

Prayer

1: Getting Going

Finding Meaning and settling down to pray

There is no “right” or wrong way to pray

Prayer is an intensely personal thing, but we can always
expand our understanding and deepen or practice of prayer

Prayer is many faceted, like a magnificent diamond

Consider George Herbert's poem: *Prayer (1)*

Prayer the Church's banquet, Angels' age,
God's breath in man returning to his birth,
The soul in paraphrase, heart in pilgrimage,
The Christian plummet sounding heaven and earth;
Engine against the Almighty, sinner's tower,
Reversed thunder, Christ-side-piercing spear,
The six-days world transposing in an hour,
A kind of tune, which all things hear and fear;
Softness, and peace, and joy, and love, and bliss,
Exalted Manna, gladness of the best,
Heaven in ordinary, man well dressed,
The Milky Way, the bird of Paradise,
Church-bells beyond the stars heard, the soul's blood,
The land of spices, something understood.

George Herbert (1593-1633)

Which image of Herbert's best describes your way of praying?

What new understandings of prayer does Herbert's poem
awaken in you?

To practice the presence of God

1. Make Time

Find a regular time (morning, noon or night) that you can commit to God

2. Find a Place

Choose a location where you can be comfortable and quiet
Place anything there that will help you focus, like a candle, or cross, an icon, a Bible

If a fixed time and place is not possible for you, identify a regular activity (like taking a shower, driving to work, eating lunch, weeding, ironing) during which you can think about God

3. Be still

Take a comfortable posture and consciously relax each part of your body in turn

Breathe slowly and deeply, noticing each breath in and out

4. Turn your attention to God

Notice God's presence and gift of life

Notice your feelings and thoughts as they well up

Simply express anything you want to say to God

Use any of the meditation and prayer techniques discussed in the following sessions

Prayer is about connecting

- Connecting with God who is above, around and within
- Connecting with God's presence and love, his purpose and will, his power and grace
- Connecting with the Church, the saints in heaven and on earth, with whom we pray
- Connecting with the world - in creation, in the news, in the community, and near at home
- Connecting with the self – body, mind and spirit; conscious and hidden; thoughts and feelings; wishes and desires; joys and sorrows

The Preface to Morning Prayer for a Sunday in *Common Worship* describes the basic scope of prayer

We have come together in the name of Christ to offer our praise and thanksgiving, to hear and receive God's holy word, to pray for the needs of the world, and to seek the forgiveness of our sins, that by the power of the Holy Spirit we may give ourselves to the service of God.

Is your prayer more than personal pleas?

Is your prayer Christ-centred?

Is your prayer transformative?

Is your prayer holistic?

Involving	Praise	A doration
	Penitence	C onfession
	Listening	T hanksgiving
	Asking	S upplication

God knows our needs before we ask, his Spirit fills the universe and “prays” within us

Much anxiety, narrowness and lethargy in prayer is relieved by letting go and letting God work within us

By simply turning our face towards God and letting in his life, light and love

- Like sunbathing! (*Rowan Williams*)

“Prayer is not primarily saying words or thinking thoughts.

It is, rather, a stance.

It’s a way of living in the Presence,

living in awareness of the Presence,

and... of enjoying the Presence.”

Richard Rohr

2: Meditation

Using words, concepts and stories from the Bible

Expressing our thoughts in words, spoken or silent, makes them tangible. Words are a primary means of communication.

But we may not know what to say to God, or how to say it.

Ultimately prayer goes deeper than words. It is about feeling and a basic orientation towards or reaching out for God.

(Rom 8:26). It is also about being open to receive *from* God.

At the same time, God “speaks” through the words of Scripture, revealing himself in the ‘big picture’ the Bible tells and addressing us personally as we reflect on specific words and passages.

In this way the Bible is a basic resource for prayer.

There are three general approaches to using the Bible as an aid to prayer.

- Centering
- Reflective meditation
- Imaginative meditation

Prior to each comes the need to practice stillness.

Give over a dedicated time to God. Find a comfortable place and posture. Consciously offer it up to God.

Now relax into the presence of God, possibly by concentrating on breathing, slowly in and out.

Centering.

The aim of the prayer is to evolve a strong awareness of the presence and goodness of God.

It may lead into, or be the context for, more structured or deeper meditation and prayer.

“Thoughts continue to jostle in your head like mosquitoes. To stop this jostling you must bind the mind with one thought, or the thought of One only. An aid to this is a short prayer, which helps the mind to become simple and unified.” *Theophane the Recluse*

Choose a word or short phrase that fits your image of God, eg.

‘Abba, Father’, ‘my saviour’, ‘holy and most merciful’, ...

Keep focusing on the word, repeating it gently in the rhythm of your breathing.

When other thoughts come into your mind, acknowledge them and return to your word.

At the close of your time of prayer, thank God for being present and express anything else you feel or want to say.

A particular expression of centering prayer is The Jesus Prayer from the Orthodox tradition.

Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner

The prayer is said slowly and repetitively, each phrase corresponding to an inward or outward breath.

