

Resources for Prayer



Some ideas that may help you in your praying

Each of these “Resources for Prayer” is an idea to try. Some you may find helpful in giving you a new or better experience of prayer, others less so – though those may help someone else. There is some repetition and some variations on the same theme as there are many ways to pray. None is the “right” way – do what works for you.

You are welcome to borrow the individual cards, either to use in church or at home. If you take them home please don't take more than two at a time, and bring them back next time you come so that others can use them. If you want copies to keep, they can be downloaded from the church website as a booklet in pdf format, from which you can print out whichever pages you want.

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Starting to Pray

Prayer is about a relationship between you and God. God knows you, and loves you and is with you. In prayer you turn your mind and heart to God whose mind and heart is always turned to you.

In prayer we share ourselves with God; this sharing can involve speaking: bringing to God what we feel, think or hope for. We can be ourselves with God, saying just what we need to, whether we are happy, sad, angry or anxious. At other times the sharing of ourselves is without words: we can simply 'be' with God, resting in God's presence.



Prayer also involves being open, and listening, for God desires to share himself with us. This is 'heart to heart' conversation, sharing what is deepest in us and being open to allow God to share what is deepest in him. Sometimes we feel or experience something when we pray; sometimes nothing seems to happen but all the same we go away feeling somehow refreshed or unburdened, or realising that we're not, after all, alone.

If we persist in prayer this sense of God's presence in the whole of our life will grow.

Jesus told us he wanted us to make our home in him, just as he chooses to be at home in us. Home is where we go out from and come back to, where we can let go of our pretences and be ourselves, and where we are known and cared for. God wants you to be 'at home' in this way. Prayer is the way you will find this home.

There's not a right way to pray – we don't need 'the right words' – what matters is what is in our hearts. As we begin so God will help us, giving us the words to say and helping us be open to hear and receive.

Here are some brief suggestions you might find useful in your prayer:

- **Find a focal point** - for example, a candle or a cross – something that you can rest your eyes on as you pray.
- **Use words and silences:** Share your thoughts and feelings openly with God but make time to be still too, resting in God's presence.
- **Use your breathing to help still you:** For a while be conscious of nothing else but your breathing; be aware of how you draw air in and then release it. As thoughts come to you don't fight them but return to this attentiveness to your breathing. After a while you will find yourself more still, relaxed and ready to pray.
- **Decide on a regular meeting time:** Maybe 5 minutes at the start or end of the day, or during your lunch break at work. You may find yourself praying at different times and places as you go through your day but this regular space will give you a solid foundation you can build on.

Take a deep breath

It can be difficult to still ourselves to pray when so much is going on in our lives and in our heads! From ancient times it has been recognised that focusing on one's breath is one way to find the inner quiet that helps us be open to God. In Hebrew, the word for breath and spirit is the same; like the physical act of breathing that sustains our life, we breathe in God, breathe out God, and our spirit lives.

Sit comfortably with your feet on the ground and your hands at rest in your lap or by your side. Close your eyes. Then give all your attention to your breathing; be aware of your drawing breath in and then releasing it out; feel the physical change happening in your body as you do so. You'll become aware of the underlying rhythm of your breathing. Thoughts will come into your head, but rather than dwelling on them or fighting them off, return to the awareness of breathing in, breathing out. After time and with practice, you will find yourself stilling down and relaxing.

One way of turning this stilling down more consciously into prayer is by holding a prayer word or short phrase before us as we breathe in and out; for example, 'Jesus' or 'My life, my help' or 'Come, Lord Jesus'. The silent repetition of this prayer word in time with your breathing may help you in your seeking God, and being more open to the God who seeks you.

We don't need hours of time to 'take a deep breath' in this way; we can find 5 minutes between jobs, or on the way to work in a quiet train. We can use this way of prayer when we are anxious, or over-busy and under pressure, or simply whenever we want to make space for ourselves and for God.

I will show you how I do not cease praying, simply by going on with my work. I am sitting there in God's presence. And when I put my little leaves to soak, and when I start to weave a rope I say, 'Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love' [Psalm 51.3]. Is not that a prayer?

Sayings of the Desert Fathers: quoted in the Roots of Christian Mysticism, Olivier Clement, New City Publishing, 1993, p205]

Be still and know that I am God:

Prayerful Meditation

This way of prayer is a quiet being present to God in which we put aside our thoughts and simply bring our desire to be more open to God in our life.

Be comfortable: Sit comfortably with your feet on the ground and your hands at rest in your lap or by your side. Close your eyes.

Listen: Listen to the sounds of this space: the hum of distant traffic, the creak of floorboards, your own breathing. Rather than thinking too much, give all your attention to what you can hear, and when you feel drawn away from this by your worries and concerns quietly go back to this relaxed listening.

Breathe: Now give your attention to your breathing; be aware of your drawing breath in and then releasing it out; feel the physical change happening in your body as you do so. You'll become aware of the underlying rhythm of your breathing. Thoughts will come into your head, but rather than dwelling on them or fighting them off, return to the awareness of breathing in, breathing out. After time and with practice, you will find yourself stilling down and relaxing.

Use a prayer word: Hold a prayer word or short phrase before you as you breathe in and out; for example, 'Jesus' or 'My life, my help' or 'Come, Lord Jesus'. This prayer word expresses your desire for God. The silent repetition of this prayer word in time with your breathing helps you be open to God who is always present to you.

Stay with your prayer: For a beginning give ten minutes to this way of prayer. If you are at home it may help to use a timer so you don't

become preoccupied with how much time is left. As time goes on you may want to extend the time to 20 minutes or half an hour.

Don't worry about 'results': The aim of this prayer is not to have great thoughts or even to feel God's closeness. You may feel nothing or even feel bored! What matters though, is that you are expressing your desire to be open and present to God. Don't try too hard – relax, for prayer itself is not just something we do, but something God begins to do in us: everything is gift.

When there's too much going on in our minds to pray...

When we try to be still and give our attention to seeking God it's likely that we'll be conscious of more not less noise going on in our heads. Our worries, fears, preoccupations, plans, and memories seem to take advantage of what we hoped might be quiet space. We can feel our attempt to listen to God defeated before we even started. One response, of course, is to turn our concerns into prayer: so we can put our worries about the meeting happening tomorrow, or our anxiety for our children into God's hands. This is a good thing to do, but if we are not careful our prayer might turn into an endless list of requests without much opportunity to listen to, or simply rest in, God.

The anonymous writer of '*the Cloud of Unknowing*', a medieval work on contemplative prayer, suggested some more practical strategies we might find useful:

1] The first is the use of a prayer word or 'mantra': the author of the *Cloud of Unknowing* advises firstly that we remind ourselves that it is God we are seeking: 'him I seek, and nothing but him'. To sum up this desire and keep it before us in prayer he suggests:

'...take a short word, preferably of one syllable...the shorter the word the better...a word like 'God' or 'Love'. Fix this word fast to your heart, so that it is always there, come what may'.

We might say this word slowly and rhythmically as we pray, as a way of stilling down and becoming more receptive to God.

2] Secondly *the Cloud of Unknowing* suggests that when anxious thoughts push in to our consciousness we...

'Try to look, as it were, over their shoulders, seeking something else – which is God'.

Our thoughts are with us, and they can seem so consuming that we lose our awareness of God. But God is there beneath and beyond all that fills our mind, and we can turn our attention, quietly, trustfully, towards that hidden but caring presence.

3] The third piece of advice seems counter-intuitive:

‘When you feel that you are completely powerless to put these thoughts away, cower down before them like some cringing captive overcome in battle, and reckon that it is ridiculous to fight against them any longer. In this way you surrender yourself to God while you are in the hands of your enemies.’

Rather than fight our distractions, we own it is useless to fight and instead let go into God's hands. The focus shifts from us – from the strength of our willpower and our powers of concentration [or lack of them] - to God who in the Spirit prays within us. Too much effort can get in the way. Everything is gift. We place ourselves in the place of prayer, we turn our desire towards God, we make use of whatever helps still our minds – but the rest belongs to God. Even if our prayer seems fractured and unfocused, God is at work.

A time for all seasons

There is a constant sense of movement in the garden: seeds sprout, then grow tall, flower, set seed and fade. As a gardener there are always tasks to be done in season – planting bulbs, pruning, feeding the soil, raking up leaves. There are times of rapid visible growth, and times of rest or dormancy. Gardening sensitises us to the passing of the seasons. In our life with God there will be seasons too – time to act, and time to rest, time to change direction or try new things, times to let go.



This prayer exercise helps explore what 'season' it is in your life at this time. It may help you discern how God is at work in your life and how can you co-operate with this.

You may find it helps to physically turn in the directions suggested as you prayerfully reflect.

Autumn: face West [the setting sun]

- Where in your life do you sense the need to let go?
- Where do you see a process of letting go already taking place in your life?
- Some things have always deserved to be let go, for they are lifeless and life-denying.
- Others have been valuable to you but now it is time to put them down and move on

Winter: face North [the sun at its lowest point]

- Where in your life do you sense the need to 'let be' –for now is a time for waiting and resting?
- What in you is dormant, maybe feels stuck, but perhaps there are the first stirrings of life here?

