

Prayer - Starting the journey

I do not know where you are on your journey of prayer so forgive me if I am telling you what you already know. Each person will have their own charism, and it is not possible to cover every aspect of prayer in any depth. There are many, many books about prayer – how to pray, what to pray, when to pray, and hundreds of books of prayers of all different types - intercessions, prayers of praise, Celtic prayers, daily prayers, Common Worship, the Book of Common Prayer and so on. But in actual fact no-one can tell you personally how to pray for the simple reason that it is not we who pray – it is God; what we have to do is to **want to want** to pray, and to **want** to pray, you must want God to take possession of you, then you are praying – that is all prayer is. As Julian of Norwich said '*prayer oneth the soul to God*'. It does not matter who you are, bring yourself in whatever condition or state you are in and offer that to God. The only way you can learn to ice skate is to ice skate and likewise the only way you can learn to pray is to pray.

On learning to pray it is most important not to overburden oneself at first with too many prayers. Leave plenty of room to grow, be content at first to say such prayers as are suited to a beginner. If you would be ever able to spend a long time in prayer you must begin with short times. Do not let prayer hang over you as a burden. It may be an admirable exercise in humility to confess to oneself how short a time one is able to pray; the mind must grow into the life of prayer, but it will never do this if it is allowed to be weighed down with a burden of prayer beyond its strength – so pray as you can and not as you can't.

The model for all true prayer is The Lord's Prayer. Ever since Christ taught it, this has been the most widely used prayer in the Bible. When we pray we have many things to ask for, but there are three things which everyone needs: forgiveness, protection from temptation, and deliverance from the power of evil. That means a great deal, about all we need so far as the spiritual life is concerned – the past forgiven, present protection, and deliverance from the power of evil for the future, and this comes in one way, the pouring into our souls of our Lord's own Divine-human nature. We have to ask for that.

There are many aspects and forms of prayer; simple arrow prayers such as when you are in a difficult situation you might just say 'O God help me'. Intercessory prayer is probably something we are all familiar with; most Christians for most of the time have people on their hearts and minds. Perhaps it is someone in pain who has asked for our prayers, but even this is not always straightforward; we may often feel that we don't know what to pray **for**, but in that inarticulate state there is a longing, a groaning, a resonating with their pain, which tells us that we are becoming on their behalf the place of prayer, of the Spirit's prayer, the prayer too deep for words. There are crises in the world about which we simply don't know what to pray for. It is then that we recognize that we need prayer beyond our own prayer.

*And so the yearning strong
With which the soul will long
Shall far outpass the power of human telling.
For none can guess its grace
Till he become the place
Wherein the Holy Spirit makes her dwelling -*

Praying in order to get what we want feels at best childish and at worst just plain wrong. After all surely prayer should be about praise and thanks-giving, as God must surely know our needs better than we ever could. Jesus told us to pray and he taught us how to pray. Pray like this he said '*Our Father*'. If you review the petitions of the Lord's prayer in your mind you will see it is all about asking for things; for very earthly, creaturely things like our daily bread. Elsewhere in the gospels he tells us