Repetitive actions, say using a rosary or prayer beads, can also be a means of centering.

The aim is for the prayer (and hence awareness of God) to move into the subconscious mind and become underpinning and background to the rest of life –

“a little like a tune that we suddenly realise we have been humming all day long.” (Richard Foster)

Reflective prayer

Also known as *Lectio divina*

The aim of the prayer is not to seek to understand the text (as in Bible study), but to encounter the Living Word speaking, as it were, heart to heart.

“Just as you do not analyse the words of someone you love, but accept them as they are said to you, accept the Word of Scripture and ponder it in your heart, as Mary did. That is all.” *Bonhoeffer*

Choose a Bible passage and read it over slowly several times, until a word, phrase or idea gets your attention – something you feel drawn to, moved by, interested in, or disturbed by.

Now stay with it, “chewing over” the meaning of the words, why you have been drawn to them, the associations and thoughts they evoke.

Go where your thoughts and feelings lead you. Try to be aware of what God might be saying to you through them.

Finish by responding to what has moved you: give thanks to God, ask for his help, express your concerns.

Take note of anything you intend to do as a result.

Imaginative meditation

The aim of this form of prayer is to “enter into” a story or parable the Bible relates, or the background setting to a passage.

Choose a passage and read it over a few times to familiarise yourself with it.

Remember that these God’s words, and that they speak to you, here and now.

Put the passage to one side and imagine that the events described or that form the background to the passage are happening right now: see the people, the place; feel the breeze, the sunshine; hear the sounds, take in the smells.

Try and picture yourself there, taking part in what is happening. Join in the conversation; talk to Jesus or others present; listen to what they say to you.

Don't worry if your imagination takes you away from the details of the passage, the historical or geographical facts.

At the end try to sum up in prayer what you've felt and learnt and what you want to say to God.

Perhaps finish with the Lord's Prayer.

These techniques require some practice.

Sometimes it is best to stay with a particular phrase or passage of Scripture for several days.

The ultimate aim of meditation is to "lose oneself" in the contemplation and enjoyment of God.

"The whole reason why we pray is to be united into the vision and contemplation of him to whom we pray." *Julian of Norwich*

3: Creative Prayer

Using objects, art, poetry and music in prayer

God is the Creator. Our human imaginative and artistic skill means we are capable of creativity too.

The creative arts can then lead us into, or be the context for, the contemplation of God. Art, poetry and music as well as objects from the natural world can communicate aspects of God to us. Likewise, we may be able to express ourselves

towards God through the arts in a way that supplements the prayers we say in words.

Entering the presence of God

Concentrating on breathing or repeating a mantra can help us to be still and focus on the presence of God. Images and objects can work in the same way, by taking our attention away from that which might distract us.

For example:

- Gazing at a religious picture or icon
- Looking at a religious symbol, like a cross or candle
- Holding an object, such as a stone, rosary or cross
- Listening to a piece of music – something gentle and repetitive, like a chorus or chant
- Doing a repetitive activity, like knitting or weaving

Against the background activity, we may find that prayer comes more readily and concentration is easier.

Different people will find certain images and symbols or types of music more helpful than others.

Things that speak of God

Through the imagination and religious sensitivity of their creator, paintings, poetry and music may draw us into new ways of understanding God or lead us to grapple with different aspects of his being. Pictures and objects from the natural

world may evoke contemplation and praise of the wonder of God.

Choose something that you think has the potential to reveal something of God to you. We are not worshipping the object but using it as a window through which to see God.

For example:

- A painting. It could be a religious scene, a landscape or a still life.
- A piece of sculpture
- A poem
- A photograph or newspaper clipping
- An object from the natural world, like a flower, leaf, fruit, shell, a smooth or an unusual stone
- An evocative piece of music - religious, classical, soul, blues or jazz

Try to give your chosen focus your full attention. Let your eyes or your hands, your thoughts and notions wander around it. Explore it. Ask questions of it. See what takes your attention, what feelings or memories it evokes. Consider if it is communicating something of God. Is there a connection with something in your life or faith?

In working with an object or a piece of art, music or poetry we may seek to enter into it, and therefore into engagement with God, with our feelings as well as our thoughts.

“he showed me something small, no bigger than a hazelnut, lying in the palm of my hand. . . . In this little thing I saw three properties. The first is that God made it, the second is that God loves it, the third is that God preserves it. But what did I see in it? It is that God is the creator and protector and the lover. For until I am substantially united to him, I can never have perfect rest or true happiness...”

Julian of

Norwich

As your time of prayer comes towards an end you may wish to put into words things you want to say to God. End by saying thank you and something familiar like the Lord's Prayer.

Ways into creative prayer

Creative prayer might mean being imaginative in the use of words or using media to express that which is hard to put into words.

