

Using these half-and-half times in the day for prayer as best we can links up the all-prayer with the all-work times, and sets us on the way to the unceasing prayer commended St Paul.

This pattern is meant to help in the midst of our noisy, restless, diverting, changing world with its ceaseless rush and bustle so that we become a chain-prayer, as our Lord himself was, always at rest in God. These are suggestions only, for along our common road of love we must each find our own best way to God.

We need to see Christian prayer not as an isolated religious exercise but as an aspect of a many-sided converse between human beings and our Creator. In Christian terms God makes himself known to humankind in many ways: through the beauty of nature, through the stirrings of conscience, through inspired men and women, through the events of history, and supremely through Jesus Christ. To these 'signs' of God, the human response is no less multiple. By gratitude and trust and love, by awe and wonder, by grief and repentance, by acts of practical service, and the pursuit of a particular path in life. In this response there is movement of the heart towards God, partly but not always wholly expressed in words. The entire God to man relationship is often described by the Biblical writers, both Jewish and Christian, in the images of speaking and listening. It is a relationship which contains words and silence, passivity and action. This is the context of prayer in Christianity.

Our prayer needs to reflect the breadth of expression I have indicated above: gratitude, trust and love; sorrow for sins and repentance; adoration - our sense of awe and wonder; prayer for ourselves and others. All these expressions of prayer should figure in our prayer-time. They can be summed up in a simple mnemonic (aide memoir!) ACTS - Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, Supplication (petition for ourselves and intercession for others).



The Blyth Valley
Team Ministry

On Prayer

by

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On Prayer: Sharing some insights

During these days of social isolation and locked churches, Christians everywhere have had to develop resources for prayer, Bible reading and spiritual communion for use in the home. That has meant private or personal prayer has become highlighted and has emphasised the need for a personal life of prayer at home, alongside our worship in church. I am sure many of you will have a personal prayer life, and I will not be suggesting anyone should alter an established personal rule of life. However, there may be others in our congregations who would welcome some help to develop their own personal prayer. So, with considerable trepidation, I should like to try sharing some insights about personal prayer which I believe to be essential to our growth in God, as individual Christians and Church members.

Sister Wendy Beckett, well known art historian and contemplative, says this, "There seems to be a universal certainty that there is some secret about prayer that can be taught. People feel sure that they would be prepared to go to a great deal of trouble and experience considerable difficulties if that was the way to uncover this mysterious 'secret'. But prayer is essentially simple", and she continues, "but the simplicity of prayer, its sheer, terrifying uncomplicatedness, seems to be the last thing most of us either know or want to know". Writing about prayer, discussing it, trying to teach it, she believes, is largely a distraction and a waste of time. Prayer; your own prayer, must be practised. It is only by doing it that we learn what prayer is and everybody's path in prayer will be different.

'Ask yourself': she says, 'what do I really want when I pray? Do you want to be possessed by God? Or, to put the same question more honestly, do you want to want it? Then you have it.' The one point Jesus stressed and repeatedly brought up again and again, is that, 'Whatever you ask the Father, he will grant it you.' His insistence on faith and perseverance tell us the same thing; you must really want; it must engross you. Faint emotional desires that do not press with burning conviction, these things you do not ask in Jesus' name. But what you really want, 'with heart and soul, and mind and strength', that Jesus pledges himself to see that you are granted. 'When you set yourself down to pray, *what do you want?* If you want God to take possession of you, then you are praying. That is all prayer is.'

Another anonymous writer on prayer, puts it like this, prayer is simply resting in God; and she quotes St Augustine, 'You (God) have made

us for yourself, and our hearts are restless till they rest in thee.' God is love; he has demonstrated his love in giving his only Son to die for our sins and to rise again to make us good ('for our justification). God therefore welcomes us eagerly with open arms. Our prayer, our true and heartfelt prayer, he fervently desires. Prayer then, is God's business; for it is the exercise of a real relationship between God; Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and us his children. And his desire is to pray in us and to work through us for the sake of the world.

Four things are needed if we are to find and keep that rest in God:

The first is love. Love of itself unites you to God, for God Himself is love; it is the lack of love which divides us from him. So, if you want to pray and rest in God, you have to wage unceasing war against unlove of every sort, in thought, and word, and action.

The second is a determined attempt to make a set time for prayer. Private prayer at home may have to be very short, and may be very difficult to get and use, but it must be got! Church attendance must also be secured, and should be on a rule or principle, and not haphazard, when you feel like it.

The third thing is an equal determination to do everything for God, and to bear everything for him. The smallest daily duty done, the slightest pain or inconvenience or vexation borne like that, serves to unite you to Him; for to do and take things in that way is in itself an act of love, and so a prayer. But we must clearly understand that doing everything for God does not mean thinking about him all the time. As William Temple said, 'If I am to serve God perfectly, I must sometimes forget him.' Many of the things we have to do demand our full attention, and if we do them properly, they leave no room for thinking about God at all. But the intention to do them for God, which we have formed beforehand and expressed in prayer, goes on beneath whatever we are doing like the track beneath a train; and, given that intention, it is the giving of one's whole attention to the task in hand that constitutes the prayer. 'Whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.'

With that we reach the fourth point that we need for rest in God - namely, persistent and progressive prayer in times of partial occupation, when one is travelling, for instance, or waiting in a shop queue or at the surgery, or doing something more or less mechanical, like washing-up, or minding a machine, which leaves part of our attention free.