

world as a human being, as one of us: *the Word became flesh and lived among us* (John 1:14). By seeing the works and hearing the words of the man Jesus, we gain an insight into the character of God that was otherwise unknown and unknowable – God’s love, compassion and mercy, God’s care and concern for individuals, especially the poor, the sick, the weak, the outcasts, those whom Jesus called God’s ‘little ones’.

By our own reasoning and intellectual capabilities, we can know something of the power and love and goodness of God. By getting to know Jesus Christ, we experience God’s love and mercy in a way we otherwise

would never even suspect. His whole life was the love of God in action. As we look at the cross of Christ, we see God’s love revealed in all its clarity.



READ

Read through the text of next Sunday’s Gospel, stopping to dwell on words or images that strike you.

Reflect on what these Gospel words are saying to your life, here and now.

SHARE

- What image of God did you have as a child?

- Have you been conscious of a personal search for God that has brought you to this group? If so, what have been some of the steps on this path?

- People’s actions can be a sign to us of goodness and life-giving love. Describe an experience when someone helped you in a time of hardship and suffering.

PRAY

Lord, you are great
and greatly to be praised;
great is your power,
and your wisdom infinite.
We would praise you without ceasing.
You call us to delight in your praise,
for you have made us for yourself,
and our hearts are restless
until they rest in you.

St Augustine (354-430)

RESEARCH

Catechism of the Catholic Church:
Nos 27-49

REFLECT

There have been many times in our journey in search of God when we’ve been very conscious of God’s nearness to us, and God’s loving care for us. We prayed when we responded to that: perhaps a word – ‘thank you, God’ or ‘God, help me,’ or a feeling, or a gesture – like kneeling.

- Are there some times or places where you find it easier to pray? For example, can you pray while you’re driving, or gardening or ‘among the pots and pans’ (as St Teresa of Avila put it) or do you need to take a particular time and place?
- Some people find that an object can help them to focus better when they pray: a lit candle, a flower, a picture, etc. Others make their own images in their heads, and others, again, ‘centre in’ on a feeling or a value. What is it that you find helps you to focus or ‘centre’ when you come to pray?

LISTEN

Reflecting on the Scriptures can be a beautiful way to pray.

Arrange to spend some time each day with your Bible, reflecting on one of these readings. Open your heart to the Spirit of God.

- Matthew 6:5-15. Jesus’ advice on how to pray.
- Luke 11:1-13. Persistence and confidence in prayer.
- Luke 18:9-14. The need for humility in prayer.
- Ephesians 3:14-21. Paul’s prayer for his people.

WORSHIP

Prayer at Mass is public, communal prayer. Perhaps you can try to notice some of the different types of prayer during Mass this Sunday:

- The Opening Prayer that invites us to draw near to God
- The Penitential Rite where we ask God’s forgiveness
- The Lord’s Prayer

PRAY

- Consciously look for an ‘environment’ that helps you to pray – to become aware of God’s loving presence to you. As you do this, become more attentive to God, and what God may be inviting you to. Talk to God about this.
- Sometimes people are helped to pray by becoming aware of their breathing, and then letting a word accompany each breath, like:
Father
or *Shepherd*
or *Jesus*

The word can be said aloud, or heard inside you, or felt in your heart.



THE ACTIVITY THAT WE

call prayer can hardly be made the object of a commandment. If two people have to be commanded to talk to each other, their relationship obviously does not have a lot going for it. Besides, it will not work. Perhaps two people can be made to speak words to each other, but they cannot be made to communicate. This happens only when they want to share something with each other. Communication is one of the expressions of love.

When Jesus talked about prayer he revealed to us its unsuspected depths, and he spoke about God's side of the communication.

The first thing we should note about prayer is that it is a gift. It is God who speaks first. Prayer is not something we do in order to get in touch with God, but rather it is God's gift to us. We cannot pray unless God opens our minds and moves our hearts and attracts us to God's own self.

That may come as a surprise to many people and may even be somewhat deflating to hear. We tend to think of prayer as our business, our activity. Yet on reflection, we will come to see it as an encouraging truth and even a great relief. We are indeed responsible adults who must make it through each day, and yet we are also God's children, walking along hand in hand with God, in total and peaceful dependence.

Paul teaches this truth with his usual bluntness: *the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God* (Romans 8:26-27). In other words, prayer is what the Spirit of God produces in us, and God knows the

mind of the Spirit – and what is in our minds, and what are our needs.

Jesus taught us

The best model of prayer we have is Jesus himself. The writer of the Letter to the Hebrews reflects on Jesus' life of prayer: *In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered; and having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him* (5:7-9).