Ideas for being creative **with words**

- Rewrite a Bible story
- Describe an encounter or experience that moved you in some way
- Create a psalm of praise or lament
- Construct a metrical or rhyming prayer
- Write a poem or have a go at a hymn

Ideas for being creative **without words**

- Doodle your ideas about God
- Paint a picture inspired by a passage or concept from the Bible

- Make a collage of pictures from a magazine that mean something to you
- Draw a symbol for important events in your life
- Make a web linking people, places and ideas that matter to you

Don't worry if your end result doesn't seem very good – it's the process that matters.

When you have finished reflect on what your creation is saying to God or what God might be saying to you through it. Again it may be how you feel that matters as much as what you think.

You may want to end by putting into words anything you want to say to God. End with the Lord's Prayer.

“The world is charged with the grandeur of God”

Gerard Manley Hopkins

4: Liturgical Prayer

Intercession, the daily office and the Lord's Prayer

Prayer can be a deeply personal thing – an intimate exchange between ourselves and God. Our most profound prayers may be those we make in “sighs too deep for words” (cf. Rom 8:26).

At the same time, especially when prayer doesn't come naturally, we need the help of set words to give expression to our desires and to stretch our imagination. Using set forms and traditional prayers reminds us that we pray as part of God's people and that that for which we pray goes far beyond our immediate needs or personal concerns.

The daily office

Ordained ministers of the Church are committed by Canon Law to saying Morning and Evening Prayer in church on a daily basis. Anyone can participate in these public services. They are offered as part of the continual offering of prayer by God's people for, and on behalf of, the world God loves.

It is recommended practice for all Christians to have a regular time of prayer, preferably daily. Most will be helped by using a familiar pattern, with the reading of the psalms and the Scriptures taking central place.

The basic pattern for the daily office derives from Cranmer's distillation of the nine offices of the Roman Church into Morning and Evening Prayer in the *Book of Common Prayer*.

Preface and Confession

Venite (Psalm 95) – *am only*

Psalms of the Day

Old Testament Reading

Te Deum / Magnificat

New Testament Reading

Benedictus / Nunc Dimittis

Apostles Creed

Lord's Prayer

Collects and other prayers

Daily Prayer in *Common Worship* is similar, but the introductory material and the first canticle varies according to the day of the week and the season of the year, there is no Creed, and provision is specifically made for ex tempore intercession or other prayer before the collect and Lord's Prayer. The office could be shortened by the omission of the introductory material and one of the canticles.

A daily lectionary of psalms and readings is published, but an individual could follow a pattern of their own devising. Ready-to-use versions of Morning and Evening Prayer (and apps for Smartphones and tablets) can be found at www.churchofengland.org/prayer-worship/join-us-in-daily-prayer.aspx

There is also a *Common Worship* short form of Daily Prayer, with brief introductory material for each day, some psalmody, a short Bible reading, a collect and a time for personal prayer. Many other simple models for daily prayer, such as *The Rhythm of Life* by David Adam, can be found on the market.

Intercession

A rounded relationship with God will involve more than simply asking him for things, yet the prayer of intercession has an honourable place in the life of prayer and the liturgy of the Church.

The Latin word *intercedere* means 'to go between', or to act on behalf of. In intercession we join our prayer with that of Christ,

who pleads for us at the right hand of the Father (Rom 8:34; Heb 7:25), asking for him to act on behalf of a particular person or in relation to a specific situation.

It is possibly best to spend a little time thinking about a few concerns than have a long list of subjects. It is a sign of true love and imagination to ask for particular outcomes, but equally we might just wish to “hold” the person or situation in mind before God and ask for his mercy and love.

Jotting down our concerns may help us keep them in mind. The church Prayer Diary can help bring breadth to our intercessions as we pray for those in our congregation, the wider Church, the parish, our local community and the wider world. The intercessions in church typically follow this pattern of prayer: for the Church; for the world; for the local community; for the sick and those in need; for the departed.

Another handy (!) way of giving focus to our intercessory prayer is to use the fingers of one hand as prompts: the thumb – those closest to you, family and friends; the index finger – teachers, pastors and those who point us in the right direction; the middle finger – leaders and those in positions of power; the fourth finger - the sick and those who are weak; the little finger – lastly, yourself.

In this way our awareness of, and compassion for, others is strengthened, and our relationship with God and contemplation of his will deepened. Sometimes we may be moved to be the answer to our own prayers. But equally, even if God already

knows our needs before we ask, by faith, we believe that prayer makes a difference and in some mysterious way releases his loving action in the world. And even if our prayer seems to go “unanswered”, yet we go on expressing our need for God and God’s goodness in the brokenness of our world.

The Lord’s Prayer

In teaching his disciples this prayer, Jesus was giving a model for prayer. It embraces praise (“Hallowed be your name”) and petition (“Give us”, “deliver us”). It recognises our need for physical things (“daily bread”) and for spiritual help (forgiveness, protection).

The Lord’s Prayer is used when Christians come together in prayer, and at the conclusion of times of intercession and personal prayer. In saying the Lord’s Prayer we are expressing our shared faith in God (“our Father”) and putting his will and the coming of his kingdom at the forefront of our seeking (“your kingdom come, your will be done”).

