

# Prayer – a Lenten Study



## Session 3. Growth in Prayer

### Read these Quotations

*“Send the crowds away and up into the mountain and silently commune with trees and flowers and animals and birds, with sea and sky and clouds and stars. Then you will know that your heart has brought you into the vast desert of solitude. There is no one there by your side, absolutely on one. At first it will seem unbearable, but that is only because you are unaccustomed to aloneness. But if you manage to stay there for a while the desert will suddenly blossom into Love. Your heart will burst into song. And it will be springtime forever.”* Anthony de Mello “Mountain of Prayer”

*“When we walk in the Lord's presence, everything we see, hear, touch, or taste reminds us of Him. This is what is meant by a prayerful life. It is not a life in which we say many prayers but a life in which nothing, absolutely nothing, is done, said, or understood independently of Him who is the origin and purpose of our existence.”* Henri Nouwen “The Living Reminder: Service and Prayer in Memory of Jesus Christ.”

*“Deep silence leads us to realize that prayer is, above all, acceptance. When we pray, we are standing with our hands open to the world. We know that God will become known to us in the nature around us, in people we meet, and into situations we run into. We trust that the world holds God's secret within and we expect that secret to be shown to us. Prayer creates that openness in which God is given to us. Indeed, God wants to be admitted into the human*

*heart, received with open hands, and loved with the same love with which we have been created.”* Henri Nouwen “With Open Hands”

**\*\***With the person next to you, discuss what they mean to you and the extent to which they resonate with the way you think about prayer.

## **Readings**

**Luke 11:1-13, Colossians 1:3-12**

Just as we physically grow through life stages we can also grow spiritually throughout our life. The spiritual dimension of life is about our inner connection with God, the inner motivations and aspirations that give meaning to our external activity and ways of being.

Spiritual growth involves a range of things, including:

- the development of our understanding about ourselves and God, that can come from our study of Scripture and what we learn about God and through experience and through our contact with other people.
- the growth in our praying, that can move from words expressed to God, through a whole myriad of ways of praying to utter silence and stillness in contemplation.
- the growing capacity to recognise and discern God in the world around us and in our everyday experiences.
- the ability to make courageous choices that we know are invited by God, even though they may look mad to many other people and the wider world around us.

## **Phases in prayer**

Growth in prayer may be manifest in a number of ways, but four phases in prayer have been recognised and provide a helpful starting point:

### **1. Vocal Prayer:**

Saying our prayers, leading others in prayer. Pray to the Father in the name of the Son, through the Spirit. But set vocal prayers can start to feel inadequate and so a more extemporary approach often feels more suitable.

## 2. **Meditation:**

Gradually words cease to be adequate for the developing relationship with God and other ways of connecting with God may be appropriate. This comes from Understanding that words and ideas are inadequate. The transition to mediation can be aided by stopping and **really looking** at things around you and **really listening** to the sounds around you. This is something that Anthony de Mello calls Awareness, and Mindfulness techniques are rooted in the same idea. This leads to Meditation. Christian meditation is focussed on the reading of God's word.

a) ***meditation as a form of prayer;*** (praying passages of scripture – see *Imaginative Contemplation* on the separate sheet)

As prayer itself, it is concerned with reading a passage slowly and listening to what God might be saying to you through it and asking you to do through it. You may imagine yourself in the scene as one of the characters and perhaps other characters as people around you. You may repeat a particular passage letting particular words take on different levels of importance. The same text may 'speak' in different ways on different occasions. A lectionary can be very helpful, because we don't choose the passages to read, they are set for the day and those texts so often can speak to us individually or the situation in our congregation, community or the wider world.

b) ***meditation as a preparation for prayer*** (monastic meditative reading – see *Lectio Divina* on the separate sheet).

As a preparation for prayer, it might involve an implicit prayer which pleads: “*Tell me who you are, so that it is you that I talk to in prayer – or just sit with in silence – and not a figment of my imagination.*”

## 3. **Prayer of the heart (affective prayer):**

Answering God during meditation and having something more like a conversation, gradually using fewer and fewer words and finally none at all, just with the heart. A bit like that feeling of knowing

what your partner wants or needs with few words or even without words at all.

#### 4. **Prayer of simple regard:**

Simply spending time in and feeling comfortable in God's presence. To some this seems like a complete waste of time, no flow of words, no bright thoughts. God and I simply look at each other. This is sometimes called 'acquired contemplation' – contemplation that has been reached through the natural development of prayer. This is not 'giving up on prayer' and can be quite unsettling, because the sense of God's presence vanishes and may not return except occasionally.

\*\*With the person next to you, discuss your experience of prayer in relation to the phases described, the extent to which they resonate with your prayer journey and the way you think about prayer.

### **Help along the way**

In Growing in your prayer relationship with God, there are a number of transitions where many people often feel confused and sometime lost. Previous practices no longer seem sufficient and new unfamiliar practices may seem to be '*not really proper prayer*'. In these circumstances it may be helpful to have access to resources to ease the transition and maybe some sort of spiritual guide to share the journey with.

The most difficult times may be:

**At the vocal prayer/meditation point of change.**

(see separate sheet with '*Practical Supports for Meditative Prayer*')

**Opening up techniques of Scriptural Meditation**

Such as *Lectio Divina* and *Imaginative Contemplation* (see separate sheet)

**When meditation 'dries up'.**

**In trying to relating prayer to life and life to prayer.**