We are told that at the beginning of his ministry, the Spirit drove him into the desert to enter into deep communion with his Father over a period of 40 days. Luke's Gospel is the Gospel which tells us most about the prayer of Jesus. He tells us that Jesus often retired to isolated places to pray. We are given a glimpse of him at prayer before or during some of the most crucial events of his life: after his baptism, before choosing the Twelve, alone on the mountain in hiding from people who wanted to proclaim him their king, and above all, during his agony of fear in the garden of Gethsemane the night before his death.

He kept on saying *Abba* (the tender but strong word of a loving son or daughter), *for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet, not what I want, but what you want* (Mark 14:36). Luke tells us that an angel appeared to him from heaven to strengthen him – a way of describing his Father's comforting him. And yet *in his anguish he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down on the ground* (Luke 22:43-44). One of the best aids to prayer is to try

to enter into Jesus' feelings at different occasions of his life, for his human feelings are our feelings too.

So the first purpose of our prayer is to learn to pray as Jesus did. In describing his Transfiguration, Luke tells us that *while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white* (9:29). In Jesus' case this was the divine glory shining through his humanity. In our case it should be the spirit of Jesus taking over our minds and hearts.

Individual and personal

Although we should try to imitate the prayer of Jesus, prayer is also the most personal thing we do. Just as no two sets of fingerprints in the world are alike, and no two persons are exactly the same, so too in prayer; no two people communicate with God in the same way. God has a unique relationship with each and every one of us, just as we have unique relationships with each one of our friends. It is not just that our love for some is deeper and stronger than for others, but that each relationship has a different spirit and tone and style.

When I pray, I am alone with my God. As C S Lewis once wrote, *The prayer preceding all prayers is, 'May it be the real I who speaks. May it be the real Thou that I speak to'*. I know I cannot pretend to be anything other than I am, because God knows me better than I know myself. There is no room and no point for the camouflage and the masks I may put on in my relationship with others. I am myself, with nothing hidden from God, but also with nothing that God

does not care for. It is preparing oneself for prayer that is the real problem, rather than the actual praying. Jesus presumably did not have this same problem, because he was always ready for prayer.

Once I can come to this consciousness of a face-to-face contact with God's presence, the response which is called for on my part is obvious. Unless I have picked up false guidance somewhere along the way, I can be confident, calm and secure. Certainly I am aware of my sinfulness, but shame and guilt are not my main feelings. Instead I feel gratitude and assurance and real humility in my total but chosen and willing sense of dependence.

Prayer requires no set of directions, just as true friends do not need a script when they meet. This is not to belittle the advice of spiritual writers who suggest techniques to use to keep our minds from distractions, or to

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keep us quiet enough to hear what God is saying. However, once we have followed Jesus' advice in the Sermon on the Mount to *go into your room and shut the door* (Matthew 6:6), it does not matter what we say in our private encounter with God. It may even be better not to say anything.

Jesus warned in the same context (Matthew 6:7-8) against the idea that the value of our prayer depends on the quantity of words we utter: *When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.* After saying these words he taught his disciples the Lord's Prayer or Our Father (Matthew 6:9-13). In doing so, it was not his intention to give them words to memorise, although we have naturally and understandably done this, because we treasure these words that come from Jesus. But rather than teach them a formula to recite, he wanted to give them a model and a spirit of prayer – an expression of total and child-like dependence on God as the giver of all gifts, which is what the 'Our Father' is.

The point is that prayer is a conversation with God, and there can be no true dialogue when one person holds the floor or monopolises the conversation. Prayer must also involve a listening to God. Moreover, Jesus wanted to teach that prayer is best when it is simple, and it is simple when it heeds the advice given in Psalm 46:10: *Be still, and know that I am God.*

Once we have grasped the fact of the value of 'the prayer of quiet', we may be surprised to hear that we should pester God for what we want. Yet this is precisely what we are told in the Gospel parable of the man who visits his friend late at night to borrow food because of the arrival of unexpected guests (Luke 11:5-8). It has been well said that if this story of the nocturnal nuisance were not in the Gospels, no one would ever dare invent it.

Two parables

According to Luke, Jesus told this humorous story to teach the need for persistence in prayer. A man found himself in the position of receiving unexpected guests in the middle of the night. With true eastern hospitality, he felt the obligation to feed them but he had no bread. He decided to go to his friend's house down the road, and knocked on his friend's door. The sleeping arrangements in a poor Palestinian household meant that the door was bolted, and a sleeping mat was probably placed against the door. The family has been asleep for hours, and it would have been a major operation even to open the door, to say nothing of waking the whole household.

