

Faith Seeking Understanding

Lent 2010

The Practice of Prayer

“Introduction to the Series”

by Revd Eugene O’Neill (St Brigid’s Catholic Church)

This evening, I want to talk about ‘prayer’ and take as my jumping off point that line in the Gospel: *‘in the morning long before dawn, he got up and left the house, and went off to a lonely place and prayed there’*.

Prayer was at the heart of the life of Jesus Christ: no matter how exhausted, he prayed – often alone.

Prayer had always been at the heart of the life of followers of Christ and prayer has to be at the heart of each of our lives, if we are to live as Christians.

Prayer has to be the foundation.

What is prayer?

There are as many definitions as there are people. The one I find most helpful for me is: “prayer is that name we give to feeding our soul”. Because we humans are more than just a body, that is our bottom line. We are spirit in a body: and that spirit we call our “soul.” If you don’t feed that soul everyday, it will grow weak and may die.

Often we think of prayer as “words” such as the phrase “saying our prayers”. Christian prayer is not words: at heart it is companionship with another person – with Jesus. It’s not about the shallows – it’s about allowing the depths of God to touch the depths of our lives.

Like any relationship, if it is to grow, prayer needs certain things – four in fact. It needs:

- belief;
- trust;
- time;
- time alone – solitude – every bit as much as any human relationship needs these things.

Prayer at heart isn’t a mumbled mouthful of words babbled into the dark. It’s a giving over of ourselves in trust everyday to someone who loves us.

So – is that you? Is that how you would see/ describe your prayer (life)? If not, what do you do?

Let’s be practical. Here’s what I would suggest. Look at those four things in your life: belief, trust, time, time alone.

They are essentials of any profound relationship between persons; the key to any marriage. Are they part of your prayer?

First - BELIEF: take a look at your beliefs. Do you believe in Jesus Christ? That he was/ is God? That he lived on this earth, that he died, rose from the dead and is now alive? That the Gospels are true? Do you actually know his story? Do you love it – or does it bore you?

Any of you who have been in love – or through a deep friendship – will have had the experience of becoming fascinated by the life story of the person you love or are coming to know: wanting to know it all, relishing the detail, getting other people to give more insight – tell it their way.

That’s not obsessiveness: it’s part of the normal process of friendship and falling in love – wanting to know the story. And knowing the story in any human relationship leads to a deeper and deeper belief in the person and their importance in your life.

But the point is that knowing the story, we come to know and believe in the person

whose story it is from our depths; and fall in love with him in our hearts.

Same with Jesus: It's to keep that story of Jesus alive and before us that the Gospels are read at every Mass. It's to keep that story current that we make such a fuss about faith schools.

Belief is the first step.

Suggestion 1: if prayer isn't working for you, it may be you need to go back to the story. Read the Gospels. You may not know them. It's there you will be able to relish the detail of the life of Jesus – essential, if you are to know him as a person.

You can read them in less time than it takes to read the Da Vinci Code.

Start with Mark; then Luke; then Matthew; then John; then Acts.

You wouldn't marry someone you didn't know or believe in; you can't pray to someone you don't know or believe in.

Second: TRUST: I am only able to be fragile/ vulnerable with someone I trust. I'm sure you're no different.

Trust is simply the felt knowledge that the person you care for will not hurt you or betray you. Even if they snap / or are insensitive at times, there is a fundamental commitment.

Trust allows me to be vulnerable, to be real, to open my heart.

It's possible with very few; it's at the centre of every flourishing marriage and every relationship of depth: the trust that in all the world there is one person who will allow you to open your heart and guarantee they will treat gently what they find there.

Trust is just another word for faith.

Do you trust Jesus?

If prayer is not alive for you, it may be you don't. It may be you've tried to trust in the past and been hurt. But it may be that you have never opened your heart to him – shown him what is real in your life - maybe

because you believe what's in your heart or your life is too awful.

Suggestion 2: from your heart, in your depths, ask Jesus now to give you personally, a deep and felt knowledge of him as your friend, your Lord and Saviour – and a trusting love for him. Make that asking your daily prayer – if there is no other. Remember: you must ask from your depths.