Spring: face East [the rising sun]

- What in you is springing to life or bubbling up from deep down inside?
- Where in your life do you sense energy - perhaps fleeting, faint and easy to miss?
- What new sense of direction do you begin to see taking shape within you?

Summer: face South [the sun at its highest point]

- What in you feels alive, free, and fully formed within you?
- What within you do you long to share with others?
- Where do you see you are able to make a difference to others?

Prayerful Reading

(Adapted from guidance given by Fr. Luke Dysinger, O.S.B. on the monastic tradition of 'lectio divina' or 'holy reading')



This is an ancient method of prayerfully reading the bible. It rests on the understanding that the bible is 'God-breathed': that is, that though a human book, or, better, a library of books, written by different people at different times, it is also a living word that can speak to our times and our personal circumstances.

Choose a bible passage that you wish to pray, for example one of the psalms. Make yourself comfortable and still yourself down. Some people find that focusing their attention on their breathing for a minute or two, or repeating a prayer word or prayer phrase helps bring about this inner stillness.

Attentive Reading: Then begin reading your passage slowly and gently. Savour each portion of the reading, constantly listening for the "still, small voice" of a word or phrase that somehow says, "I am for you today." It doesn't matter if you don't get to the end of the passage. Do not expect a dramatic revelation. Most of the time God does not reach out and grab us; rather, He softly, gently invites us ever more deeply into His presence.

Reflecting: If a word or phrase you read in some way connects with you, hold on to it. Slowly repeat it to yourself, allowing it to interact with your inner world of concerns, memories and

ideas. Sometimes this process is likened to 'rumination' – or 'chewing things over'. What does this word or phrase mean for you? How does it connect with the place you are in today? How might God be speaking to you through this word?

Expressing: Give to God what you have found within your heart during your reflection. This might take the form of words you speak to God in prayer, whether of thanksgiving, or questioning. Share what you feel, naturally and honestly, and make space to listen to how God responds to you.

Resting: Finally rest in God's embrace and in whatever understanding or feeling you have received. This time is more about being present and open to God than being active with your mind.

Though this way of prayer is described in stages following on one from another you may find you flow backwards and forwards from one way of prayer to another, now thinking, now resting, and now speaking. It is the Spirit who leads us. This is not a way of prayer we have to 'get right'! This way of attentive reading can also be used with non-biblical material, whether poetry or prose, that helps us become connected with God.

Clenched fist, open hand

A clenched fist can be useful:

It grasps hold tightly of things we are afraid to lose; it hides what we fear others will see; it becomes a weapon of our hatred or our need to defend ourselves against aggression.

But a clenched fist is also a hand disabled:

A hand that cannot give or receive, or take another hand in friendship; it is unable to pick things up; such a hand will never sow seed in the ground, reassure a frightened child or prepare a meal for friends.



In the Kingdom of the clenched fist fear is the key: fear of the one who wants to challenge my world by being different; fear of those who might succeed at my expense; fear of the nothingness if I don't hold on to the scraps that I say are my meaning.

What will I choose...clenched fist or open hand? When I am unsure whether I am OK as I am, I want to curl my fingers back into a familiar tight hold; I am ready to strike the one who threatens me. I hold fast to what is mine. I hide who I am in case you reject who I am...but all the while my identity is hidden from me.

If my hand is open, won't you take everything away?

God reaches out not with a clenched fist, but an open hand...
not to compel, but to invite, not to destroy but to wake what was dead into life.
To God belongs the might of vulnerability,
the otherness of intimacy.

What will you choose...clenched fist or open hand?

Clench your fists so that your fingers dig deeply into the palm of the hand; feel the tension and constriction.

Look at your fingers tightly bound,
the blood flow constricted in your knuckles.
Here is your anxiety about the future,
your ill-ease and discomfort,

your holding fast of what does not satisfy,
your fear of being who you are.

God comes to you with open hands:
tender and compassionate hands,
generous, welcoming hands,
waiting, inviting hands.



Now slowly release the tension in your fingers;
watch as they slowly unfurl,
like fern fronds in response to the warmth of spring sunshine.
Let your fingers stretch and play,

your palms open and relaxed before you.
You are ready now to let go,
ready now to receive,
ready now to express who you are,
ready to reach out your hand to another:
not in violence but in love,
not to ward away, but to invite.

Repeat the action:
now clenching your fists
now letting your hands relax and open

*God of the open hands
I give you my clenched fists.
Let me take the risk
of allowing you to love me as I am.
Let me dare to give myself
so that I may receive myself
as gift from you.*

Poetry and prayer

- Choose a poem
- Ask the Lord to help you be open to what you read
- Read the poem through – it might help to read it aloud
- Read it through again, pausing at those words and phrases that seem to draw you
- Ask the Lord to help you consider the meaning of the poem for you today. How does it speak to where you are today? Does it express something you feel? What does the Lord say to you in these words?
- Talk with the Lord about the thoughts and feelings that have come to you as you have reflected on the poem. Listen to what he says to you
- Read through the poem again, and rest in the words and whatever insight God has given you
- At some point you may want to express what you have felt or understood in a poem of your own. Putting words on paper can often express what lies hidden in the heart

In the palm of God's hand



- Take a small natural object such as a stone, a twig or a nut and place it in the palm of your hand.
- Read the words from Julian of Norwich below.
- Rest in the awareness that you are held in God's hand, enfolded in love, known and wanted.

I saw that he is everything that we know to be good and helpful. In his love he clothes us, enfolds and embraces us; that tender love completely surrounds us, never to leave us. As I saw it he is everything that is good.

...he showed me more, a little thing, the size of a hazelnut, on the palm of my hand, round like a ball. I looked at it thoughtfully and wondered, 'What is this?' And the answer came, 'It is all that is made.' I marvelled that it continued to exist and did not suddenly disintegrate; it was so small. And again my mind supplied the answer, 'It exists, both now and for ever, because God loves it.' In short, everything owes its existence to the love of God.

In this 'little thing' I saw three truths. The first is that God made it; the second is that God loves it; and the third is that God sustains it.

[Julian of Norwich: Revelations of Divine Love]

God in my Day

This is an awareness exercise to be used on a daily basis as a way of becoming more aware of where we meet God within outward events and our inner thoughts and feelings. It will probably take 5 to 10 minutes. It can also be a prayerful way of letting our day go into God's hands so that we don't carry our anxieties and frustrations unobserved and unhealed into our sleep and into a new day.



1. Events of today

Like watching a video, I replay the day, letting God prompt my memory, and remind me of significant things that happened in my day, or insights that I gained

2. Thanksgiving

I thank God for the gifts of the day that have gone – the kindnesses shown me, the things that lifted my spirits – no matter how small.

3. Feelings experienced

I become aware of what I felt today and ask God to show me why I felt as I did.

4. Your call to me

I ask God to show me in what ways he asked something of me today..

- in my dealings with people
- in the way I treated myself
- in anything I previously sensed I was called to do

I review how I responded

5. Forgiveness and healing

I bring to God anything that I need forgiveness for, trusting in God's readiness to forgive.

I bring to God anything from my day I need healing for, trusting in God's love that casts out fear, and binds up wounds.

6. Trust in God for the day to come

I let go to God any anxieties I have about the day to come

I ask God for the gift of what I most need for the day ahead.

Imaginative Contemplation

This is a way of prayer that uses the imagination to enter into a Gospel passage and allow it to interact with the place where we are. It may take a little time to settle into this way of prayer. Take your time and relax – the fruit of this prayer is in God's gift rather than dependent on the strength of your powers of imagination!



Choose a Gospel passage that describes an event in Jesus' life.

- Make yourself at home in the presence of God. You may find it helps to spend a few minutes stilling yourself down, giving your attention to what you can hear around you, or becoming aware of the rhythm of your breathing.
- Bring to God what it is you are seeking today, for example a deeper awareness of his presence, guidance in a decision you are making, or greater freedom within you to be able to let go to God. Ask God to help you to pray with openness and generosity of spirit.
- Read the bible passage through a couple of times slowly and reflectively.
- Put the bible down, and in your imagination set the scene described in the passage. The setting might be similar to that described in the bible, or you may find the setting changes to

one that connects in some way with your past / present experience.

- Use all your senses – what can you see, hear, feel, taste, or smell?
- Now put yourself into the story. Who are you? A central character or someone observing from the sidelines?
- Let the scene unfold in its own way, even if it develops in a way that is different from that described. The story may stick closely to what you read in the gospel or seem to take on a life of its own; rather than fight this, trust that it's OK, and that this is the story that it is important for you to attend to today.
- You may find yourself wanting to talk to Jesus as the story unfolds or to ask him a question; or that Jesus speaks to you. It may be that you engage with another person in the story.
- Be aware of your own feelings and responses as you pray through the passage.
- When you have finished, look back over the prayer. Remember how you reacted and felt at different points. What seems to you significant?
Did anything surprise you? Ponder what this might be saying to you, asking God to help you see and understand.
- Spend some time in prayer with God sharing your thoughts, feelings and needs.

You may find it helpful to repeat the prayer at another time, returning to those points where you were conscious of being moved in some way.

Praying with parables

Jesus looked at ordinary life and saw within it the pattern of God's working: – a woman making bread, or a merchant searching in the marketplace for the finest of pearls. Life itself is where the word of God is sown, and we can make space to receive this word in attentiveness.