The disturbed friend's immediate reaction was to say: *Do not bother me; the door has already been locked.* But the knocking continued, for the petitioner was sure that his pleas would be answered for friendship's sake. Finally, Jesus says, the man of the house gave in, and at great inconvenience to himself, his wife and his children, opened the door and shoved a loaf of bread into the hands of his friend in the darkness.

Not surprisingly, it is Luke who reports a similar parable of Jesus in 18:1-5. There he tells the story, again not without humour, of an unscrupulous judge who finally gave in to the persistence of a victimised widow not because he had any conscience about justice, but because he could no longer stand the woman's complaints.

The daring aspect of these parables lies in the comparison they make between God and a reluctant giver, and even between God and a corrupt judge. Of course we are not meant to apply these parables so literally as to picture God in either of these roles. But Jesus

says we must pester the Father in the same way, secure in the knowledge God cannot become exasperated nor deny justice to those who call on him.

But for what do we petition God? What should be the aim of our persistence and perseverance in prayer? In his own model of Christian prayer, Jesus teaches us to say 'Hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven'. Perhaps this would not be our list of priorities. Probably we would put 'our daily bread' first. But anyway, what does it mean?

At our best moments – moments of real prayer, or on a crowded bus – we want first things first. We do love our Father, and – empowered by God's Spirit, and with the example of Jesus before us – like all lovers we want first of all the good and the well-being of the one we love.

God's 'name' is God's own person. God cannot be 'hallowed' or made holy, being already the perfection of holiness. When we pray, 'Hallowed be your name', we want God to be seen as holy, accepted as holy, honoured as holy by all God's children, all members of the human race. We want God's kingdom to come, so that God's love may capture the minds and hearts of all people. We want God's will to be done, so that all may experience the healing and forgiveness, the freedom which God wills, and the happiness that follows. It also means of course that we want the secular powers to co-operate with God's grace, so that the whole human family might experience these benefits.

The Lord's Prayer also implies a co-operation on our part to help bring about God's kingdom of justice, love and peace – God acts through people. We cannot pray the Lord's Prayer sincerely unless we are committed to helping achieve what God's kingdom envisages.



PRAYERS OF PETITION

Jesus said: *Ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you* (Matthew 7:7); and again, in John 16:24: *Ask and you will receive, so that your joy may be complete*. For what should we ask? While we acknowledge that we should ask that God's name be held as holy, that God's will might be done, and that God's reign might become a reality on earth as in heaven, are we justified in asking for such mundane things as a job, a home, a husband or a wife, or a healing from some illness?

The answer to these questions, in the light of the parables of Luke 11:5-8 and 18:1-5, is surely 'Yes'. However, the standard of our asking should be the one we use with our best friends, those we most deeply love. If we truly love another person, then a sign and quality of that love is unselfishness. Love and selfishness cannot co-exist. Real love means that we want the good of the other first.

Our prayers of petition are not attempts to persuade God to do what God really does not want or choose to do! Nor do we have to inform God of our needs. Our prayers are our persistent attempt to be completely aware of our dependence on God. The more we realise we need something – health, forgiveness, employment, or whatever – the more we realise our helplessness.

This is not a disgrace, just the fact of being a creature. We have a God who wants to share graces and blessings with us. Persistent, humble prayer is the best human attitude open to what God has to give. Sincere and open prayer admits us to the mind and heart of Jesus, which in turn tunes us in to the way of the Father.

A faith-filled life

Whether or not we are people of prayer will be a reflection of our lives. If our life is faith-filled, then it is itself a prayer; if our prayer is genuine, then our life is faith-filled. This is how it is for all who love. Just to be in the same place as the one loved is in itself a source of pleasure and satisfaction. But it is not enough, for friends and lovers also want to reserve certain times when they do nothing but communicate with each other, and really be with each other.

So it is with prayer. Although we may do our work in the peaceful awareness of God's presence, we can easily become absorbed by that work. Our love needs to be nourished, kept alive and stimulated by times when we do nothing but communicate with God. This is illustrated again by a couple of episodes in the Gospel of Mark. The first occurs in chapter one: Jesus has just begun his public ministry and made an immediate impression on the people. We are told that crowds flocked to his door. But in the early hours of the morning, he slipped off to a lonely place to be by himself with God in prayer.

Mark tells us how Simon (Peter) and his other disciples went in search of him. Their remarks when they found him carry a hint of disapproval and rebuke: 'Everyone is searching for you'. It is apparent that they considered Jesus' withdrawal for prayer to be a tactical error. Surely he should have been cashing in on his newly-won popularity. They failed to appreciate his need for quiet time to be alone with his Father in prayer (see Mark 1:35-39).

