Ignatius of Loyola, praying imaginatively is an even earlier practice, from both Cistercian and Franciscan tradition of the 12th century.

The best way to learn about prayer is to actually do it. Below we follow the account of Bartimaeus from Mark 10: 46-52. You may want to read through the guidance notes a few times, and then put the paper to one side. Try not to approach this as an academic exercise where every question needs to be answered, but as a real experience in which you are taking part.

Begin by becoming still and conscious of the presence of God. Ask God for guidance, then allow the scene to unfold naturally in your imagination.

They reached Jericho...

How do you imagine Jericho? What does it look, smell or sound like? What time of day is it? What is the weather like? Take time to settle into the place.

And as he left Jericho with his disciples and a great crowd...

How do you imagine the 'great crowd'? Can you catch sight of Jesus? What is he doing? How do you feel about being there, and about what you see?

Bartimaeus - that is, the son of Timaeus - a blind beggar, was sitting at the side of the road. When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout and cry out, 'Son of David', Jesus, have pity on me'. And many of them scolded him and told him to keep quiet...

How do you feel about hearing Bartimaeus as he cries out? What does he sound like? What is the mood of the crowd? How do you feel about those who tell him to keep quiet?

But he only shouted all the louder, 'Son of David, have pity on me'. Jesus stopped and said 'call him here'.

What is the expression on Jesus' face as he stops? How is he responding to what he hears? What are the people in the crowd saying and doing? What are you doing?

So they called the blind man over. 'Courage' they said 'get up, he is calling you'. So throwing off his cloak, he jumped up and went to Jesus'.

What is happening in Bartimaeus? How does he look? How is he feeling?

Then Jesus spoke 'what do you want me to do for you?' The blind man said 'Rabbuni, let me see again'.

What is Jesus' tone of voice? How does Bartimaeus feel to be asked this question? How are the crowd responding?

Jesus said to him, 'Go, your faith has saved you'. And at once his sight returned and he followed him along the road.

What is happening in Bartimaeus as he receives his sight? How is Jesus looking at him? What is the mood in the crowd now? How is Bartimaeus feeling as he follows Jesus?

Take some time to speak with Jesus about what you have seen and heard, and about whatever has surfaced for you during prayer.

If you find this way of praying helpful, you might also try:

Mk 2: 1-12	Cure of the paralytic
Lk 5: 1-11	Call of the disciples
Lk 24:13-35	The road to Emmaus
Jn 4: 1-42	Woman at the well
Jn 13:1-16	Last Supper and washing of feet

The pattern of imaginative contemplation is:

- 1) Read through the passage a few times, then put it to one side.
- 2) Begin prayer by asking for God's guidance, that you might know, love and follow Jesus better.
- 3) Allow the scene to unfold in your imagination. Engage with your senses and notice how Jesus is listening, feeling and responding.
- 4) At the end of the scene take some time to talk with Jesus, as one friend speaks to another, about all that has happened.

Praying for Yourself and Others

For many people, the first form of prayer they learned is praying for others (sometimes called intercessory prayer), having been taught as children to pray at bedtime: 'God bless Mummy and God bless Daddy and God bless Granny and Granddad'. Most of us carry these prayers into adulthood in one form or another. We naturally call out for help from God when we are struggling, like a child calling out to a parent when the world is too difficult or perplexing to manage on their own.

Having a relationship with God inevitably means that we will talk to God about the people we love, the people we struggle with, the situations in our community or our world that concern us. When we speak to God like this we share something of ourselves, make ourselves vulnerable and recognise our need for God. Intercession is also an invitation to see the world as God sees it, to broaden our gaze to recognise the needs not only of ourselves and those we love, but also of those who suffer or struggle across the earth. When we do this we experience something of God's compassion for the world.

Sometimes those with little or no experience of Christianity mistakenly perceive this form of prayer as a kind of shopping list, a way of making demands and using God to get what we want. However, the heart of all true prayer is relationship, and sharing your feelings, your hopes and your longings can only strengthen a relationship. It also helps build relationship if you also listen to the feelings, hopes and longings of the other person, so perhaps take time to notice what God is longing for as you pray. Only if we listen will we learn how, sometimes, we can be the answer to another's prayer and sometimes, if we ask God to change the world, we need to be open to God beginning by changing us.