Daily life presents its parables:

- Why did that incident make such an impression on me?
- There I was rushing for my train, and there was that man sitting on the bench looking out at the flowers. Why did I notice him?
- Why can't I get that dream out of my head?

When asked why he teaches in parables Jesus gave a puzzling reply, quoting the prophet Isaiah:

....This is why I speak to them in parables: "Though seeing, they do not perceive; though hearing, they do not listen or understand." ¹⁴ In them is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah:

"You will be ever hearing but never understanding; you will be ever seeing but never perceiving." ¹⁵ For this people's heart has become calloused; they hardly hear with their ears, and they have closed their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts and turn, and I would heal them.'

¹⁶ *But blessed are your eyes because they see, and your ears because they hear [Matthew 13]*

Considering Jesus' words positively a pattern of conversion of life emerges

- We are to see *and* perceive
- We are to listen *and* hear
- We are to understand with the heart
- This leads us to turn to Christ
- And to be healed [made whole as human beings]

A word is being generously sown – have we the space to receive it, to allow it to grow and to bear its fruit? It is in some sense a hidden word. It takes time and desire to not only see but to begin to perceive, not only to listen but to begin to hear and understand...to be moved to turn to God present in all we experience...and this turning is the path to our wholeness.



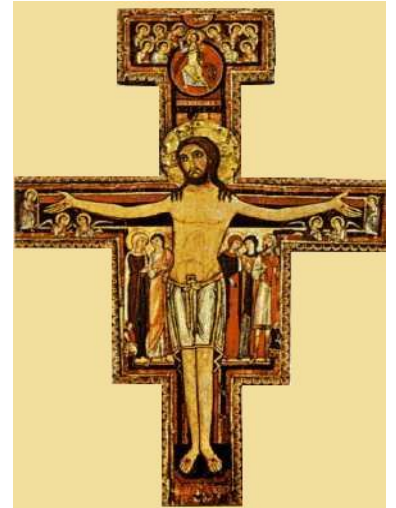
A method for prayerfully considering the parable of everyday life

- I ask God for what I desire – for example, that I be open to understand the significance of my experience and to respond to any invitation from God I receive through it.
- I remember that hearing, perceiving and understanding are all God's gift to me.
- I see and hear the parable of what I saw or experienced – recalling it in my memory, pondering its meaning for me, attending to those moments that moved me in some way. I pay attention not just to the content of what I saw or what happened but my own internal responses to it – what did I feel? what did I think?
- I seek to understand the meaning of this experience. What was significant about what I saw, or what happened to me? Why was it significant? I ask God to guide me as I consider this: how does this event speak to the place where I am today?
- When I am ready I turn to Christ, expressing the prayer that arises from my heart from my reflection
- I rest quietly in the presence of Christ, open to receive what I need at this moment for my wholeness.

Gazing on God: praying with icons and religious art

Gaze: Choose a visual focus point for your prayer; this could be a cross or an icon, or a painting – something that for you, expresses a dimension of who God is for you.

To gaze is to fix one's attention in one place, but in a relaxed way. Rest your eyes on what you see, and let it still you. Though your eyes and thoughts may be drawn elsewhere, bring them back to the picture or image that is the focus of your prayer.



Consider: As you gaze, consider what is before you. What strikes you in what you see? What do you glimpse of God through it? Are there any ways you sense some challenge or invitation for you? You may find you don't so much have a thinking response as a feeling response: what are you feeling – can you give it a name?

You may find there are there things you want to say to God, or that you sense God in some way speaking to you.

Contemplate: Remain gazing attentively. Relax into the picture. Rather than being active in your observation and thinking by trying to identify new insights, look to be present to what you have already thought or felt and let God, if God chooses, take you more deeply into these.

This is a time of simply being there, present to God as God is present to you.

Prayer stones

You may wish to use a stone as a focus for your prayer.



Spend a few moments quietly resting in God's presence.

Look at your stone: see its colour and shape. Feel its texture and its weight. How does it feel in your hand?

Think about the story of this stone: the rock from which it came, the wind, sun, frost and water that shaped it into its current form.

Think about your own story, and what has led you to today.

As you hold your stone know that your yesterday, today and tomorrow are held in the palm of God's hand.

If you wish, when you have finished your prayer you put your stone down as a symbol of trusting your life to God's care.

You may want to take your stone home or keep it with you and use it again when you pray.

Waiting on God

I wait for the Lord; my soul waits,

And in his word I hope...

My soul waits for the Lord

More than those who watch for the morning...

[From Psalm

130]

What are you waiting for?

- For the next step on your path through life to become clear?
- For an answer to a question?
- To become free within?
- To find purpose or peace in your life?
- For the fruit to come of what you have sown and nurtured?

We wait actively...working, and searching, for life is in our hands. It is the one who seeks who finds, and the one who asks who receives, and the one who knocks who will find the door opened.

And yet we also wait passively – for the right time to come, for growth to take its course, and to receive by gift what cannot be ours by effort alone.



Waiting is at the heart of prayer

Wait now in the presence of the Lord...

Name before God what it is you are seeking...

Hold before God the desires of your heart - even those too deep to name.

Let go to God,

not in resignation but in hope.

Everything is gift,

and God is generous in meeting our deepest needs.

Ask God what it is you can do to help bring an answer to your prayer

But be content to wait...

Use the words from Psalm 130 above to express your waiting in hope. You may find it helpful to repeat them quietly as you wait before God, and to come back to them as your day continues

Sometimes an external action helps to express our waiting on God:

- Sow seeds in a pot ready for the season to come, or clear a patch of ground in your garden ready for new planting.
- Clear out a cluttered space in your home – a drawer, a corner of a room. Leave it a little while before you decide how you will use it in future.
- Take time out to go on 'pilgrimage – to take time to walk or travel to somewhere you don't normally go. Your outward pilgrimage is an expression of your inward searching

Letting go and letting God

Whether we are seeking to grow in prayer, or become free of what we have come to recognise as life-diminishing ways of acting or thinking, or to know what it is God wants us to do, it is in letting go that we make room for God. It is the Spirit that roots and grounds us in God, draws us into wholeness and guides us along the way that leads to life. If we try too hard, believing that it is only through the sheer force of our will and effort that change can happen, we leave little room for God. Everything is gift.

However 'letting go' is in itself a work, for our natural inclination tends towards keeping life in our minute control, depending entirely on our own resources rather than being open to another's help, and bringing about change by the strength of our will and endeavour. To go against this instinct for self-sufficiency and self-definition can feel daunting; yet we let go not into nothingness but to 'let God' be active in our lives. In doing so we find that we too are alive in a way we have never been before.

- Put a stone in your hand to represent that which you desire to let go to God.
- Place a candle or cross nearby to symbolize the place of letting go.
- Using the reflection below may help you to identify what you want to put in God's hands:

We let go to God our regrets about the past – the choices we have made however we now feel about them, whatever has happened to us for good and for harm. God is in the place where we are, however we got there.

We let go to God our anxiety about the future. We cannot control what is in essence beyond our control – instead of torturing ourselves with fears that begin 'what if...' we let go to God who will always be alongside us in 'what is'.

We let go to God what hurts. True we cannot switch off our painful feelings; they flow into our lives, but if we do not cling to them they will flow from us again, carried in the stream of God's presence and care.

We let go to God our resentment. Even though the anger may not die down in our hearts we consent not to hold on to our need to get even; we give to God to heal what we cannot heal by ourselves

We let go to God our need to be good enough. God gives freely what we can never earn. We are valued, loved and believed in as we are.

We let go to God our desire for growth. It is God who continues to create us and who works to make us whole.

We let go to God the choices we face today. Though we do not know what to do, as we choose to listen, God will lead us along the unseen way.

We let go into God's working: We consent to be drawn this day into the stream of God's life: to become the activity of Love in that part of the world that is ours.

- As you sense something you want to let go to let God, put down your stone by the candle or cross.
- There may be feelings you need to share with God before you feel ready to let go: fears, hopes, doubts, desires or pains. You may sense you are not ready yet to let go and let God in this area of your life; if so, let go at whatever level you are able to today, with your ambivalent feelings and doubts.
- You will probably find that on another day you will need to let go in this area all over again. Letting go is rarely a 'done deal'; it is a process where little by little we allow God to become the source of our life.

Meeting God in Creation

To see a world in a grain of sand
And heaven in a wild flower
[William Blake]



In the Creation story in the bible God summons each being into life by name; God looks at what he has made and sees that it is good [Genesis 1].

1. Remember a particular time or place when you felt a sense of wonder awoken by the created world: walking by the sea, a small seed that became a flower, birdsong at twilight, snow wrapping the earth in silence, stars at night... Go back to that time or place in your prayer – be present to it again in your imagination, getting in touch with what you heard, saw, felt, sensed then.

2. God is in all things; all creation sings God's song. You too are made in God's likeness. Go for a walk in a garden or park, or in the countryside if you can. Ask God for the gift of awareness of his presence as you walk. As you walk stay in your senses, more than in your thoughts. Take in what you see – the changing sky, trees and flowers of different shapes and colours, the movement of birds or of

grass in the breeze....feel the freshness on your face...touch leaves or the bark of trees...listen to birdsong, wind blowing leaves. Pause for a while if a sight, or sound draws you...take time to 'stop and stare'.

