

# Prayer – a Lenten Study



## Chapter 4. Living in Tune

### Read these Quotations

*“To pray is to say simply, without holding back, ‘I am human and you are God’ ... When you pray, you discover not only yourself and God, but also your neighbour. For in prayer, you profess not only that people are people and God is God, but also that your neighbour is your sister or brother living alongside you. For the same conversion that brings you to the painful acknowledgment of your wounded human nature also brings you to the joyful recognition”*  
Henri Nouwen “With Open Hands”

*“St. John of the Cross says that people receive from God as much as they expect from God. If you expect little you will generally receive little. If you expect much, you will receive much. Do you need a miracle of grace in your life? Then you must expect a miracle to happen. How many miracles have you experienced in your personal life? None? That is only because you weren't expecting any. God never lets you down when your expectations of him are high; he may keep you waiting, or he may come at once, or he may come suddenly and unexpectedly like a "thief at night," to use Jesus' expression. But come he surely will if you are expecting him to come.”* Anthony de Mello “Contact with God”

**\*\*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

## **1 John 4.1-21; 1 Corinthians 2:4-16**

In these readings there is much mention of ‘Spirit’ - the Spirit of God and the spirit of the ‘anti-Christ’. As people trying to deepen our relationship with God, we want to follow the action of a good spirit and reject the action of an evil spirit. Discernment of spirits is an approach to understanding God’s will or desire for us in our lives. Talk of good and evil spirits may seem foreign to us. Yet it’s language much used in Scripture and it’s useful because it recognises the reality of evil. Our hearts are divided between good and evil impulses. To call these “spirits” simply recognizes the spiritual dimension of this inner struggle.

Consider the following questions:

- Do you notice changes in your closeness or distance from God?
- How does it feel when you are in ‘harmony’ with God?
- How does it feel when you are in ‘disharmony’ with God?

**\*\***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 God.

## Decision-Making

We might get a sense of this harmony/disharmony in the choices that we have to make throughout our day; a sense of harmony/disharmony judged in relation to the central focus: *the love of God*. How should we respond when faced with a decision or choice? In thinking about our relationship with God it’s instructive to look at how Jesus responded when faced with a decision. How did He know what to do? How, as a man, did he make choices moment by moment? For Jesus the question was ‘*Is this choice in tune with God’s will?*’ and also for us ‘*Am I in tune or out of tune?*’

There are many examples of decisions in Scripture. We can learn from the decision-making of Jesus, since as Christians we try to make our choices in the context of companionship with Jesus: wanting to know him more clearly, love him more dearly, follow him more nearly day by day.

## **Some decisions made by Jesus:**

**Luke 2:41-50** - To stay behind in the Temple at the age of 12

**Matthew 3** - To leave home at the age of 30 — and to be baptised

**Matthew 4:1-11** - To live by certain values

**Matthew 23:13-39** - To decry lack of integrity

**Matthew 20:17-19** - To go to Jerusalem, despite knowing what would happen

**\*\***Read one or more of the passages above, then with the person next to you consider the following questions:

- How difficult were the choices that Jesus made?
- What was Jesus exposing himself to in making them?
- What was he expressing in his choices / What values lie behind them?
- What do you think influenced his choices?
- What was the ‘cost’ of the decisions that he made?

## **Actions and Prayer**

Let us now consider the harmony (or lack of it) between our actions and our prayer. In the Christian life there are two basic patterns: the upward, Godward pattern of unselfishness and the downward pattern towards ourselves. These might be seen as driven by God’s Spirit or by a rather more malign spirit. The letter to the Galatians refers to the malign spirit as ‘flesh’ and puts it like this: *“Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh. For what the flesh desires is opposed to the Spirit, and what the Spirit desires is opposed to the flesh; for these are opposed to each other, to prevent you from doing what you want.”* Galatians 5:16-18

## **Towards God or Away from God?**

For people who are not seeking God’s grace, for whom they themselves lie at the centre of their world, the good spirit disturbs and shakes them up. It stirs feelings of remorse and discontent. The evil spirit wants such people

to continue in their confusion and darkness. So the evil spirit tries to make them complacent, content, and satisfied with their self-seeking distractions and pleasures.

For people who are trying to live a life in relationship with God, the good spirit strengthens, encourages, consoles, removes obstacles, and gives peace. The evil spirit tries to derail them by stirring up anxiety, false sadness, needless confusion, frustration, and other obstacles.

### **The Selfward Pattern (desolation).**

Spiritual desolation is an experience of the soul in darkness or turmoil. We may be assaulted by doubts, bombarded by temptations or mired in self-preoccupations. We may be restless and anxious and feel cut off from others. Provided that we're trying to live in relationship with God, experiences of feeling out of sorts, ill at ease, anxious, unhappy, listless, etc. are likely to be experiences of desolation. They don't come from God.

### **The Godward Pattern (consolation)**

Consolation is an experience of desire for God, of distaste for past sins, or of sympathy for Jesus or another suffering person. Paul's letter to the Galatians lists the fruit of the Spirit as "*love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control*" (Gal 5:22-23). Experience of these things may indicate that God's Spirit is moving you, and give you a heightened awareness of God's love. It doesn't mean that life will be without pain and suffering; it means that God wants to be a consoling presence, even in the inevitable pains and sufferings of life.

When we reflect on the experiences of our day, we may be able to discern moments of consolation, when we felt in tune with God and also moments of desolation when we felt alienated from God.

**\*\*With the person next to you, discuss your experience of 'Consolation' and 'Desolation' in your life and how they relate to your feelings about your relationship with God in prayer. (You might also like to read more in the additional sheet '*Spiritual Consolation and Desolation*', which is adapted from one of Margaret Silf's books.**