Some approaches to praying for others

Newspaper prayers:

Looking through a newspaper (or social media/news websites), notice what attracts your attention. Consider how God looks on that situation and ask God to be with the people involved.

Prayer walk/Prayer for your community:

When you walk past the houses of your neighbours you can ask God to bless the people who live there, adding names or details if you know them. You might pray for the children and staff in local schools, the owners of businesses, the people who clean our streets. Try to be local and specific – you may find that you come to know your community much better.

Praying with a prayer list:

Some people keep a list of all the people and situations that they've offered to pray for. This can be a great way to stay alert to the needs of others. You might want to divide your list into seven for each day of the week. Another option is to place a physical list before a lit candle or some symbol of God's presence and ask God to bless each person on the list with what they most need.

When a situation seems intractable:

Sometimes there is no easy solution and no clear sense of how God might intervene. It may help to hold the situation in your mind and heart for a few minutes. You do not need words or requests, just sit with your concern, in God's presence.

The Examen

Do you ever find yourself in the evening, just before you go to bed, sitting down over your last cup of tea and analysing your day? We think of the brilliant response we wish we'd been clever enough to give at the time. Sometimes we look over the day at work, and fret over all that is left undone. There are also evenings when we look back with contentment - days when we achieved something, when a hope has been realised, or we've felt we've made a difference. We are, by nature, reflective, learning people, who look back and look forward, trying to make sense of our lives and their direction. Whether it's at the end of the day, or when something happens in our lives to take the wind out of our sails we will step back and remember, and try to make sense of that.

The examen is prayer for practical people. It is a prayer of looking back over all our day to come to a fuller sense of where God has been active in our lives. We take 10 or 15 minutes to let the day replay in our minds, and allow God to show us how God has been at work. Although reflecting on our lives may increase our self-awareness and self-knowledge, this isn't the examen's main focus. Instead we seek to increase our God-awareness and our knowledge of how God is moving in our lives.

One of the greatest surprises of the examen is in seeing just how much God is active in the midst of all the busyness and activity of our lives. What may, at first glance, seem an unremarkable day, on closer examination is filled with things to be thankful for; that blue tit balancing on the feeder this morning, the cup of tea a colleague put down on your desk, the pleasure of blood pumping through veins at the gym. All these are gifts of God. We see too the patterns of our struggle; the ease with which we can get drawn into gossip, our losses of temper, our willingness to ignore others' need.

The examen reminds me that my relationship with God is living, growing and developing, a relationship in which God communicates with me and I communicate with God in the day to day. Praying over the day with God is an opportunity to share my joys and struggles with someone who loves me. Practiced regularly, we become more attentive to how God makes Godself present in our lives, We become more alert to the significance of our lives and how God is with us, holding us and calling us, every second of our day.

An Outline for the Examen

- 1) Begin by becoming still, perhaps by focusing on your breathing. Become conscious of God with you, gazing upon you, and ask for light as you look back over the day.
- 2) Allow the day to unfold in your mind. Do not rush. Remember how you awoke, what you ate, who you met, where you found yourself at each part of the day. You don't need to recall every moment, but notice what emerges and what catches your attention.
- 3) Now review the day again, this time noticing moments of life, of light, of energy. Moments when you were aware of God's presence or of God's actions and movement around you. Notice too the moments that were deadening, when you felt far from God, or when you were not at you best. What are your feelings as you look at all these different moments? Ask God what is being revealed as you notice.
- 4) Speak to God, as one friend speaks to another, about what you have noticed during your prayer. Take time to give thanks, for at least one moment that you have treasured, and to ask God's healing and grace for one moment where you have struggled.
- 5) Look forward. In light of what you have seen through your prayer, ask God for the gifts and graces that you need for the day ahead.

Other useful questions

When did I experience love, joy or peace today? When did I experience fear, distress or disturbance?

Where did I live as a person of love today? When did I choose to not live love?

When today did I feel really alive? When did I feel drained?

When did I feel like I was truly myself? When did I fail to be true to myself?