Ask God for the gift of prayerful presence to the beauty and wonder of what 'is'. Give God thanks for your own life and for all that lives and breathes around you.

3. Walking can be a way of prayer. There is a long biblical and Christian tradition of pilgrimage. The outer journey, made step by step, expresses the inner journey, deeper into God. As you walk repeat a short prayer in rhythm with your walking e.g.

- Jesus my light
- I thirst for you
- Draw me to you
- Your kingdom come

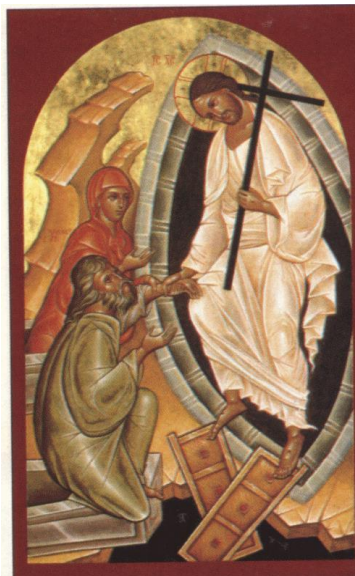
or the words of a poem or the Lord's prayer. Alternatively use a verse from a hymn that expresses what is in your heart. The words, and your walking act as a way of stilling you, making you more receptive and open to God

What is this life if, full of care,
We have no time to stand and stare...
[William Henry Davies]

Talking heart to heart

Prayer is heart to heart dialogue; not only our words to God but God's word to us. Prayer is as much about sharing feeling as thought, and the psalms in particular give us the language and imagery to express what is deep within: our longing, fear, need, gratitude, joy or pain. Here too we can also sense the heart of God reaching out to us.

*You are a hiding-place for me;
you preserve me from trouble;
you surround me
with glad cries of deliverance.
I will instruct you and teach you
the way you should go;
I will counsel you
with my eye upon you.*
From Psalm 32



Write your own psalm expressing the words you want to express to God from your heart. You may also sense words from God's heart to you and these too might become part of your psalm.

You may find it helpful to use some of the following headings as starting points for your psalm. Add your own words to the end of these sentences:

Lord you are...

I am...

I feel...

I don't understand why...

I long for...

I picture my life today as like...

I remember your goodness to me when...

I look to you for...

I sense you say to me...

Lord you are my...

Staying still to perceive movement

Morning by morning he wakens – wakens my ear, to listen as those who are taught [Isaiah 50.4]



Walking today I saw a kestrel hovering in the sky over a single point, eyes intent on the ground below, seeking out the slightest movement.

The attentiveness sometimes took some effort: the kestrel beat its wings not to travel but to remain in that one place.

At other times the moving air by itself seemed to hold it in position.

But when a change in the wind began to move the kestrel away it resumed its wing beat to return to its watch.

Living in attentiveness to God's presence in all things has something in common with the kestrel's flight.

It begins with a wing-beat, turning ourselves towards God and seeking his presence. We light a candle as the day begins, or say a prayer, or read words of scripture. In this way or that way we seek God who is ever in search in us.

There are moments within the day when it seems no wing-beat is needed; the moving air holds us in awareness of God-with-us.

But in another moment our focus is lost; we are no longer in the seeing place, the hearing place. Instead we become lost in the demands we make of ourselves or others make of us, beaten about by the swirling currents of our needs and desires, without the steady gaze on God that can help make sense of these things.

The beat of a wing is needed to bring us back until we can rest again on the uplifting air.

The kestrel has eyes and ears for its prey; stillness helps it be sensitive to movement.

Our steady focus helps us sense the movement of the Spirit:

- What is it Lord that I see?
- Why does that sight so touch me?
- Why when I read those words from the bible does my heart beat faster?
- Why do I feel such excitement or sadness, attraction or fear?
- What are you showing me Lord as I keep my gaze on you?
- What is the significance of what I hear and how are you inviting me to respond?
- How are you at work in my life, and how can I co-operate with you?'

We hover over the moment, avoiding the temptation to simply move on.

There is something to see here: - something to learn.

But to perceive it we must stay still.

*Morning by morning he wakens, wakens my ear to listen
as those who are taught.*

A Prayer for the Dark

Winter reminds us of how much darkness is part of our experience of life. The nights are long and light lasts a few brief hours. We tend to see darkness negatively as the absence of light. Darkness may carry with it a sense of threat or danger. We are not in control in the same way as we are when we can see our way. We make artificial lights to avoid the unknown of night. When we are in trouble, confused or in pain we may feel ourselves to be 'lost in the dark'.

And yet many of us will have learnt as children to close our eyes when we pray.

We let go of the stimulation of our moment by moment existence to rest in a presence that is in every moment and beyond every moment.

God is in the darkness as well as in the light.

Night invites a deeper trust to that presence and care that is always there.

Night bids us relinquish our weary efforts to micro-manage life

We let go – not into nothingness – but into Love...hidden from us perhaps, but very real.

God bids us rest.

Find a physical dark space. Turn off the lights.

You might want to light a candle – but be open to the darkness surrounding it that makes this light shine so brightly and warmly.

Sit quietly, relaxing into the moment.

As worries, concerns, thoughts and fears come to mind neither fight them, nor cling to them.

Let them come and go, passing them over into the darkness.
Rest the palms of your hands on your thighs, turned upwards and open;
that way your preoccupations can slip away from your grasp
and God can look after them for you.

You may feel you want to move away:
darkness and stillness allows inner anxieties and hurts to surface;
they can seem overwhelming.
But stay in the dark.
Just as your eyes slowly adjust to the night
so you might begin to sense the presence of a Love you can trust and
rest in,
surrounding and enveloping you
clothing you with kindness..

Thoughts and words of prayer may come,
but you may also find it enough to simply rest without need for
words.
There is no need here for explanation
and often words fall so short.
It is enough to 'be'.
Because the God of love is so close to you, you cannot see him.
Because divine light so dazzles you, you are in darkness.
But you are in God
And God is in you.

Prayerful Knitting

By Sarah Goodwin

A Background

Many of us seem to be knitting these days. What is it about this ancient art that keeps people working through the knit 1 purl 1 repetition? Compassion and a love of knitting can combine into a prayerful ministry that reaches out to those in need of comfort and solace.

Historically many cultures and traditions use knitting as either a pastime or as a task to 'get done' before days end when creating necessary garments to be worn.

Knitting however can also be considered in a contemplative reflective and prayerful way. The repetitive movement of knitting is a way of quieting and refreshing us at the same time and can enrich and strengthen both the knitter and even perhaps the person who is being knitted for.

In American society today many churches have a 'Shawl Ministry' where either individuals or groups of knitters knit and pray into their work creating eventually a gift for someone who may need some comfort in their lives at that time.

"Knitting is the simplest
and most ordinary of activities,
yet somehow it mysteriously
contains within itself
the potential for expanding
our conscious awareness"

This type of work is an old concept used by Tibetan Monks, native Americans and other cultures. It is a way of serving those less fortunate by the creation of a garment of beauty through prayer and love.

The clicking of needles helps slow our minds and provides the knitter with a sense of stillness in their sometimes chaotic lives.

By knitting in sets of three even the stitches can invoke a sense of the Trinity and the union of mind body and spirit.

Peace I leave with you, my peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid.(John 14:27)

How do I start?

“Experiencing your body and mind working together you may find yourself in a place where you can listen to God and may hear God”

Everyone responds differently through their acts of prayer. Find a comfortable and peaceful place to be.

Ponder the knitting wool, what it feels like. Think about the sheep it came from, the shepherd who tended them, the shearer who sheared them. Think of those who have come before, the many knitters through the ages who have also created.

Concentrate on one thing.

Perhaps begin by knitting an easy stitch (garter or stocking stitch). This will allow you to adopt a rhythm which you can pray into. For example:

Knit Lord, have mercy on us

Knit Christ, have mercy

Knit Lord have mercy

Some people find knitting whilst repeating a mantra fits their rhythm of knitting.

(similar to the use of prayer beads)

Maybe consider listening to music or sacred traditions such as Taize chants.

You may like to focus on a particular person you may be knitting for. Knit your prayers into your work or sing them! A favourite hymn would be a good place to start.

Many blessings can be knitted into your work.

There is no hurry! Take the time to ponder, to reflect, to relax and be still.

If at any time you discover a friend or colleague shares a similar interest in knitting and prayer, then get together and share each others' thoughts and ideas.

Who knows you may even start your very own shawl ministry at your church!

Further reading / information:

www.Ravelry.com You can find patterns for prayer shawls/ blankets and information on groups on this international knitting forum

Going through the motions

Sometimes people make an outward show of action without their heart being in it. They are 'going through the motions'. But before we dismiss the 'motions' in favour of the purity of the inner spirit it helps to remember that we are bodily people; physical actions can help make our spirit ready. This is certainly true when it comes to prayer. Choosing a regular place, posture, and way of beginning and ending our prayer can provide a supportive framework for the building up of our openness to God.