Third - TIME: How much time do you spend in prayer everyday? Do a "time audit" on yourself and be honest.

If prayer isn't good in your life ask yourself: am I giving it time? And do I have any deep, meaningful, sustaining human friendships which I expect to flourish with no time spent in the company of the person? If you spend no time with a person any friendship will fade.

Suggestion 3: programme in some prayer time everyday. Wherever: in the shower, in the car, by your bed, in the bath, with your family, on your own.

But make it a realistic amount; make it do-able.

Fourth and last - TIME ALONE – solitude.

With friendship, the only way to know someone really, is to spend time alone with them. That goes for humans; it goes for God. It's true too for marriage.

I'll bet every married couple with children however much they love them will acknowledge that they have needed time with just the two of them, to deepen their relationship. It's not about escaping the little monsters. It's about deepening their love. And once that love is deepened in time alone together in solitude, they come back replenished to the family.

The distractions need to be put away sometimes: distractions keep us in the shallows.

That's why Sunday Worship can be experienced by many as so unfulfilling spiritually - because you need to have come

to know God in solitude, if you are to experience him in community.

Suggestion 4 – final one: carve out of your busy day/ week – a chunk of time for you and God alone. You owe it to your soul. And your soul is your deepest self.

If there is one thing I have wanted to convey to you this evening, it is this: friendship is the key to a relationship with god – to prayer. You and I can relate to God as a friend.

Belief, trust, time, time alone. Four essentials of any relationship between persons. Four essentials of the relationship between the person YOU and the person Jesus.

At best, your prayer life can be:
the deepest communication;
the most vulnerable companionship;
depth speaking to depth;
heart flowing into heart;
love beyond words.

“In the same morning, long before dawn, he got up and left the house and went off to a lonely place and prayed there.”

If Jesus needed to pray, you can be sure that those who are to be his hands, feet, voice and witness, need it more, and that he is telling us something.

These are some suggested foundations for your prayer life.

So let's recap:

What is prayer? At heart: an ongoing friendship between persons: you and God. What does it need to work? Like any relationship, it needs foundations – in fact four: belief, trust, time and time alone.

Now I want to talk about two other things: first: presence; second: memory. And why these are important to prayer.

First presence. It's important, when we try to pray, never to forget that prayer is not a form of exercise we do. It's a meeting of two presences. There are two persons present at

each end of the prayer line: God and you; God and me.

What does God bring by his presence? Intimate knowledge of us; total love for us; complete acceptance of us – as we are.

Let's not forget, it is God who created us individually. Who knows our worth and destiny. Who loves us infinitely in this life – even if we detest ourselves. And it is God who will meet us when we walk alone through the doorway of death.

It is the deepest part of our faith that

- no matter what we have done, or how far we stray, God never lets us go
- he continually beckons us
- if we surrender to him, God can give us profound inward consolation in life and sure guidance. He does this in prayer.

Yet, we are inclined to think that prayer is what we do – like going to a gym to get fit by putting ourselves through discomfort. Prayer is not so much what we do: prayer is mostly what God does.

So what do we do? We make ourselves present. That's what we do in prayer. What matters is our “being there,” present and available for God to act in us.

That can mean physically being present – in church, in a quiet place, outside amongst nature, wherever. You would be amazed at how many people come into church every day to spend time in quietness and prayer. You'd be amazed at how many people – especially young people – spend really substantial amounts of time in prayer.

But that's not always possible. And there's no point saying spend twenty minutes in church or in quiet prayer at home to a mother of a bunch of demanding small children. It's not usually feasible. There's no point saying it to someone whose work is so time-demanding that they barely get five minutes to call their own in the day.

It's easy to make prayer seem so complicated and time-demanding that it's tempting not even to try. To think: I might as well not bother because I don't have time; I have to

get on with my work and my family and my life.

The truth is off course that prayer is very simple: that each of us can make work, family and life into prayer.