When did I sense God's call today? When did I sense myself avoiding God's call?

It is also possible to download an audiofile of the 'Review of the Day' from www.pray-as-you-go.org.

Art and Prayer

The first thing that happens when suggesting using art in prayer is the response: 'I'm no good at art'. The belief that they can't draw or paint is usually fairly deeply embedded, based in some experience at school, or something their parents said when they were young. Whether that opinion is true or not is not really relevant when it comes to art and prayer. If anything it's probably more difficult to really let go and relax if you approach a sheet of paper with the expectation of creating a masterpiece.

One of the benefits of praying with art is in how it helps us step out of our comfort zone. We're familiar with such experiences in our day to day lives. You might be unused to children, and suddenly find yourself baby-sitting because of some unexpected crisis. You might have always looked after management at work and suddenly found that the cleaner is off sick, and that room really needs to be cleaned. Roadworks force you to take a different route home and suddenly you find parts of town, just around the corner, that you've never seen before. These experiences give us a new perspective. They help us to access part of ourselves that we've never given attention. They can jolt us out of a sense of boredom or despondency. The same is true in prayer. When we seem stuck in the old ways, when we feel discouraged, or we simply need to do something different, picking up a crayon can make all the difference.

If you have read this far and are thinking 'this is a waste of time, my playing with crayons is not prayer', I want to suggest that you reserve judgement for 15 minutes. Give it a chance. You may well find yourself surprised. It's very easy to think that prayer must be a 'serious' experience. You have to be quiet, furrow your brow and treat God formally. But prayer and play are not mutually exclusiveness. You only have to look at tropical fish to know that God has a playful nature. Parents know that quality time with their children (as infants, or as grownups) needs to involve serious conversation, but also times of relaxing together and playing. God is allowed to enjoy Godself with us, and we with God. If God sees all that God has made, and sees that it is good, that includes our impulse to create, play, doodle and compose.

This week's prayer exercise may involve gathering a few things before beginning. Pick up a pack of crayons, coloured pencils or poster paints when you're next shopping – or borrow them from your children. You will also need some paper – A4 size or larger is best – computer printer paper is ideal.

Here are a few guidelines for this way of praying:

- Before you begin, become aware of God's presence with you. Ask that God would guide you and be with you as you pray.
- Try not to judge what you create. Remember, it's the process that is important, not the finished product. No-one is going to see this but you and God. It's more important that you enjoy yourself, than that you represent something accurately or tidily!
- When you have finished, take some time to look at what you have created. Talk to God about what you notice and how you feel. Allow God to respond.

Freestyle Prayer

Using colouring pencils, crayons, pastels or paints, choose three colours to represent God and three to represent yourself. Then simply play, and see what happens. Doodle, scribble, make bold strokes or tiny dots, whatever feels right. Notice how the six colours relate to each other.

Signature Prayer

In very large letters sign your name. Then using colour, decorate your signature in conversation with God. Notice what colours seem to fit with who you feel you are. Notice what colours fit with the ways in which God has formed you and created you. Try to focus on what you feel is deeply important in your identity. Don't be surprised if God draws your attention to things you hadn't noticed before

Spiral Prayer

Spend some time reflecting on your life at the moment. Where are you particularly grateful? What moves you to joy and gladness? Are there any particular areas of sadness and struggle? Try to include what is good as well as what is difficult. Working in a spiral, use colours, shapes or words to reflect where you are grateful, expressing thanks to God, and colours and shapes or words to reflect where you struggle, asking God for help. Keep working in a spiral, talking to God about whatever comes up, lingering over those areas that seem particularly important, moving on only when you are ready.

Praying With The Body

All world religions have expressions of bodiliness. Buddhism has a focus on stilling the body, resting with the breath, to quiet the mind. Islam has those tremendous lines of bodies, standing, kneeling and prostrating themselves before their God. In Judaism, the body is dressed and fed in a way that recognises its value. But Christianity has a unique relationship with the body, because it is, at heart, a bodily religion. The word became flesh, we believe, and lived among us. God created us, body and soul, and sees that it is good.

