

Praying Together

(an item for our Parish Magazine) by Pam Rolls

Over the last few months I have been learning more about prayer and I'd love to share with you some of what I've learned, and to ask why prayer is so important.

But first of all, what is prayer? Essentially, prayer is about placing ourselves consciously in God's presence and spending time with him in conversation. Of course, we are always in God's sight. He knows everything about us and knows what we are thinking or saying – even before we think or say it.

I said that prayer is a conversation, so it's two-way, an opportunity to talk to God and to listen to him. If you are like me, your prayer life is probably rather one-sided – and sometimes seems to consist of talking at God rather than to him. And how often do we listen for a response or allow him to tell us that we are precious to him? There are lots of ways in which we can improve this two-way conversation and I'm going to explain below some thoughts, many of which I've learned from people who are experienced pray-ers and from some wise authors of books on prayer who have given me some fresh insights. One book which has affected me profoundly is 'Listening to God' by Joyce Huggett. I'd thoroughly recommend that you read her book (I couldn't put it down!) because she advises us how to listen to God. Details are at the end of this article.

I'm sure that most of us have tried to pray at some time. Some people seem to pray apparently without effort while others (most of us actually) struggle. How can this be? Why is prayer so hard for so many people when spending time in God's presence is the reason that he made us? (Psalm 100: 2,3).

I think there are many reasons for this difficulty, including the following:

- ▶ a frantic pace of life which seems to make us too busy to spend time with God?
- ▶ a feeling of being unworthy to speak to God?
- ▶ we don't know what to say to God, what to pray about?
- ▶ a feeling that our prayers are inadequate and that we can't find the right words?

- ▶ we are trying too hard to copy someone else's prayer style – one which doesn't suit our personalities?
- ▶ we are unsure whether God will answer?

Whatever our worries about prayer, we need to remember that God is a loving God who longs for us to come into his presence and promises to be with us. In fact the Bible tells us this in many places – for example in the letter of James, chapter 4 verse 8, the writer says 'Come near to God and he will come near to you'.

Let's think a bit more about the concerns listed above and see if we can address them.

- ▶ Busyness. So many of us are really busy with jobs, family life, church life, hobbies and other interests and it's easy for prayer to be squeezed out. I'd like to suggest that this is the very reason why we should pray, to spend some of our time focussing on God so that we orientate our lives in his way.

A regular time of quiet, spent with our attention on God, is the most worthwhile way we can spend our time as it allows us to listen to God more deeply and gives us strength for the day. Maybe there's somewhere in our homes or gardens, or a room at work, or on the train where we can spend a few minutes of quiet, 'little pools of silence' as the writer Catherine de Hueck Doherty called them (quoted in Huggett, 2005, p147). Times to draw deeply from God and express our love to him.

Some very accomplished pray-ers, like Brother Lawrence in the 17th century, were able to spend quality time with God even in the clamour of a hot, busy monastery kitchen. After many years of engaging deeply in prayer, he wrote some very profound thoughts in 'Practising the Presence of God', which is another worthwhile read.

- ▶ Unworthiness: Actually we are all unworthy of speaking to God in our own right. But, if we have allowed Jesus to come into our lives then we are worthy in God's eyes because he no longer sees sinful people but his beloved children. Jesus died in our place and nailed our sins on the cross. We need to recognise that and live in gratitude for his sacrifice.
- ▶ We don't know what to pray about: There are so many matters to pray about and so many different types of prayer. It's good to try to have a

balance in our prayer life of praise as well as asking God for things, otherwise we just approach him with a long shopping list.

A very good way of remembering the different components of prayer is the pneumonic 'ACTS' – Adoration (worshipping God), Confession (saying sorry to God and seeking his forgiveness), Thanksgiving (saying thank you to God) and Supplication (asking God for things, sometimes called 'intercession'). We try to have a balance of all these elements in our Church services. Maybe that will be a help to remind us what we can pray about. But how do we do that?

► How do we find the right words? I think the main thing to remember is to keep things simple. God doesn't want long, wordy prayers. Remember what Jesus said about the hypocrites with their long prayers on street corners, hoping to be noticed and praised? Jesus instead taught his followers a simple and very comprehensive prayer which we call the Lord' Prayer (Matthew 6: 5-13). That's a very good place to start. Another simple prayer is called the Jesus Prayer in which we can seek God's forgiveness by saying 'Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me'.

There are some great books on prayer that will help us to express our prayers or we can just use simple words or sentences. Don't worry about how you say your prayers, the important thing is to do it. God knows what we want to say anyway. I heard a lovely story on the prayer course that I attended recently about a little girl who was learning to pray with her Dad. Instead of articulating prayers, though, she said the alphabet. Her father was surprised and told her that she wasn't praying. She replied 'but God knows what I mean, and he will put the letters in the right order!'

► sometimes we try too hard to copy someone else's prayer style: We might admire someone else's skills at praying and try to emulate them. But maybe their style of prayer suits their type of personality and doesn't suit ours. Some people are quiet (like me) and prefer a more contemplative style of prayer, perhaps slowly reading a Bible passage and savouring what God is saying through it, or putting yourself into the story and reflecting on your own reactions and feelings (the Ignatian style) from Ignatius of Loyola (1491-1556).