The other incident is described in Mark 6:30ff. The Twelve had just returned from the missionary tour

on which Jesus had sent them (6:7) and they were filled with excitement at what they had achieved. Again, his response to their enthusiastic reporting was to invite them to *come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while*. Although prayer is not mentioned explicitly, this is surely what was behind Jesus' invitation.

In his book *Believing in Jesus*, Father Leonard Foley mentions an astute observation by Ann Lindbergh. She once wrote that if her friends called to invite her to a party and she told them she had an appointment with the hairdresser, they would consider that a perfectly valid reason for not attending. But if she said she needed time for prayer, they would have been quite puzzled and unimpressed.

Without that 'reserved' time from our busy schedules – fifteen minutes

or half an hour or even an hour, if we are fortunate enough to be able to afford that amount of time – we can easily become undernourished, less committed, less fervent. The way we pray is less important than the fact that we do it. Spending time in prayer necessarily means that we forego other activities and experiences. We must make a choice and still our restlessness. As one spiritual writer, Fr. Ron Rolheiser observed: *Because prayer can seem unreal, we often stop doing it, but it will only seem real if we persevere in it long enough and do it deeply enough. We often give up too soon. Prayer isn't easy. It's hard to sit still and (seemingly) do nothing when so many necessary tasks demand our attention and when so much inside us aches for activity and involvement. It's hard to pray when we suffer from the*



kind of headaches and heartaches that cannot be eased by taking an Aspirin. But prayer beckons us beyond, asking us to lift even this up to God.

Ways of praying

There are different methods of prayer. One may use a set of formulas – the Our Father, the Hail Mary, the Rosary, the Psalms, etc. Such prayer may be said aloud or in silence. It gives a concrete form to expressions of faith and love, and frees one from the



worry of 'making up' what one wants to say. This kind of prayer should not be discounted or considered inferior, for it can be invaluable for a person in physical or emotional pain, or finding it hard to concentrate. In so many situations, familiar prayers – whether known by heart or read from a book – are an important guide and a source of strength.

Many people, however, prefer to pray in a less formal and more spontaneous way. Their prayer has no set form, and may not involve words at all: it may be simply silence in the presence of God, or it may follow some pattern. It is as hard to describe in any systematic way as a conversation between friends.

Such informal spontaneous prayer may need a focus, something on which to fasten one's thoughts. Prayerful reading of the Scriptures may provide a

good starting point. In this context, we are not reading for purposes of study, or to gain information or because we find the subject interesting. The aim is rather to listen to the voice of God so that we can respond with prayer.

Our prayer response may be in the form of adoration, praise or thanksgiving. It may take the form of expressing sorrow for sin. Again, it may be petition for one's own needs or those of others. It may in fact be anything, as long as it comes from the heart.

A form of prayer which has received much renewed emphasis in recent years is the so-called 'Jesus prayer'. To some extent, this has been due to the influence of Eastern spirituality, and involves the creative use of what used to be called 'aspirations'. It is prayer which has the advantage of simplicity, and is meant to be repeated, rhythmically, without haste and from the heart. Because of its rhythmic character, it is often called 'breath prayer' or 'breathing prayer'.

A simple form of such prayer is 'Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me'. There are many short and simple prayers of this kind in the Scriptures which one may use: 'Lord, I believe, help my unbelief'; 'Come, Lord Jesus, Come'; 'Be it done to me according to your word'. Another obvious example is the traditional 'doxology' or prayer of praise: 'Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit, as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end!'

Everyone with any experience of prayer will know that very often it is plain hard work. This is the reason why so many people will find any number of excuses to avoid prayer or at least put it off. We will find a hundred different things to do before beginning to pray. In this we are in good company, because even great saints and mystics



have confessed that often they did not find it easy to pray.

God is a silent and mysterious figure for the most part. We are invited through God's self-revelation, and especially through Jesus, to be God's friends. But the basis of friendship is truth, and the truth is that we are God's creatures and totally dependent on God. It cannot be a relationship of equals, and it is only when we admit our creaturehood and our 'nothingness' in comparison with God that we can become 'something' through God's grace. This means an attitude of complete trust in God – often in silence, and even in the absence of any 'enjoyment'.

In God's presence

Our prayer may come down to simply being in the presence of God. This may not always be a source of satisfaction for us, but it can lead to a real sense of what it means to depend on God. Thomas Merton, one of the great spiritual directors and writers of the twentieth century, warned that prayer cannot be measured in terms of 'usefulness'. In other words, its value cannot be calculated on the basis of 'what we get out of it', or whether we

have a series of emotional 'highs' or come to clear conclusions. When these things happen, it is a bonus and reason for gratitude, but prayer is above all a matter of complete self-surrender.

