

Home Retreat Talk: PRAYER Saturday, 18th July, 2020.

Come Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of the faithful and kindle in us the fire of your love. Send forth your spirit and we will be created and you will renew the face of the earth.

"Is there a correct way of praying? And, if so, what is it?"

As Christians, we believe that Jesus Christ emptied himself of his Godness to become a human being so that he could tell us in our own human language that God loves each one of us, rather than trying to express this in the Old Testament language of thunder, lightning, clouds, visions and prophets.

Love is a two way relationship: it has to be accepted as well as offered. I mentioned this in a previous talk in the context of forgiveness, which is one of the vital components of love: we don't let hurts that our loved ones inflict on us, whether intentionally or not, get in the way of our relationship with them. Hopefully we learn that in our families.

But love is not just about forgiveness. We want to get to know the person we love. We want to spend time with the person we love. We want to communicate with the person we love. We know this at the human level and we learn how to express our love for other people or for one person in particular. We make mistakes and we learn from our mistakes and from the reactions of the people we are trying to build a relationship with.

Prayer is our attempt to communicate to God our love for him. There are some similarities with the way we express our love for other people and there are some ways in which it is completely different. For example, God will never, in any way, reject our attempts to get to know him. We read in the Old Testament that he got fed up with lots of sacrifices of animals but we get the impression that this was because he wanted his chosen people to care about him as a person who cared about them and not just a god who had to be propitiated for the times they didn't behave properly.

Some of us were brought up on ACTS: A C T S as the components of prayer, standing for Adoration, Contrition, Thanksgiving and Supplication. Each of these has its parallel in our relationship with another person we love: we adore them and express it in the way we look at them, complement them on how they look and so forth. When we know we have hurt them, we apologise and express our contrition, our regret and sorrow. We express our thanksgiving, our gratitude for things they have given us or have done for us and sometimes, because we know we are loved by them, we ask them for things, supplication. Sometimes, where God is concerned, we think about praying only when we want to ask him for something for me or for someone else. We need to remember the other three elements as well, especially the thanks – for everything. If we believe in God as a loving creator, every single thing we receive comes ultimately from him. As for supplication, asking God for something to happen, when God doesn't answer our prayers for something or someone in the way we expect or want, the important thing to remember is that he does love me and actually knows better than I do what is best for me or the person I'm praying

for - like the parent who doesn't give his 17 year old son the 750cc motor cycle that he has asked for.

When Jesus was asked which was the most important of the Commandments he answered that there were two equally important commandments: love God and love your neighbour. When he appeared to Paul on the road to Damascus he asked: "Why are you persecuting me?" not "Why are you persecuting my people". Another time he said that whenever we do a kindness to someone, feeding or clothing them or visiting them in hospital or prison, we do it to him. That is why we talk of the Church, the Assembly of God, as the Body of Christ: we are each members of his body. And that is why the prayer we do together, whether monks in choir or parishioners in church or groups sharing the Eucharist, is an important, a vital aspect of our worship.

But our own private prayer is vital too, literally vital in the sense of life giving. And this is where I maintain that there is no one correct way of praying. The only incorrect way is not to do it, not to spend time on it. Looking at our human relationships we notice two things. Different people talk to their loved ones in different ways. You may have stayed a weekend with a former school or college friend and thought to yourself "I can't understand how he (she) could have married her (him) and the way they talk to each other..... Well!" But they seem quite happy together. So different people express their relationship with God in different ways and though we may be tempted to think "Well, you pray to God in your way and I'll pray to God in his", that is not valid or excusable. Abbot John Chapman used to say "Pray as you can, not as you can't". We shouldn't worry "Am I doing it right?"

The other thing we notice is that as our personal relationships deepen, so do our ways of expressing them change. When we first meet it may be chatter, chatter, chatter "Have you seen that film? Do you like that colour? What are you doing tomorrow?" But later, the words don't matter so much: "Darling" "Yes, Darling" "Nothing Darling, just Darling Darling". And you've noticed with your grandparents that they may spend the whole evening in the same room, she's knitting, he's reading the paper and they don't say a word to each other - but it would be quite different if one of them weren't there. So we shouldn't be surprised if the way we pray to God changes or develops as our relationship develops.

We probably start with set prayers like the Our Father that Jesus himself taught us. When we're trying to work out how we 'adore' Him, we may find it helpful to say slowly the words of the Gloria at Mass. We may find the Rosary helpful, thinking of the different mysteries as we say it. I now begin my prayers with "I am your beloved son, in whom you take delight". It helps me realise that this is indeed a two-way relationship. And lest it seem somewhat presumptuous, I follow it with the Jesus prayer: "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner".