Place: Making a particular room, or seat, or walking route a habitual place for prayer. Of course we can pray anywhere. But through repetition the mind and spirit begins to recognise that in entering *this* place I am setting myself to pray. Your 'place' might be your kitchen table at a quiet time of the day, a bench in a park where you walk your dog, your seat on the train on the way into work, or a corner of a room in your home that you set aside as a meeting point with God.

Greeting:

Words or gestures you use to acknowledge that you have entered God's presence. This might be the lighting of a candle, the bowing before a cross, or the saying of a particular prayer or a verse from one of the psalms. For example:

To you O Lord I lift up my soul.

Psalm 25.1

Regular usage helps us move more quickly into prayer. We understand we are here for this purpose and for no other.

Posture:

A physical way we set our bodies: sitting with hands open and resting on our laps, or, if walking, a slower, measured pace that begins to settle us down.

As these physical settings become familiar, our spirit begins to work in unison, helping us be relaxed, open and attentive.



Ending and moving on:

Just as we have greeted God at the beginning of prayer, so we choose a way of closing this time, whilst remaining open to God's presence and leading as we go about our day.

Again this might be a physical action, words of prayer or a combination: blowing out the candle, bowing to a cross, or words from a psalm:

*'Make me know your ways, O Lord;
Teach me your paths.
Lead me in your truth and teach me,
For you are the God of my salvation;
For you I wait all day long
Psalm 25:4-5*

Making a Choice

These suggestions for ways in which we might prayerfully make a choice are adapted from the *Spiritual Exercises* of Ignatius Loyola. Their foundation is the principle that 'the eye of our intention is single': that is that in every choice we seek to discern what leads us towards the 'end for which we are created': which might be summed up as a fully human life, lived generously for others through relationship with God. The first step in making a choice is always to direct ourselves towards this end. Throughout the process of discernment we seek to be open to the guidance of the Spirit in prayer.

Method 1 *This method will probably feel familiar to us as the weighing up of 'pros' and 'cons'. There are some important additions though: making the choice within the context of prayerfully seeking what God desires, and seeking to be genuinely open to be led this way or that, rather than predetermining what the answer probably is.*

- Put before your mind the choice to be made
- Keep before you the end for which you are created
- Rather than being inclined one way or another, seek the freedom to be equally willing to say 'yes' or 'no' to the options that are before you:
- 'I should find myself in the middle, like the pointer of a balance, in order to be ready to follow that which I perceive to be more to the glory and praise of God our Lord and the salvation of my soul'
- Ask God to 'be pleased to move my will and to put into my mind what I ought to do in the matter proposed'
- Consider the advantages and disadvantages of the different options before you, given you are seeking 'the end for which you are created'.

- Listen carefully to what reason says and make a decision accordingly
- Bring the choice you have made to God in prayer, asking him 'to receive and confirm it, provided it is conducive to his greater service and praise'.

Method 2 *Sometimes we become stuck in a particular way of looking at a situation. We are too close to the action to be able to find the distance to make a good choice. These suggestions are about changing our perspective, and so gaining greater freedom to discern what the good and life-giving thing to do is.*

- Imagine a person whom you have never seen or known; what would you advise this person to do if they had a similar choice to the one before you?
- Imagine you are at the point of death: what choice would you have wished to make in this matter from this perspective?
- Imagine yourself before God on the day of judgement – what choice would you have wished to make in this matter?
- What course of action do you now sense is the right one?

Both methods will take time, and talking things through with someone wise and sufficiently outside the situation not to take sides will also help

Lifelines

Lifeline: definition: A rope or line used for life-saving, typically one thrown to rescue someone in water or one used by sailors to secure themselves to a boat.

When we are tired and feel we are sinking under the waves of daily pressures we need a lifeline. My lifelines to God are short, often single line quotes from the bible, from hymns or from poetry that I have committed to my memory and come back to me when I need them. Here are some examples:

Do not be afraid, I have redeemed you. I have called you by your name, you are mine. [Isaiah 43:1]

I can do all things through him who strengthens me [Philippians 4:13]

At night there are tears but joy comes with the morning [Psalm 30.5]

Some of my lifelines remind me that I meet God in the midst of daily life and I experience his goodness in many forms:

I greet him the days I meet him,
and bless when I understand [Gerard Manley Hopkins]

To see a World in a Grain of Sand
And a Heaven in a Wild Flower,
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand
And Eternity in an hour. [William Blake]

Each of these lifelines connects in some way with my story and experience – or rather God's story in me. They connect me back into God's generous and faithful care.

Some come back to me unbidden as I walk along, especially the lines of hymns or of psalms I have sung in the past.

What are your lifelines?

What words from the bible, from a hymn or psalm or poem have become important to you, reminding you of God's presence within your story?

Ask God to help bring them to mind.



Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path
Psalm 119:105

These lifelines express the Gospel of Christ's work in your life, the Creed that arises from your personal experience.

Commit these lifelines to your memory so that you carry them around with you to surface when you most need them.

You may find it helpful to take one lifeline with you into your day – to recall it and say it aloud to yourself as you enter into the business and busyness of your day. Say the lifeline quietly to yourself at different points of the day – allow it to lead you back in that moment into awareness of God's presence and care.

If you have a prayer space in your home you might want to have some lifelines visibly there as reminders. Leave space for more to be added as your story moves on and as another 'word' becomes important for you.

Some possible starting points for painting or drawing as a way of prayer



Relax into the space.

Play with the paints and colours.

Don't worry too much about results. This is just for you.

When you begin you may feel self-conscious but as you go on you'll find that you become absorbed in the process.

Some possible themes to explore...

- A time and a place I became aware of God with me
- The different colours of my life
- The road I have walked through life
- The prayer of my heart

Thanksgiving

*Bless the Lord O my soul
And do not forget all his benefits*

Psalm 103.2

Each day brings its gifts: –a kindness shown to us, a sight or sound that lifts our spirits, no matter how small.

Life is sometimes difficult, painful and challenging. It can at first seem there's little to give thanks for on days like these. But God chooses to be alongside us in life just as it is – in sorrow and in joy - and gratitude awakes us to this presence.

Thanksgiving reminds us that all that we have flows from God, who gives freely and gladly.

The practice of thanksgiving begins to root and establish our lives in love.

Gratitude becomes the seedbed of a generously lived life.

Towards the end of the day find a few minutes to recall the gifts you have received. It might be on your walk home from the train station after work or in the moments before you go to sleep.

Here are some questions to help you remember:

- Who showed me care and consideration today?
- What did I enjoy?
- How were my senses touched by beauty?
- What did I see, hear, read or sense that gladdened my heart, even for a moment?
- What new understanding was given to me today?
- How in all these things have I met you Lord?

*Bless the Lord O my soul
And do not forget all his benefits*

Pauses

Many of us find an unbroken and regular block of time to set aside for prayer elusive.

But even when life is demanding and unpredictable there are pauses, and these can become rich moments of encounter with God.

- The quiet moments when we are absorbed in a task that leaves our mind free
- The 5 minutes we take to wander around the garden and see what has come up
- The walk with the dog around the local park
- The time between pushing the 'on' button on your computer and it becoming fully functional.
- The train journey into work
- Washing the dishes and gazing out of the window
- The ten minutes we take in a lunch-break to get out of the office and away from the phone

There are daily tasks when we are naturally more at ease and self-forgetful – what are these for you? They may also be times to rest in the presence of God.

One early Christian teacher put it this way:

I will show you how I do not cease praying, simply by going on with my work. I am sitting there in God's presence. And when I put my little leaves to soak and when I start to weave a rope I say, 'Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love' [Psalm 51.3] Is that not a prayer?'

'I am sitting there in God's presence'... Prayer can be as simple as that.

Turn your heart towards God who is with you in this place.

Use words if you want to or simply 'be there'.

Turn aside from the drivenness of 'things to do' for a moment by simply being present to what is around you – What you can see, hear and sense? God is in these things.

Pause... in God's presence...

A holding cross

You may find it helpful to hold a cross in your hand as you pray

The cross is a symbol of how God is with us in times of trouble. God understands and shares our pain.

As you hold the cross you may sense how God is holding you and holding those you love and care for.

The cross is also a symbol of hope. Having shared our sufferings and struggles Jesus rose from death to life.

As you hold the cross, be aware how God is with you as One who is turning all sorrow into joy, and every ending into a new beginning.



[The pictures show crosses made specially for holding, with smooth edges. They can be obtained from many Christian bookshops.]



Meditation Cards

[Lay out a selection of cards with pictures on a table.]

These images are given as starting points for prayer.

Sometimes a picture can speak to our inner self in a way that words cannot.

- ❖ As you look at the pictures, see if one begins to 'look at you' – something about it draws you, even if you're not sure why.
- ❖ Take the card with you and find a quiet place. Gaze quietly and prayerfully at the picture you have chosen. Ask God to unfold to you its significance...
- ❖ What does it suggest about the place where you are today...how you feel...how you sense God is at work in your life?
- ❖ Share with God the thoughts, hopes and feelings that arise

- ❖ You may find a verse on the back of the card that may or may not be helpful. What does the verse add to your thinking? If it doesn't help deepen what you see in the picture then leave it alone.

- ❖ When you have finished your reflection return the card to the table

Here and now is a meeting place

Here and now is the meeting place of your deep longing and God's deep giving

A fruitful meeting...