Merton and others have said that we must be prepared to 'waste time' with God and for God; that is, we must be willing to give time to God absolutely, simply because God is our loving creator to whom we owe everything. It is not self-hatred but a simple statement of the deepest reality to say: 'God is all, I am nothing'. I know deep down that I am precious in God's sight but that is because God has made me so, and all the honour and praise belongs to God.

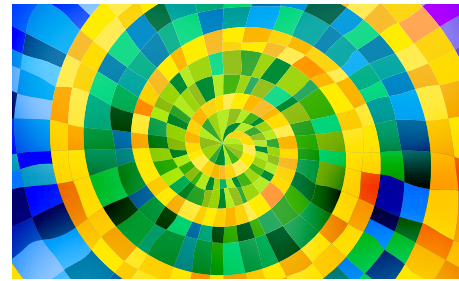
When we say that prayer cannot be measured in terms of usefulness, we do not mean of course that it does not have fruitful effects, but usefulness is not its purpose. In the same way, friendship provides many benefits, but if these were the sole purpose for cultivating a friendship, there is really no friendship at all but only a business relationship. Some of the great saints wrote in their spiritual diaries of times of dryness, when God seemed remote and prayer itself was a tedious process. St John of the Cross spoke of 'the dark

night of the soul'. In our prayer, we have to learn patience to travel the weary path that takes us through the dry places.

Spiritual writers have remarked that these dry stretches can almost be seen as a sign of progress in prayer, as we are drawn more and more into the mystery of the cross and share that experience which caused Jesus to cry out: 'My God, why have you abandoned me?'

So prayer may come down to just 'wasting time' before God, that is, remaining in God's presence without

being concerned about any personal benefit, but simply being able to say 'You are my God. You are my all. I adore you. I love you.'



READ

Read through the text of next Sunday's Gospel, stopping to dwell on words or images that strike you.

Reflect on what these Gospel words are saying to your life, here and now.

SHARE

- Describe a place where you experience a sense of quietness and/or peace, where the business of life is put aside for a moment. How can this become a regular place of prayer for you for spending time with God?

- The Gospels have many records of Jesus praying. Can you recall some of the different ways Jesus prayed?

- Prayer is a gift from God who loves us, and speaks with us. We begin our prayer with a sense of gratitude and thanks for all that God gives us. Share and discuss a simple prayer that you have used or are aware of.

PRAY

O Lord our God,
grant us grace to desire you
with a whole heart,
that so desiring you
we may seek and find you,
and so finding you may love you,
and loving you may hate those sins
which separate us from you,
for the sake of Jesus Christ, Amen.

St Anselm of Canterbury (1033-1109)

RESEARCH

Catechism of the Catholic Church:
Nos 2558-2865

REFLECT

- Pick up your Bible and hold it reverently. Let your mind imagine the countless millions of people now, and down through the centuries, who have made this book the basis of their lives and their never-ending search for God. Feel yourself in solidarity with them.
- Open the Bible and note its composition – how there are two main divisions – Old and New Testament – and many parts within each.

Some of these parts you may already know something about, and many you may not have heard of.

- With the book still in your hands, imagine all the loving and living that has gone into it, and all the wisdom and direction that can flow into your own loving and living because of it.

LISTEN

Spend time each day with God's word, letting these readings speak to you.

- Isaiah 55:1-11. The word of God is food and drink that fully satisfy.
- John 1:1-14. 'The Word became flesh and lived among us.'
- 2 Timothy 3:14 to 4:5. The wisdom that leads to salvation.
- Hebrews 4:12-16. The word of God is something alive and active.



PRAY

- Find the time and place where you can be focussed, or centred, or still. Let yourself become quiet. Remember that just as God has spoken to us in the Bible, God still speaks to us today. Listen to what the Lord may be saying to you now.
- From time to time you may wish to focus with a simple prayer that you can repeat as slowly and as easily as breathing.

Like: *Come, Lord Jesus*

or *Be with me, Lord*

or *Lord, teach me to pray*

or *Jesus, Word of God
guide my path.*

WORSHIP

The 'Liturgy of the Word' is the part of the Mass that consists of several readings (usually one from the Old Testament, a Psalm, a reading from the New Testament and then the Gospel) and a homily, in which the priest gives a reflection on the readings and their relevance for our lives today. See if you can notice the connection between the First Reading and the Gospel – the two are usually linked in some way.