But in the middle of our daily tasks, duties and distractions, all of us have the ability to be “mindful” of God: constantly or from time to time – in our heads to draw our thoughts from what we’re doing to a deeper reality: to remember him, to be aware in faith of his loving presence, to thank him and ask him for our needs. In fact, the “mindfulness” is more important than any physical presence.

You know that one can be present physically in any relationship and a million miles away mentally. The same is true of prayer. So “being there,” means more than that: it means “mindfulness” of God first.

An old definition of prayer was: “prayer is lifting up the mind and heart to God”. It’s not a bad definition. That’s what “mindfulness” is.

So prayer is not words. It’s being attentive to a presence; drawing the mind and heart to focus on God; it’s being there physically or in moments of mindfulness even when not alone or when busy.

Two presences:

First: Bringing our presence to let God’s presence act in us.

Second: Saying prayers – the ones we know by heart. What’s the point? How can they help our being present? Some people think that prayer is just saying prayers, uttering pious words. It’s not. Remember the old definition of prayer as lifting up the mind and the heart to God. Nothing about words or techniques there. But using words is not an inferior form of prayer. It’s how we all communicate most of the time.

I used to think that words were an inferior or non-advanced form of prayer. Like stepping stones or a ladder, necessary to get somewhere but eventually you went beyond them as you became holier. And eventually

you would arrive at deep contemplation of divinity.

Now that’s true....

That the ultimate goal of all prayer is union with God.

But it’s not true of me ...yet!

In the over twenty years that I’ve been taking the search for God in prayer seriously, I’ve tried most things: meditation; centering; Ignatian prayer; rhythmic prayer. I’ve gone on pilgrimages; sat on mountains; gazed at God-in-nature; I’ve tried to find him in others, in music; I’ve breathed enough incense in my youth to make an elephant collapse. And I believe that the quest will continue until I collapse.

But more and more, I come back to simple things – in fact simple words: the words of the psalms; and the words of prayers I memorized often when I was young.

Now prayer is speaking to God, yes. Speaking and listening to someone who knows and loves you, definitely. Clearly, being spontaneous and real is important.

But, sometimes, I don’t know what to say. Sometimes, I can’t be creative. Sometimes, in fact, I feel that I’m speaking to myself. Or just processing my thoughts in Church. But I can still pray sincerely. And I’ve found the words of others really helpful.

The memorized words of writing that has emerged from the thought or soul of another person, can sometimes say it better. At least in my experience.

Memorized prayers are like poetry known by heart, or a well-loved piece of music played again and again. The well-known words, the well-known music sometimes seem to say what we’re feeling so much better than we could if we had to articulate it.

I’ve found that these things have a capacity to transport me – often to a place of peace or hope and calm.

To bring solace, consolation, balm...just as a well-worn novel or favourite book can.

I'm sure you're no different.

Well known, memorized prayers can do the same. They can knit into the DNA of our memories. They can become our words as much as the author's. They can become part of us and how we think.

Like the favourite music played again and again, I've found in my experience prayers known-by-heart often have had the effect of taking me out of my head, breaking through the noise of my thoughts and directing me outwards...towards God. All of us have minds richly stocked with just such prayers.

So: think "presence"; think "memory".

Finally, I want to look at some of those simple memorized prayers and give you some very practical steps I've personally found helpful to make them work better for you.

First way: pay attention to the words!

You know and I know, how easy it is to have said the words of prayers and to be finished and to have no recollection of the words or phrases just said.

I could kick myself every time I utter the "Our Father", get to the end, realize I've said the words at least physically...but that's it: my mouth has formed the shapes, breath came out, the sound emerged; but did I think, did they come from my depths, did they mean anything to me? You must be joking!

I suspect that you're no different at least some of the time.

Yet, how will we be transformed if we say, "forgive us our trespasses" but not from our depths?

I kick myself because this is the prayer, these are the words, Christ himself gave us – gave me – to speak to the Father...and to express the depths. And so often, they are babbled from the shallows.

Paying attention to the words very closely; listening to them; pondering them is a really simple but very effective way of making praying better.