And we shouldn't be surprised if the words in our prayer get fewer. We may find it helpful to imagine that we are at Jesus's side during one incident during his life that we read of in

the Gospels and meditate on how we feel, watching how he relates to different people and listening to what he teaches. How do his parables hit us, if we imagine ourselves listening to them for the first time? Some people find this very helpful, others not at all.

And then there is meditation, which some people talk of as mindfulness. Some people think of it as contemplation and as an advanced form of prayer, only for saints and mystics. This is not so. It may not be for everyone, but it is for anyone - provided we do not expect to be caught up in visions and aethereal experiences. It is simple. Find somewhere quiet, sit up straight, keep your head erect (it's too easy to drop off to sleep otherwise) close your eyes and keep saying a prayer-word or mantra to yourself, over and over again. One such, widely recommended, is 'Maranatha'. It's a word in Aramaic (the language Jesus spoke) and it can be translated as 'Come, Lord Jesus' but it's important not to try and concentrate on the meaning. The mistake is to think that this will keep distractions at bay. It doesn't. But when you realise that for the last ten minutes you've been planning all the things you've got to get done today, or wondering what you're going to get for supper, you are able to immediately dismiss these distractions – allow them to float on down the river, so to speak, and revert to repeating the mantra, without having to try and conjure up images of God or remember where you had got to in your prayer. It acts like an anchor to come back to. And to keep coming back to – because the distractions will keep on coming, thick and fast.

I tried this way of prayer for a month or so about 50 years ago and didn't find it helpful. 17 years ago I tried it again and am still trying; 20 or 30 minutes in the morning and 20 or 30 minutes in the evening. I was warned by a couple who have been praying this way for years that the first 20 years are the hardest. And I was encouraged to hear that Abbot Herbert used to quote the old simple catechism: "Fathers, we read that prayer is the raising up of the mind and heart to God. It says nothing about keeping them there." Mind you, it helps to have a notebook or sheet of paper to make a note of things that do occur to you that need to be done because then you don't need to concentrate on remembering them and can, as I say, let them float off downstream.

I was told that self-discipline is vital. This was not, as I at first assumed, discipline in controlling distractions – you can't. The discipline lies in keeping at it, when it seems completely pointless, when you wonder if it really can be valid prayer, when you wonder whether there is actually a God anyway. (I was encouraged when making my Ordination retreat with Fr Aidan, who was the hermit in our Community, to hear him using this phrase.) And St Bernard, when somebody told him that avoiding distractions was just a matter of will power, bet him his horse that he couldn't say the Our Father from beginning to end without any distractions. The chap knelt down, closed his eyes and started saying the Our Father but interrupted himself to ask "Will you include the saddle and bridle?"

This self-discipline is where a regular time or times each day is a help. It's why we monks have regular times of prayer: not because we like it but because we know it's important and so it needs to be a routine.

All the spiritual masters seem to agree that the real test of prayer is not how holy you feel, or how close to God you think you are, let alone how little you were distracted, but that if you are regular in making time each and every day for trying to pray, then if you look back over the last month or two you will find, if you are absolutely honest with yourself, that in some area of your life you have become more tolerant, more generous or more truthful or whatever: more Christlike. There's still a long way to go but there has been some definite improvement. It's what happens when we waste time with God: we make room for the Holy Spirit, who energized Jesus in his human form, and who Jesus promised to send to energise us.

And if you think about it, when it seems a complete and utterly pointless waste of time and yet we stick to it day after day, perhaps then our prayer is even purer: we don't feel we're getting anything out of it and yet we go on making time for God, even though we're not sure he's there, never mind listening: then we are truly living as if he is more important than ourselves and the other far more entertaining or useful ways in which we could be spending our time. And that, St Paul tells us, is what love is: living as if the other is more important than myself.

The other day I was lent a new book by Fr Ronald Rolheiser called Domestic Monastery and he quotes Fr Carlo Carretto who, after spending many years in the desert by himself, praying, realized that his Mother who had spent nearly 30 years raising children was actually more contemplative and unselfish than he was. Rolheiser goes on to say that he would previously have taught that the more busy the Mother was, the more she needed an hour or so of uninterrupted prayer each day. Carretto's experience made him realize how unrealistic this was. But only because that Mother's 30 years had been spent totally at the disposal of her children, living continually as if they were more important than herself. In other words it doesn't apply to people who are just very busy. Most of us really do need our daily private, quiet time with God to keep us growing in love.

One of Richard Dawkins atheist friends once remarked, after listening to someone talking about prayer "Well, when I was a child, I used to have an imaginary friend to whom I used to talk, but I grew out of that a long time ago." At one level one can reply "Yes, OK, it is just a matter of faith". But one can also look back over the last month or two and reflect on how one has been changed.

Pray well. And may the Holy Spirit indeed kindle in us the fire of love, for God and for each other, because it will renew the face of the earth.