A deep breath...

A resting place...



“Life may be brimming over with experiences, but somewhere deep inside, all of us carry a vast and fruitful loneliness wherever we go. And sometimes the most important thing in a whole day is the rest we take between two deep breaths; or the turning inward in prayer for five short minutes.”

[Etty Hillesum: *An Interrupted Life*]

Listen to the sounds of this place, giving all your attention to your hearing...louder sounds and quieter...from close by and from distant places...with different tones and textures.

Look at what is around you – the shapes and the colours, the light and the shadow...take your time...this is a deep breath between all that activity... and God is in this deep breath.

As you stay in this meeting place you may become aware of your physical self...the weight of your feet on the floor, the relaxation of your fingers as you let them uncurl, the slow rhythm of your breathing. Take time to be with yourself in this way, for God meets you here.

Your feeling self may also greet you: – the lightness or heaviness, tiredness or energy, gratitude or sorrow. Receive your feeling self gently – as a guest in this place. A name for how you feel in this moment may come to you. Acknowledge its presence with you but also let it go – allow it to rest.

In this meeting place your thoughts will come and go. They might want to hustle you out of this moment, telling you there's somewhere more important you need to be. But there's nowhere more important for this moment than here and now – where God is. Even hurry and worry deserve to rest for a while.

In this meeting place God may speak or be silent – either way is good.

Speech may flow from your heart to God, in words or in stillness.

If you meet God here – in this place, in this moment of time, you can meet God again

Whenever you want, wherever you are

Today and tomorrow

God is here, God is now

Meeting God in this place – in this moment of my life

[As used in a day at Southwark Cathedral (when there was maintenance work in progress using scaffolding) – can be adapted to any church building, and possibly other places]

I look down at the floor

I think of feet that have walked these stones before me
My faith, building on the foundation they made for me

- Who has guided me on my faith journey so far, in person or through what they have written?
- What past experience of God's goodness grounds me in my life today?

I look up to the ceiling

I consider praise of God carved in stone, the work of human hands

- For what do I praise God today?
- How does God invite me today to express my praise in what I do, and in what I build with my life?

I look to the arches

I consider the support I need from God

- How do I need God to uphold me today?
- What heavy load am I invited to let go to God's care?

I face the scaffolding put up to gain safe access to the roof so it can be repaired

- Are there parts of me which I tend to ignore but which could do with a little tender loving care?
- Where in my life have I built scaffolding for safety which, now the repair work has been done and the structure is secure, perhaps I can now begin to take down?

I look to the East window, I consider the light flooding through.

I see this light echoed in candle flame

- What are the sources of light in my life?
- Where in my life do I want to ask God to say 'Let there be light'?

In the window I see Jesus with arms outstretched, surrounded by doves

- Where do I sense the Holy Spirit, life-giving holy dove, moving in my life?
- In what way might Jesus be inviting me, with open arms, today?

I look around at the people I share this space with

- Who do I want to thank God for today?
- Who is on my heart today? Who needs something from me, or has something to give me that I must be open to receive?

Listening to the Spirit

'Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?' [Luke 24:32]

1] Lectio Divina [Sacred Reading]

To be used with scripture or other spiritual writing including poetry

This way of prayer is a dialogue with the Lord. I reflect on what I have heard or read with Jesus, trusting him to open up what is as yet closed to me.

- I hear or read the passage, listening or looking out for those words and phrases that seem to be for me today
- I reflect on these words... the way they speak to me...how they connect with the place where I am in my life...how God reaches out to me through them
- I share with God the thoughts, feelings, hopes and desires these words have awoken in me. I listen to how God speaks to me
- I rest in what I what I have received, knowing that God is with me and I am in God.



2] A form of the Examen:

The daily practice of attentiveness to God within in my experience
This way of prayer is a dialogue with the Lord. I reflect on what I have experienced with Jesus, trusting him to open up what is as yet closed to me.

- I reflect on my experience: the things I saw, thought and felt today. I notice those moments of the day that in some way touched my emotions or understanding
- I reflect on these experiences... the way they speak to me...how they connect with the place where I am in my life...how God reaches out to me through them
- I share with God the thoughts, feelings, hopes and desires these experiences have awoken in me. I listen to how God speaks to me
- I rest in what I what I have received, knowing that God is with me and I am in God.

Walking and resting in the presence of God

God is in all things; all creation sings God's song. You too are made in God's likeness. Ask God for the gift of awareness of his presence.

As you walk stay in your senses, more than in your thoughts.
Take in the landscape around you: – the patterning of light and cloud, the shapes and colours of leaves and trees, the flight of birds against the sky
Feel the warmth of sun ...touch the bark of trees...listen to the wind blowing leaves.

Relax into the rhythm of your walking. If a sight or sound draws you, stay with it.

You may find words of prayer come to you – or you may find it enough to be still in God's company, in wonder at God's world



Using an arrow prayer / 'mantra' or song

As you walk repeat a short prayer in rhythm with your walking e.g.

- My light and my help
- Bless the Lord O my soul
- Draw me to you
- Come Lord Jesus
- Your kingdom come in me

or the words of a poem, the Lord's prayer or the 23rd psalm.

Alternatively use a verse from a hymn that expresses what is in your heart

The words and your walking act as a way of stilling you, making you more receptive and open to God

Resting in God

One of the 'Desert Fathers' described his simple way of prayer:

I am sitting there in God's presence, and when I put my leaves in to soak and when I weave a rope I say, Lord have mercy' – is not that a prayer?'

Find a quiet place to sit in the presence of the Lord.

Don't strive too hard for words or thoughts; instead rest there in God's company expressing your own need of him in whatever way comes naturally – with or without words.

Rest in that place, open to receive whatever he desires to give you.

Finger Labyrinth – Seeking God



*Ask God to lead you into his presence
Trace the pattern of the labyrinth slowly with your finger.
Let the motion still and calm you*

Come to me and I shall give you rest

**I respond to God's invitation to me.
As I move along the path I set my mind, heart and desire on God.
I let go to God all that holds me back.**

**I move slowly, prayerfully,
letting the path take me to the centre.**

I pause when I feel led to.

**I rest at the centre,
aware of God with me and in me.**

I give to God all that I am.

I ask God's forgiveness, healing and love to complete me.

**Having stopped for a while in the centre,
I follow the path out of the labyrinth.**

**I ponder what I have received
and its meaning for me.**

**I ask God to let this meeting shape me,
and flow into my life and relationships.**

Finger Labyrinth – Letting the day go to God



*Ask God to lead you into his presence
Trace the pattern of the labyrinth slowly with your finger.
Let the motion still and calm you*

At the end of the day:
As I move along the path I remember the day with God. I ponder the things that happened. I review what I felt at different points of the day. I ask God to show me the significance of what I experienced

I pause when I reach the centre. I leave here any burdens I have picked up in my day. I rest my whole being in God who is here, loving me just as I am.

As a new day begins:

I move with God into the day to come. I trace the path from the centre to the outside. He is with me and loves me just as I am. He is walking with me as I go about my day

Meeting God in Creation – II

Gather together some “natural” objects – leaves, fruits, twigs, stones – or perhaps some pictures from nature – views, wildlife. Spend some time gazing at them. See the rich colours, shapes and forms. You might find yourself drawn by one in particular – notice the detail... the intricate design.

What feelings are awoken within you as you gaze?

All beauty, all individuality and all fruitfulness
flows from God

All is made and held in Love



The seasons pass in and out of our lives
We too know change and movement,
ending and beginning.

God is the stillness of Love for all of our days

A resolution for a new year.

Like many others I have often not carried through my new year resolutions. Or to be more accurate I have – but only for a day or two! I wonder if in part this has been because I have plucked them from the surface of my life rather than allowing them to arise from some deeper place within. 'I will drink less coffee through the day'; 'I will tidy up my desk at the end of each day, not allowing any clutter to accumulate'. These good and useful wishes need attending to; yet they do not reach to the core of me. Instead as I walk around the park near our home words form themselves into a prayer: 'How can I 'be' unless I draw near to you?' If my life is not grounded in God I am all over the place, I am not at home with myself and I have nothing to share. So my first 'resolution' is not about coffee or my desk. It is to turn to the one whose gaze is always turned to me; it is about a way I desire to face life, my work and my relationships. Of course that turning will need to find its practical expression day by day, and it might even mean I am more moderate in my coffee consumption and I respect my desk more. But the turning comes first...and last.

In the Epiphany season we hear echoes of this inner resolve to turn towards Christ.

The wise men from the East resolutely follow the star. [Matthew 2]

The servants at the wedding feast of Cana are told to fix their attention on Jesus: 'Do whatever he tells you.' [John 2. 5]

Two disciples of John the Baptist are drawn to ask Jesus 'Where are you staying?' and are invited to 'Come and see'. They 'remain with him that day'. [John 1. 35-39]

Simon and his brother Andrew respond to Jesus' invitation: 'Follow me'. [Mark 1.17]

Jesus chooses twelve apostles 'to be with him' [Mark 3.14]

Other steps will follow, but they have no meaning without this first and enduring one: to resolutely set oneself towards Christ, seeking his company, attending to his word, walking in his footsteps.