Other people are more exuberant and outgoing – maybe expressing themselves in singing and dancing, in a charismatic style. Still others like to use their senses and approach God by burning incense to remind them that

their prayers are rising to God or they focus on a devotional object like a candle or a picture. Some of these ideas come from the catholic style of prayer. Think about your personality and what style of prayer might be the right one for you and try it out. Teresa of Avila (1515-1582) gave wise advice when she said ‘pray as you can, not as you can’t’.

► We are unsure whether God will answer: Let me assure you that God does answer our prayers, but not always in the way we expect. He does what is best for us. He isn’t a holy vending machine into which we put our prayers (like coins) and expect our desires to come tumbling out. No, God answers in his time and in his way. The important thing is that we align our wills with his.

I hope the ideas above about prayer are helpful to you. But we also need to think about praying together. In a sense we are praying ‘together’ even when we are alone because we are part of the great fellowship of believers on earth and in heaven. It is good, though, to gather with others in prayer. Here are some ideas (Nairn, 1998), some of which already happen in Harwell and Chilton:

† Prayer Groups. Some people gather to pray in both churches at 8.30am on Saturday mornings for about half an hour. Others pray in home groups (details on the church noticeboards), and we have a short, quiet monthly service of Night Prayer in Chilton on the first Wednesday of the month at 8.30pm. Think about taking up one of these opportunities.

† Prayer Pairs or Triplets. If you are not able to join a group or find that praying in a large setting is not for you, how about pairing up with someone or joining two other people and praying together? This helps you to encourage each other and you can share together at a deeper level than with a large group.

† Prayers in Church. We have plenty of opportunities to pray during (and before and after) our services. Special requests for prayer can be placed in a prayer diary which we have in each Church and these are taken up in the prayer meetings and in our services. A number of matters for prayer are included in our weekly notice sheet, and can be prayed over in Church or at home with the aid of this list. If you are not able to get out of your home, you still have a very important prayer ministry and could have a

notice sheet brought to you so that you can join with others in praying about the matters raised.

† Prayer Chain. For local, urgent matters for prayer we have e-mail and telephone prayer chains which cover both parishes. The details of who to contact to initiate a prayer request appear in the notice sheet.

Listening to God

So we've thought about how to pray both on our own and with others. But we also need to remember the importance of listening to God. As I mentioned earlier, God does speak through the Bible, but his part of the conversation doesn't end there. David Watson reminds us that 'God did not finish speaking to us when the scriptures were completed' (quoted in Huggett, 2005, p64). God sometimes speaks to us directly through speech or by putting thoughts into our minds, or by giving other people wisdom or knowledge or prophecies to pass on. Sometimes he appears to us in visions or dreams, sometimes he even sends angels. Certainly God spoke through wisdom, knowledge, dreams, visions and angels in the Bible, but he still speaks to us through them today.

In order to really listen to God, we need to take time apart to spend with him. This could mean a special time each day or each week. Or it could be that we set aside time to go on a retreat for a day or so. This gives opportunity to 'be still and know that I am God' (Psalm 46: 10); to just 'be' and not to 'do'. Time to focus on what God wants from our lives and from our churches.

Prayer is hard work and needs to be sustained (Huggett, 2005) but it should not be a chore. It is a time for us to express our love for God and for others. I'm excited about the prospect of trying to spend more time with God in quiet, and I want to learn more. Will you join me?

Pam Rolls
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1984 words (excluding annotated bibliography)

Annotated Bibliography

When quoting from the Bible I used the New International Version (1979), London: Hodder & Stoughton

Huggett, J (2005), *Listening to God, Hearing His Voice*, London: Hodder and Stoughton
An extremely practical and readable book from which I have learned so much about having times of quiet to engage with God and to listen to his voice. From this I quoted further from Catherine de Hueck Doherty (page 147) from her book (1975, *Poustinia*, London: Fountain) and from David Watson (page 64) from his book (1981, *Discipleship*, London: Hodder and Stoughton)

Law, P (2007), *Praying with the Bible*, London: SPCK
A resource book for use either on my own or in leading a group with chapters devoted to particular types of prayer, eg Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, Petition, each using biblical texts. Each chapter ends with short 'arrow' prayers, and a Contemplation Section provides short texts to use as prayers in themselves.

Brother Lawrence (undated), *Practising the Presence of God with Spiritual Maxims*, Grand Rapids, MI: Spire Books
A simple yet profound book which has taught me about praying in a busy world.

McGuinness, J (2005), *Creative Praying in Groups*, London: SPCK
A resource book that I can use with groups, covering beginnings and endings of meetings, praise, thanksgiving, intercession and reflection. Prayers for major festivals are also helpful.

Morgan, H (ed) (1991), *Approaches to Prayer*, London: SPCK
A useful handbook giving ideas on how to pray as an individual or in leading a group, encouraging different styles of prayer and the use of visual aids, music, symbols etc.

Nairn, P (1998), *When I needed a Neighbour*, London: Marshall Pickering
This down to earth and practical book gave me insights into corporate prayer, particularly praying in groups and in pairs or triplets.

Pritchard, J (2002), *How to Pray, a Practical Handbook*, London: SPCK
A book which I have used a number of times which gives insights into the prayer styles of different traditions (eg Ignatian, Benedictine etc), gives practical guidance, and some sample prayers to use from the different styles.

Course Handouts

Anon, undated, *Classic Paths of Prayer* for references to Ignatius of Loyola and the Jesus Prayer.

Anon, undated, *Mysticism* for references to Teresa of Avila

Anon, undated, *Jungian Typology and Tendencies in Prayer* for references to personality type