It's also a deeply ancient, authentic form of prayer. The first monks from the fourth century onwards would often pray by taking a short piece of the Sacred Scripture and saying it over and over, very slowly forming the words again and again until these words saturated them...slowly seeping into their consciousness and knitting into their memory. Effectively becoming part of them so that these words began to form how they would think.

And it's a deeply liturgical form of prayer. In Catholic belief and in different ways in the Reformed traditions, the Eucharistic liturgies are at heart the miracle of the Resurrection, the Word, made present, by the uttering of words.

ur liturgical worship in many traditions is full of prayers that focus us on God's blessings to us and direct us towards God.

These words can wash over us like a pious rigmarole. Or we can decide to make each word our own...repeating them in the silence of our minds.

Paying attention to the words: straightforward, uncomplicated: the first way to make them work better to create mindfulness.

Second way: short familiar prayers can be a useful check on wandering minds.

When we sincerely want to give time to God, it is a good thing to have something ready-made up our sleeves in case we find ourselves going blank.

Something that will pull our thoughts to God and provide fodder for our minds.

When the desire to pray wanes and we feel bored – at least in my experience – a verse or phrase from a prayer, hymn or poem can act like blowing on the bottom of a dying fire.

One that I like – and use during quiet times at Mass – is the poem composed by St Thomas Aquinas in the thirteenth century: the Anima Christi – familiar certainly to Catholics as "Soul of my Saviour": "Soul of

Christ, sanctify me; body of Christ save me; blood of Christ inebriate me...”

It can pull me back from distraction by trivia to focus on the presence of God.

Third way: prayers can be recited somewhat mechanically to cut through the noise of a distracted mind.

I find this really helpful at times when I’m sitting there with a million thoughts buzzing around my head ...that are more pressing than the thought of God.

In the Catholic tradition, the rhythmic recitation of the scriptural prayer we call the Rosary fulfills such a function.

The Orthodox Churches used the Jesus Prayer for the same purpose. Do you know it? The phrase uttered by the blind beggar, Bartimaeus to Jesus: “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the Living God, have mercy on me, a sinner”.

Repeated quietly or inwardly, again and again.

Its purpose is to break through the din of the mind and free the soul for a contemplative gaze.

But any phrase is as good.

Fourth and final way. Brief prayers springing spontaneously from our hearts, can punctuate our nights and days. Especially busy nights and days, and really help the mindfulness that can open us to God’s presence.

What do I mean? Anything: it can be a phrase from the scriptures or worship: “my Lord and my God”, “God so loved the world”, “You are God’s masterpiece”.

Or a single phrase from a well-loved prayer: “pray for us now and at the hour of our death.” “The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God”, “Ever this day be at my side, to light to guard, to rule and guide.”

Such brief phrases take seconds to utter or think. But if said or thought with sincerity,

feeling and meaning can help us keep our finger on the pulse of God in our lives.

God is always there – just as the blood in our bodies is always flowing. You only become aware of that quiet, hidden flow when the finger searches for the pulse.

You only become aware of the quiet stream of God’s life in yours when the pulse of God’s flow is sought.

And just such brief phrases can help find that pulse.

Short phrases can be beacons reaching their light out into the darkness, to guide you in the dark, to lead you safely towards harbor, to bring you to the other person present in prayer: Jesus himself.

That’s it: memorized prayers, all of us know them from our own traditions. They can help us: by paying attention to the words; by using them to check wandering minds; by reciting them mechanically to break through the noise inside and out; by punctuating the day like beacons of light.

They can help us to become more mindful in simple, practical ways.

“In the morning long before dawn, he got up and left the house, and went off to a lonely place and prayed there”.

Prayer was at the heart of the life of Jesus Christ; prayer has to be at the heart of the life of the followers of Christ; prayer feeds our souls; it is a giving over of the self to a person who loves us; it’s not about words; but we are people of the Word; and at best, they can bring us into an encounter with the Divine Word; and through prayer, our hearts can flow into his heart, our depths into his depths; and we can be led into a love beyond words.

And this is our goal in organizing this series of talks for these five weeks of Lent 2010: to help us all enter and develop more deeply, “the practice of prayer”.