In our human relationships our physical bodies play a huge part in communication. If you have ever tried to have a conversation with someone with their legs crossed, head down and refusing eye contact, you know how difficult it is to make a connection. We use our bodies to communicate. We wrap our arms around a distressed friend, when we know there are no words that will help. We take to the dance floor to communicate something of the energy and joy of the experience of life. We cover our faces when we are upset or embarrassed. Given how physically communicative we are in daily life, why are we so reluctant to use our bodies in prayer?

It's very easy to believe that prayer comes from our heads. We communicate with God from the silent, private space of our thoughts. We may want to get our bodies under control before we pray – saying 'right, settle down you rebellious body, I'm trying to do something important up here in my head'. Our bodies are allowed to enter into prayer only in so far as they are behaving themselves, or when we ask God to prevent them misbehaving themselves – when we're ill, or when we're troubled by our sensuality. But we can use our God-given bodies to communicate with God, and to know God's communication with us.

There is a line in 'Chariots of Fire' when Eric Liddel is attempting to explain to his sister why he wants to be both a missionary and a runner. He says 'God made me for a purpose, for China, but he also made me fast, and when I run, I feel his pleasure'. One of the invitations of an incarnational faith is to allow ourselves to feel the pleasures of our body, and to allow God to feel that pleasure along with us.

Some suggestions for praying with your body:

- 1) At a simple level, pay attention to how your posture changes how you experience prayer. Pray a familiar prayer like the Lord's Prayer sitting, standing, kneeling or bowing, with your eyes open or closed, with your hands joined or open. How does the position of your body change your sense of being before God, and your sense of how God is with you? It may be that you find one position particularly reflects how you are feeling at the moment. Use this to help you in your prayer – perhaps just holding yourself in that position without any words.
- 2) Move through your bodily senses, asking God to reveal Godself to you there, and opening yourself to God's coming.
 - Spend time with your sight, asking to see God's light, and see the world as God sees it. Spend time with smell, asking to be attentive to all the smells of life, and to know how to respond.
 - Spend time with touch, asking to feel the warmth of God, asking to be a bearer of God's warmth to others.
 - Spend time with sound, asking to hear God in all the sounds around you, and to be attentive to the voices of those who are in pain.
 - Spend time with taste, asking to 'taste and see that the Lord is good', and to be open to the sweetness and bitterness of the world.
- 3) Are there particular physical experiences when you feel fully alive? It might be when you are doing physical work – baking bread or washing the car, or when you are running or walking briskly through the rain. Allow yourself to really feel the physical experience. Can you sense God's presence there, in the movement of your muscles, in the air that you breath, in the ground that supports you, and in your own moving, feeling body?

Praying With Familiar Prayers

Those of us who have grown up in the Church have a reserve of familiar prayers that we have known from infancy. These prayers can become utterly woven into our very being – many people with dementia can still recite the Our Father and the 23rd psalm, long after they've forgotten their own life stories. Such learning is a tremendous gift. It is a marvellous thing to be joined in with centuries of praying people, and to benefit from prayers that have stood the test of time. In the Psalms, for example, we have access to a book of prayers that have been prayed through millennia, and yet still somehow reflect our own needs and concerns.

This heritage of prayer can act as a resource for us. Sometimes it is difficult to find the words to pray, and having the words of others can help. When we're struggling to express our joy to God, we can borrow Mary's words from the Magnificat (which she herself borrowed from Old Testament tradition) saying: 'My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my saviour'. Praying for our daily bread reminds us of what is really important.

However, over familiarity can become a problem. It's easy to rattle off a prayer by instinct without ever pausing to consider whether we actually mean what we are saying. Sometimes people also begin to feel 'bound' to these prayers, valuing them, but also seeking to somehow make them more alive and relevant to their day to day life. It's good to experiment with various forms of prayer – to use art, imagination and our bodies. But these approaches to prayer do not mean we need to discard words that have nourished us through our lives. Below are some suggestions for how to pray with familiar prayers.