Give me the grace to seek you,
for you seek me.
Turn my gaze towards your face,
for you look with love upon me.
Draw me to my home in you,
for you are at home in me.

An Easter Reflection: Seeds and their growth

The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how. The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head. [Mark 4: 26-28]

I am waiting for the weather to be a little kinder before I begin sowing seeds. I have packet upon packet of them collected from the dried seed pods of plants I grew last year: peas and beans, cornflowers and scabious, lettuce and sunflowers, cosmos and cucumber.

In themselves they are not much to look at: a small, dimpled round ball, a speck of dust so easily taken away by the wind, a bell-shaped piece of grit. To a casual observer they seem to hold little sign of life, in their greys and browns, and hard, dry coats.

And yet they hold inexpressible, irrepressible life. Hold one of those small seeds in the palm of your hand and wonder:

How can this piece of nothingness hold within it a tender shoot, the first green leaves, a stalk that sways in the breeze, questing roots that seek out nurture from the dark earth, a flower that stretches to the sky, and even a seed head to give life and colour for a time yet to come?

Different images spring to mind:

The seed is the word God sows in you: his word about who you are and what your life is for; the first glimmering of understanding of his desire for you.

If you make my word your home you are truly my disciples; you will learn the truth, and the truth will make you free [John 8:31]

The seed is Christ, the grain of wheat that falls to the earth and dies, and so bears a rich harvest: The garden tomb is where life stirs on Easter Day. As the seed coat breaks, the stone is rolled away. Our lives awaken in Christ.

What is sown is perishable, what is raised is imperishable. It is sown in dishonour, it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness, it is raised in power. I Corinthians 15: 42-43]

The seed is the hope we sow when we go where God invites us and act in response to God's call: the smallest of seeds will become a great tree where the birds of the air will find shelter.

With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it? It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade.' [Mark 4: 30-32]

You and I are seeds. God is drawing forth our hidden self

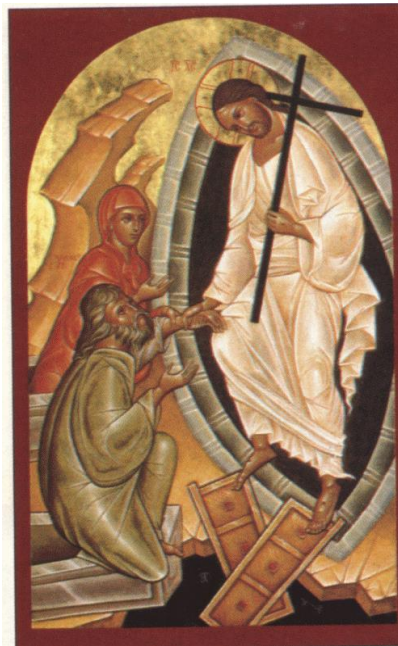
I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, for ever and ever. Amen. [Ephesians 3: 14-21]

Living Easter Day by Day

Easter Day comes. The awful desolation of Good Friday is over. We can move over decisively into joy with alleluia as our song.

Except it is often not like that. The difficult in our lives remains. We are not delivered forever from fear and doubt, even if we recognise that Christ's rising has set us free from death and made all things new. We may have had our alleluia moments in the past when Christ's presence felt tangible and hope abounded in the heart. But we are not guaranteed to feel that way when Easter Day comes. We may still be awaiting our own resurrection in an unresolved area of our life.



We can take heart that it was so for the first disciples too. We see Mary Magdalene weeping in the garden where Jesus was laid. Peter and his companions try to put out of their minds the trauma of the death of their friend by returning to their fishing. Two companions take the long road home to Emmaus, mourning the loss of their dream. Recognition of a new reality comes in a moment – the calling of a name, an unexpected haul of fish, the familiar movement of a stranger breaking bread. The risen Jesus meets them, and meets us,

at the unanticipated moment and within the dark as well as the light of our days.

We greet him not so much in the removal of our troubles but as he breaks bread with us within them.

And then the moment is gone. Mary Magdala cannot hold on to Jesus and we cannot grasp this Easter Day experience or make it happen again at our will.

But also the moment is not gone; it dwells in the storehouse of our memory. We can ponder it, returning to that time when difficulty envelops us and we can no longer see our way. Hope has found a home within, and if we search deeply enough it will find us again.

There are surprises too in the account of Jesus' death. Amidst the desolation the author of John's Gospel sees water flowing from Jesus' side [John 19:34].

I think of Ezekiel's vision of a life-giving stream of water flowing from the Temple [Ezekiel 47]. Wherever the river flows, life teems; the salt water becomes fresh; the trees that grow on its bank are for the healing of the nations. This Good Friday is also Easter Day.

Perhaps we too might experience resurrection not after our difficulties and struggles are resolved but in their very midst. Because it is in their very midst that Christ is, and life-giving water is ever flowing from his side.

Reflection for the end of Summer – Movement and stillness

Summer gives way to autumn. Spend some time today taking in the sights, sounds and essence of this season, As we look out on a garden, a park or a tree-lined street we are aware that we capture it in a still moment, as if in a photograph. And yet everything is in movement: the season journeys on, and what we see today will take a different form tomorrow. As we come before God in prayer we do so within a still moment. And yet around and within us everything is moving: events are unfolding; our thoughts and feelings turning this way and that way. And what of God? God is still, and still moving.

Summer gives way to autumn.
The sun slips lower in the sky.
Colours are intensified in the fresh morning air.
Berries ripen on wasteland and hedgerow.
Creation is still, and still moving.

Changing seasons of the earth and of the heart.
Times of sorrow and times of joy.
Moments of clarity and moments of confusion.
Times to begin again and times to let go.
Changing seasons of the earth and of the heart.

As we contemplate the changing seasons
of the earth and of our lives,
we also touch what is still.
God is ever creative in our lives
ever alongside, ever making new.
God's stillness is not that of the stone

but of the ever-flowing stream,
loving into being all that it touches
working its way into every furrow of our experience.
Still, and still moving.

What stillness is asked of us?
To continually seek God,
whatever the season.
To go on co-operating
with the work of Love in our lives
Then our stillness becomes the movement of the Spirit;
a channel for the river of life.

Being simplified under the gaze of God

What I needed was the solitude to expand in breadth and depth and to be simplified under the gaze of God, more or less the same way a plant spreads out its leaves under the sun

Thomas Merton: *Elected Silence*

When I read these words they settled with me.

In the complexity of all the needs, desires and anxieties that push and pull me around I recognise that I too need to 'be simplified'.

I notice it is a passive verb. I am not to simplify myself; instead I am to place myself under the gaze of God who alone has the dexterity and patience to unravel me.

I notice too that being simplified means we become more not less.

Under the gaze of God our breadth and depth expands like the leaves of a plant drawn into life by the sun.

A natural process of growth takes place that isn't forced or strained but is the realisation of what has always lain hidden within.

Our being is focused rather than scattered...integrated rather than pulled apart.

We are stripped of non-essentials so that what is real and true and useful is revealed.

Our co-operation is needed; we must sit still long enough before God for the liberation of our true life to begin.

Being simplified will hurt but it will also heal.

God's gaze persuades us to release our tight grip on what confuses and diminishes us, and take hold of what is unfamiliar: enduring and trustworthy love.

Placing ourselves under the gaze of God we allow the Creator to be creative.

We dwell under the gaze of God.

When we gaze we allow ourselves to be absorbed by what we see; our attention is steady; our eyes do not lose their focus.

Does God then 'gaze' at you and me in this way?

I for one do not consider myself that interesting or significant that another would choose to look at me so attentively

Yet we are invited to place ourselves 'under the gaze of God' - eyes that choose to see and by that gaze, go on creating us.

God gazes at us always but it is through solitude that we turn our eyes to meet God's. We seek the one who has always sought us. We align our lives towards God as a sunflower turns its face towards the sun.

Looking into God's eyes, life becomes simpler,

yet deeper, richer...

Reflection – faith, hope and love

**And so
faith, hope and love abide – these three,
and the greatest of these
is love.**

[1 Corinthians 13: 13]

The beginning, despite the word order of Paul's sentence, is love.
The beginning is God.

Your faith journey begins with God.

It is God who creates you, and goes on drawing you into being.

It is God who in Christ the Word comes to seek you, to call you by name, to invite you into relationship.



It is the Spirit of God, gifted to you out of love, who enables you to hear this invitation and to respond.

Love comes first, and from this we learn that God gives freely, generously, unconditionally.

Our value lies in God's beholding rather than in anything we achieve. All notions that you or I have to earn our worth to be loved by God fall away.

Love is God's name, and God's only activity. The pattern never changes.

If we begin with faith and hope we might forget that the beginning is always in God.

Our prayer, no matter how focused and attentive, doesn't make God present. God is already there.

Our good works do not earn God's favour.

God gives favour without ever considering if we deserve it or whether it is wise to give so much.

The real question is whether we will choose to align our lives with this Love that God is. Will you and I turn our lives towards Love? Will we respond when Love invites? Will our relationship with the God who loves first become the foundation of all we do and are?

The choice is faith,
the fruit is the active hope through which we begin to express the love
in which is all beginning.