to pester God with our prayers as God can be like a reluctant neighbour who is comfortable in bed and who doesn't want to be disturbed by our shouting. Ask, he said, and then you shall receive. We pray because God wants us to, not because he wants to be flattered, but because he loves us and wants what is best for us. And prayer is good for us, it's good for our health; it's good for us because in prayer we realise more deeply that we are God's children and he is our loving Father, and this is normal human behaviour. What would we make of the child who never asked her parents for anything. Of course we must pray for the right things and this is where we get things wrong. We assume we should be praying for deep spiritual gifts, like being able to love God more or to increase our spirit of generosity. These are easy prayers because it is impossible to tell if they have ever been answered. Praying for the right things is praying for the things we **really do want**. The ancient liturgies of the Church don't yearn for high spiritual gifts, they are much more concerned with very practical matters of having sins forgiven and setting us on the way to heaven. When you pray think first about what you want and need, and pay no attention to how silly it may seem – passing an exam, sorting out a financial mess, getting a promotion, entering a relationship. Few of us are ready to want world peace more than anything else. When you pray come before God in all honesty, for there is no point in pretending to him. Genuine, honest prayer is a great help to our human mental health for in true prayer we discover where we are in our lives, and this involves taking a risk, for if we acknowledge our most infantile needs there is a danger that we will actually mature beyond them with the help of God. And so we need to look into the darkest corners of our souls and admit to ourselves, and to God, the dreadful things that sometimes tempt us, the awful things we occasionally want, and it may even be that God will then reveal to us that our real desires are actually so much deeper, so much more religious than we would ever have thought possible of ourselves. But there is only one way to find out and that is to stop pretending about high minded aspirations, and to start from where we find ourselves right now in our lives. God often gives us what we ask for in prayer; more often, we actually **receive** much more than we ask for, although it takes a great period of time before we'll ever appreciate it.

Distractions in this type of prayer can be our real needs, the things we are most concerned about; weighing in on all the noble and bogus things we assume we should be praying about. So if you pray and you find yourself distracted, welcome the distractions, don't try to suppress them, when they come look straight at them and ask what worries or desires or concerns they come from and then start praying about exactly that – those prayers will not be attacked by distractions. A drowning man's cries to God are remarkably distraction-free.

Everything that we have is God's gift to us, God's free gift to us, and because everything is, we easily forget Him. From time to time God reminds us about it and he gives his gifts as answers to prayer and we receive a privileged glimpse of his generosity.

If you have been to Lindisfarne you will know that on average twice a day the tide covers the causeway to the island and it is cut off from the mainland. Tables of safe crossing times are issued but there are people who think they know better and attempt to drive across and inevitably find themselves in the sea with the tide rising by the minute. David Adam, the former Vicar of Lindisfarne told me the following tale:

A man (women wouldn't be so silly, would they?) was stuck in his car with the tide gradually rising. He was a religious man and so he prayed to God to rescue him. He had hardly finished his prayer when a man in a rowing boat came along side. 'Jump in' he said. 'No, no' said the man in the car, 'I have prayed to God and he will rescue me'. So the man in the rowing boat shrugged and went away. The tide continued to rise and the man prayed again all the more fervently. Then a lifeboat approached. The lifeboat man shouted to him to climb out of his car window and grab the lifebelt that they threw to him. 'No, no', said the man, 'I have prayed to God and he will rescue me'. So parting with some salty words the lifeboat went away. The tide continued to rise and it was now up

to the window of the car. Again the man prayed and then he heard an air sea rescue helicopter overhead and a man was lowered down on a rope. 'Grab hold' shouted the rescuer over the noise of the helicopter. 'No, no' said the fool in the car, 'I have prayed to God and he will rescue me'. So leaving him with a few choice words the airman was pulled up and the helicopter disappeared into the distance. The water was now half way up the car window. 'O God', pleaded the man, 'I have called upon thee three times to rescue me, why do you not answer my prayer?' God answered! 'I have sent a man in a rowing boat, a lifeboat, a helicopter and all of these you have sent away, what more can I do'?

The point of this story is of course that although God does sometimes answer prayer in a miraculous way, it is more likely that he will use the ordinary to answer our prayer, and that may not be what we expect.

Answers to prayer are not special acts of God's love, they are just his love becoming specially visible for a very brief moment. But in allowing us to pray, and in answering our prayers he is also doing so much more, for he is treating us not as creatures, but as his children in Jesus Christ. When we pray we confront God as the Father in Christ. The cross was Christ's own prayer to his Father to effect what he had failed to do, to effect it through his acceptance of failure. God's answer to Christ's prayer was the resurrection, Christ's resurrection and our resurrection. All our prayer is but a sharing in this one prayer of the cross, that is why the Eucharist is the greatest of all our prayers.