For each of the suggestions below, take a prayer that you are familiar with, such as the Our Father or the 23rd Psalm. In time you may want to explore these methods with other prayers, psalms, poems or song lyrics, but begin first by praying with words that you know intimately:

- Become aware of the rhythm of your breathing. Then pray just one word with each breath. One breath for 'our', one for 'father' and so on, until you reach the end of the prayer. This slows down your approach to the words, making the prayer a more gentle, rhythmic experience.
- Take the first word of the prayer and stay with it. Consider its various meanings, notice how it touches you and sits with you. Reflect on how God shows Godself to you in this word. You may find that one word can absorb many minutes. Only move on to the second word when you are ready. When you return to prayer at a later time, pick up where you left off. So, if you pray with 'our' and 'father' on Monday, move on to 'hallowed' on Tuesday. It may take many days to finish the prayer. When you do, you can return to the beginning or you can begin with another prayer.
- Pray with the rhythm of movement. One of the easiest ways to do this is while walking, praying 'our' with one step, 'father' with the second and so on. You will notice that the speed of your steps will influence the feeling of the prayer. This is a great way to pray if you walk to and from work. It is also a good way to pray with young children who usually like to combine words with skipping or jumping. Experiment with using this method with other kinds of movement – ironing clothes or brushing the floor.
- Try praying the prayer in a different form. Is it set to music? You can use the internet to find all sorts of settings of familiar prayers. Notice how different tunes, styles and beats change how you approach the prayer.

Meditative Prayer

When we hear phrases like 'it was beyond words' or 'I just can't explain it' we instinctively understand what is meant. Some experiences of our lives simply do not fit neatly into language. There is something more going on, something deep within us, in some indescribable place. For me two of those moments have come when I first held my niece and then my nephew. Something shifted inside me that I felt right down to my toes. Something bigger than love, stronger than devotion, deeper than wonder. We also have those feelings when the sun catches the trees a certain way, or when we hear a particular piece of music. Something stirs in our soul and language is only a flimsy attempt at putting shape on it.

We also know something of this in our relationships. We know a friend for years, but a looking their eye when something particularly wonderful or something particularly terrible has happened confirms the connection between us. I have a memory of falling on ice when I was 7, the air knocked out of me. It is one of my earliest memories of fear. I remember my father rushing to me, lifting me up in his arms and carrying me. I have no recollection of any words spoken. It is his presence that I remember, my need for it, and the comfort it gave.

Our world is a very noisy place. We have radio and television, traffic sounds and mobile phones. Inside our own heads too, we have an endless chatter, forever thinking, worrying and assessing. We feel the pressure to be active and productive, to have something to show for our efforts. When someone asks us how we are, it is a badge of honour to be able to reply 'busy'. This can spill over into our prayer. We have to 'do' prayer, to tick it off our list, and preferably to have something to show for our efforts! It's easy for prayer to become a monologue, a stream of thoughts, needs and concerns that we spill out to God, without ever pausing to allow God to get a word in edgeways.

Meditative prayer seeks to step outside all this activity and busyness. It is a deceptively simple form of prayer. To quote from 'The Cloud of Unknowing', a mystical text from the fourteenth century 'Lift your heart up to the Lord, with a gentle stirring of love desiring him for his own sake and not for his gifts. Centre all your attention and desire on him and let this be the sole concern of your mind and heart'. Our sole concern in meditative prayer is to be with God. We do not rely on images or on words. We do not attempt to do or achieve anything. Rather we stop and sit still. We become truly present to ourselves and to God.

It is difficult to describe meditative prayer, and the outline given below is much shorter than in previous outlines. What is important is the doing of it, the stepping away from busyness and action, from pressures and demands, and just being with God. Meditative prayer does require practice. Our world is not used to silence and stillness and it can take time to build our muscles in this direction. Distractions will come. You will get bored. Your body will object. Your mind will throw up endless chatter. Be gentle with all of this, and simply bring your attention back, again and again, to your breath, and to being attentive to God.