**And so faith, hope and love
abide – these three,
and the greatest of these is love.**

Reflection – Noise and silence, turmoil and peace.

Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid. [John 14:27]

He did not say; you will not be troubled, you will not be laboured, you will not be disquieted; but he said: 'You will not be overcome.' [Julian of Norwich]

Where can we find true silence? Isn't there always noise? And where can we find peace of heart? Isn't there always something to disturb us?

Yes.

But the nature of the quest is not to find a place where noise is entirely absent but stillness *within* the normal sounds of life.

And in the same way we find peace *amidst* challenges and disturbances – not in their absence – for there will almost always be something to concern us.

One way to welcome noise and so begin find stillness is to give it our attention rather than try and fight it. So today as I sit in my office I hear a radio playing somewhere, the mechanical whirring of a cooling fan, the photocopier, snatches of conversation. I step out of my thoughts for a while to give all my attention to these sounds, seeking to be present to them. I breathe slowly and deeply, staying with the simple act of listening. As I do so, stillness slowly begins to enter me. Or is it that I enter the stillness that is *always* there, around and within the sounds I hear? As I become present to this moment and to the texture of its soundscape, I become present to God who is here in this place with me.

But how do I begin to find peace within troubles?

I am here in the company of my anxieties and concerns. Sometimes I feel they overwhelm me. I haven't the time to do what I need to do. I remember a conversation that just happened where I didn't put across what I wanted to say. I carry with me the frustration of something I've been giving my time to that hasn't worked out as I hope.

Now I stop to hear my worries and hurts. I let them come one by one in their turn. Rather than let them carry me away with their momentum, I let each one flow by me as if carried by a stream, giving each one space to tell its tale but then allowing it to move past me. I slowly become aware of the space between and around my worries – the stream that carries them to and from me. I am more than these things that trouble me. God is the 'more' that fills and surrounds me. I rest in this presence.

When we move from a place of stillness and peace we might again begin to be afflicted by noise and crave silence, or feel any peace within slip from us as concerns rise to the fore. But the point is that the stillness and the peace *never* leave us...We can step into their presence once more...into awareness of God who *is* our stillness and our peace.

Reflection – Building a Soul Shelter

I am in search of a haven, yet I must build it for myself, stone by stone. Everyone seeks a home, a refuge. [Etty Hillesum]

In 1941 Etty Hillesum, a young Dutch woman of Jewish descent, began keeping a diary as a way of focusing her desire to live a more centred and fruitful life. It was an accident of history that she began this spiritual search just as the Nazi occupation of Holland was taking firmer hold and life for Jews was becoming more restricted and uncertain.

We all seek meaning within a particular context. Hers happened to be the war and Nazi persecution. It concentrated her search but this is our search too: 'Who am I?' 'What is my life for?' 'Who is God and what does this mean for me?' 'How do I meet the challenges life throws at me?' 'How can I live more at depth rather than at the surface of things?'

Etty Hillesum came to realise that if she was to get anywhere she needed to build and maintain a 'soul shelter' – an inward space where she could rest in the presence of God and reflect on her experience. She adopted a variety of practices to help form and maintain this sacred space: daily meditation, the keeping of her journal, and contact with a mentor who kept her faithful to her search for an integrated and fruitful life.

Etty understood that this dwelling place of God within was the spring from which came her own capacity to live generously, without being ruled by self-absorption and fear. It was a transformational space where the most difficult of sorrows and anxieties could be received and remade, allowing what began as destructive to become creative. This shelter held the depths of who she was, for in its depths God was held, and she was held by God:

And that is how I feel, always and without cease: As if I were lying in your arms, O God, so protected and so sheltered and so

steeped in eternity. As if every breath I take were filled with it, and as if my smallest acts and words had a deeper source and a deeper meaning.

What need have you and I of a soul shelter? How will we build it and keep it?

It is a place within where, whatever is happening, we can remain at home with God.

It is also a hospitable space where others can enter and find shelter.

This is space to 'be'.

This is also space to 'become', for here we are open to God who goes on creating us. There is room for all our experience to rest, joyful and troubling, resolved and unresolved.

The shelter is a gift of God, and is also built by human hands. Our intent to be open to God is needed, as are regular practices that express that intent.

In being generous in giving God space within our daily rhythm of life we discover how generous God is in giving us room.

For Etty Hillesum meditation, reflective writing and the guidance of one she trusted helped form her soul shelter. The practices that build and maintain such space for us may not be identical, but we cannot take its presence for granted. It needs to be built 'stone by stone' and then cared for day by day.

Etty Hillesum wrote how she hoped to defend God's dwelling place inside her to the last; before anything and everything she knew this was essential. Only then was there room for other people, room for love, room to be 'Etty', room to house God.

Etty Hillesum's letters and diaries are published by Persephone Books as:

An Interrupted Life: the Diaries and Letters of Etty Hillesum 1941-43.

What is Prayer?

Prayer begins with God

Though we think of prayer as something we do, the first initiative belongs to God. We are called to dwell in a love already given, and be at home in God who has freely chosen to be at home in us. Prayer is the experience of being drawn into intimacy with God, the same intimacy as exists between Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Prayer is about relationship

Prayer is therefore about a relationship between you and God. God knows you, loves you and is with you. In prayer you turn your mind and heart to God whose mind and heart is always turned to you. To pray is to choose to respond to the invitation to relationship with God.



Prayer is where longing turns to seeking

Below the surface of our lives we long for completeness: to be free to live out what is best in us, and to be loved for who we are. For all that makes our lives full, we sometimes glimpse that something is missing. Our longing can move us in many different directions, and we enjoy the many good things of life. But at other times we may be restless, weary or hollow inside, frustrated at our inability to live the way we would wish to. We sense we have no still centre, no rest, and no final and complete 'home'.

In the Gospel we meet many people like us – the Samaritan woman who met Jesus at the well, the fisherman Peter, the taxman Matthew sitting at the side of the road as Jesus passed by. Something happened when they met Jesus...there was something about the way he looked at them. They intuitively knew that here was what they were longing for, and their longing turned into a choice to seek to be in his presence. Prayer is where our longing turns into seeking. We move from simply asking for things to make our life better, to

seeking a relationship with the One who alone can make our lives complete.

Prayer is seeking and finding our home

Jesus wants us to make our home in him, just as he chooses to be at home in us.

- Abide in me as I abide in you [John 15.4]
- As the Father has loved me so I have loved you; abide in my love [John 15.9]
- Those who love me will keep my word and my father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them [John 14.23]

Home is where we go out from and come back to, where we can let go of our pretences and be ourselves, and where we are known and cared for. God wants you to be 'at home' in this way. Prayer is the way you will find this home.

In prayer we share what is within our hearts

In prayer we share ourselves with God; this sharing can involve speaking: bringing to God what we feel, think or hope for. We can be ourselves with God, saying just what we need to, whether we are happy, sad, angry or anxious. At other times the sharing of ourselves is without words: we can simply 'be' with God, resting in God's presence.

Prayer is attentiveness and awareness

Prayer also involves being open, and listening, for God desires to share himself with us. God's word is spoken through scripture but also in daily life – in what we see, hear, read, think and feel. This is 'heart to heart' conversation, sharing what is deepest in us and being open to allow God to share what is deepest in him.

(Continued over...)

Prayer is being present to 'Presence'

God is always present to us...always 'here', always 'now'. God is there not just there in the special moments when an awareness of God breaks through to us, but always and everywhere. We can step into this 'always' whenever we wish, in busy places as much as quiet places. Prayer is stepping into the 'always' that is God's loving presence.

If we persist in prayer this sense of God's presence in the whole of our life will grow.

Prayer opens us to inner transformation

When we pray we make room for God to be at work within, bringing us healing, moving us towards wholeness, and setting us free. We open ourselves to Love, and in turn our capacity to love grows. In prayer we are drawn into God's compassion for others and find ourselves wanting to share our time and gifts in ways that bring life to others. We not only pray but begin to live 'Your kingdom come, here on earth as in heaven'

Many ways into prayer

There's not a right way to pray – we don't need 'the right words' – what matters is what is in our hearts. As we begin so God will help us, giving us the words to say and helping us be open to hear and receive. We may have been brought up with a particular style of prayer – with an emphasis on loud praise, or on quiet presence, or a formal liturgy – all have their place, and it's good to stretch ourselves by experiencing ways of prayer that are unfamiliar.



Let go to God

Sometimes we experience something when we pray; sometimes nothing seems to happen. All of this is in God's gift. What matters is not whether we feel this or that but whether through prayer we become more open to – and aware of – God in the whole of life.

There are things that can help us to pray: finding a regular place or time for prayer, using a visual focal point, relaxing our bodies or using a prayer word or 'mantra' to help still our minds. Ultimately though, prayer is not about having the right technique. Prayer isn't something we do in our own effort – it's something we allow the Spirit of God to do in us. Trying too hard or worrying whether we are doing it right can actually get in the way. 'Let go and let God' very much applies to prayer. Though we make the active choice to seek God, everything else lies in God's gift.

Ask, seek, knock

Jesus said 'Ask, seek, knock' [Luke 11.9]. Prayer is expressed in our desire to be present to God, knowing our need of his life. The desire for God is at the heart of prayer, and this desire itself is something we can ask for.

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