A short outline of meditative prayer:

- Decide how long you want to give to this prayer. The advice is usually at least 30 minutes, but if this feels prohibitive, it is better to try for a shorter period than to not pray at all. To avoid the distraction of constantly looking at the clock, it is good to set an alarm of some sort. I have a timer on my mobile phone that cuts off all calls, and sounds a bell when the time is done.
- Find a position that is relaxed but attentive. You may want to sit on a straight backed chair, or to lie on your back with a pillow under your knees. You want to be comfortable enough that your body will not object too loudly, but not so comfortable that you fall asleep.
- Become aware of your breathing, without trying to change it. Let your breath lead you into quietness and stillness.
- Be aware that God is present. Try not to put images or ideas on this, but simply be with the truth that God is.
- Your attention will wander. Each time, return gently to the breath, and to the presence of God. Stay in this space, returning your attention again and again, until your time of prayer is over.

When Prayer is Hard

There are times when prayer seems impossible. We all go through it – even monks and contemplative sisters. We sit down to pray and can think only of shopping lists or some old grudge. Or perhaps we manage to sit still and attentive only to find ourselves assailed by doubts and convinced that we are wasting our time and that we would be better off cleaning windows or washing the floor.

More often than not these ups and downs happen for no other reason than that we are human beings, attempting real and honest communication with the living God. I find one of the instructions that Ignatius of Loyola gives to spiritual directors very helpful here. If a person is not experiencing ups and downs in their prayer, the director should question them closely, because it suggests that they are not actually praying!

When things seem dry, it is tempting to give up on prayer altogether. This is probably not a wise move – it is hard to build up any discipline of prayer, however tenuous, and stopping and then attempting to restart can be utterly disheartening. However, a change is as good as a rest. Think about your own close relationships. It is easy to get stuck in a rut with relationships with our family, but something as simple as a day out or even just doing something completely different, can move everyone back into balance. The same is true in prayer. Some very simple things, like changing where you pray (moving from one room to another, or from inside to out), or when you pray (20 minutes during your lunchbreak instead of 20 minutes last thing at night when you always fall asleep) can make a world of difference.

There are times when real prayer seems impossible due to the circumstances of life. A single mum with two young children will tell you that it isn't easy to find a quiet space in the day. It may be that if you suffer from depression, or if you have been recently bereaved, the pain of sitting still in your own presence is crippling. Perhaps we are in physical pain, and any attempt to be in the present moment just hurts too much. Here the challenge is to find a way to pray that fits with life, rather than turning prayer into another seemingly impossible task.

Finally, the thing holding you back from prayer may be prayer itself. Perhaps, if you are absolutely honest with yourself, you do not particularly like God. If you have been taught that is judgemental, critical and perpetually disappointed, the last thing you will want to do is spend time in God's presence. Perhaps you believe God to be good and kind, but believe yourself to be unworthy and inadequate. You fear the vulnerability of being seen by God as you really are. If any of these are true, be gentle with yourself. There is no rush. Try honesty, and playful, unusual prayer methods, until you and God become a little more used to each other's company.

At the end of the day, it is not all about us. We do our best to connect, and then it is God's job to pick up the slack. When we're at the end of our tether, God needs to step in to help. The most important thing to remember is that God is gentle and kind. God does not turn people away. Even if we cannot feel God's closeness in prayer, it does not mean that we are abandoned. God is present, patiently and gently, and it is good to be gentle with ourselves.

Some Things to Try

- Just lie back and let God be there – don't try to do anything.
- Make a prayer cd or playlist of music that helps you remember who God is and what God is like.
- Making a list of all the things you are grateful for (try listing by senses, by colour, or by letter of the alphabet).
- Write down how you feel and what you want to tell God. Then read your prayer aloud.
- Begin to keep a box of things that remind you of God's presence and love. It might include photographs, or words of a prayer, or small objects like shells or pebbles. Return to this store of treasures when you find prayer difficult.
- Sing. Sometimes the words of familiar songs or hymns make communication easier.
- Write God a postcard each day, of what was special. Imagine God sending you one back.
- Buy some children's bubbles, and use them. Imagine the bubbles contain your concerns – give them to God, and watch them be carried away.
- Give one part of your daily routine over to God. Try 'kettle prayers', taking a few moments to check in with God's presence each time you put the kettle on for a cup of tea.
- Find a symbol of God's presence that you can sit with, no matter how you're feeling – a blanket, a mug or a favourite image.
- Try www.prayasyougo.org or www.sacredspace.ie



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