

Taking Prayer Seriously



by Mike Stewart



Anglican Agenda Series ♦ J.I. Packer, editor

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**“They devoted themselves to the apostles’
teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking
of bread and to prayer.” Acts 2.42**

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Preface To The Series

The Anglican Agenda series of publications aims to open up current questions that call for thought, discussion, prayer and decision among members of the Anglican Church of Canada at this time. The series is sponsored by the Essentials movement, which seeks all-round renewal of life and strength in the Anglican Church, and its writers are Anglican Church personnel speaking out of their loyalty to the Church and their acute sense of its present needs. It is hoped that the series will spark deep personal reflection and group discussion within and between parishes, so that we all may be better prepared for the difficult and demanding era into which, as it seems, our Church is now entering.

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The world really doesn't need more busy people, maybe not even more intelligent people. It needs "deep people". People who know that they need solitude if they are going to find out who they are; silence, if their words are to mean anything; reflection, if their actions are to have any significance; contemplation, if they are to see the world as it really is; prayer, if they are going to be conscious of God, if they are to "know God and enjoy Him forever." Don Postema, *Space For God*.

The Priority of Prayer

The most basic and fundamental requirement for a human being to live is to breathe. From the child's first cry at birth to the final breath at death we breathe in order to live.

Prayer is breath for the Christian. There can be no life of faith without it. As Richard Foster states, prayer is "the deepest and highest work of the human spirit" (*Celebration of Discipline*). Prayer both creates and changes life and lies at the root of all godliness. Any read of church history will show that all men and women who have walked with God regard prayer as the **main** business of their life and not just an "add-on" to a whole host of other activities. For anyone wanting to grow in their relationship with God it is essential that they cultivate a life of prayer. Put simply we pray because our life depends upon it, and more deeply we pray because we love God.

The Purpose of Prayer

It is a question worth asking from time to time; "what are we doing when we pray?" It is interesting to note that although the scriptures have much to say about the need, the pattern and the fruit of prayer, they do not seek to define it as such. It is assumed that a person wishing to know God and to do His will, prays. Jesus' counsel is not "you should pray" but "when you pray" (Matthew 6. 5). Prayer is how we come to know

God and His purposes. It is the means by which we enter into a continued and growing relationship with God. No-one in love needs to be told the importance of spending time in the company of the one they love. Similarly no child at birth needs to be told “stick close to your mother”! Prayer is how we stick close to God. It is our response to God’s initiative working on the human heart.

☺ *Prayer as asking*

Prayer usually begins here. It is instinctive to the human soul to cry out for help when in need. Most people understand prayer this way. Indeed Jesus encourages us here with a glorious promise, “Ask and it will be given you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened” (Matthew 7. 7-8). This kind of prayer arises from our dependency on God to do for us what we are unable to do for ourselves. Prayer as asking is often referred to as the “prayer of petition”.

Both the Old and New Testaments are full of encouragements when it comes to offering our petitions to God. The book of Psalms is the most glorious example of this and is quite simply the most precious resource for any praying soul. I remember once hearing a Trappist monk speak on the importance of praying the psalms. He recalled once being asked if he ever got bored reciting the psalms with the other monks in his community seven times a day 365 days a year. He said that in all honesty his answer was “no”. He went on to say that for him the Psalms are like running water, they are therapy for the soul. Like a mirror, he said, they continually reflect our life’s story-they cover every human condition and always keep up with you. Some people like to attempt to explain the Psalms, others are content to let the Psalms explain them.

The Apostle Paul encourages us to not be anxious about anything, “but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 4.6-7). A glorious fruit of the prayer of petition is the blessing of God’s peace which is not reliant on our ability to figure out how God is answering our requests but comes as a result of leaving our cares and concerns in the hands of Him who knows us and knows what we need better than we do. The Good Shepherd knows how to care for His sheep.

Prayer as Thanksgiving

“Enter His gates with thanksgiving and His courts with praise; give thanks to Him and praise His name” (Psalm 100. 4).

Thankfulness is the ideal way to bring ourselves consciously into the presence of God.

Consider the following story told by Lora Clark; “The phone rang. It was my friend Annette. She had been going through a rough time. ‘I feel so alone,’ she said. ‘I’ve lost God and don’t know how to find Him.’ I’d felt the same way once, and told Annette how making a gratitude list had helped. ‘Write down the numbers one through fifty down the side of a piece of paper,’ I explained. ‘Then go back and count the things you’re thankful for. And remember, it’s not the things you’re supposed to be thankful for, but the things you really are thankful for.’ ‘Okay then, I’ll give it a try,’ Annette said, hanging up. Not long after, the phone rang again. It was Annette. ‘I found Him!’ she exclaimed joyfully.”

Thankfulness honours God and is good for the human soul. “Praise the LORD, O my soul; all my inmost being, praise His holy name. Praise the LORD, O my soul, and forget not all His benefits” (Psalm 103.1, 2). A wonderful exercise in prayer is to keep a journal. My journals are my constant companions on my journey through life with Jesus. In our journals we can record our prayer requests, the things that we find ourselves thinking most about, our reflections upon our life circumstances, and the things we sense that God is saying to us. Many of the Psalms themselves could be said to be David’s journals. As we look back over our journal entries we can see how much God is working with us and how He continues to answer prayer and reveal Himself to us in a myriad of ways. Indeed, re-reading our journals brings that glorious and growing conviction that we are not alone. Such findings result in thankfulness of heart to our merciful LORD who has promised us His continual presence.

Thankfulness puts the focus where it belongs, on God Himself and not us. True Christian spirituality is about God and His workings, not about me. I am not at the centre of my existence, He is. Having a thankful heart puts things in the right order. “First things first”, a thankful heart concludes: God is good to me.

“No one can really give thanks unless within his heart he deeply feels that undeserved blessings have been bestowed upon him. Our great sin

is our carefree assumption that we deserve what God gives and that we are free to do with it what we please” (Calvin Wingert).

☛ Prayer as confession

As we grow in our relationship with God we discover that just as asking and thanksgiving begin to come naturally to us, so does confession. These three aspects of prayer become a regular diet for our prayer life. Just as we make our requests known to God and thank Him for His many blessings, benefits and answers to prayer, so we realize that we have not been all we should be or would like to be. As with all approaches to prayer, confession is God’s gift to us. It is a work of the Holy Spirit to convict us of sin. (John 16. 8-11). Regular confession is a very necessary aspect of prayer and a means whereby we are transformed into the image of Christ. As the Holy Spirit reveals our sin we simply say sorry and ask God’s forgiveness and grace to do better next time and then we move on in faith and trust. It is important to remember that God reveals our sins to us because He loves us and is more committed to our salvation and sanctification than we are. Jesus’ parable of the prodigal son shows us a father who longs for His son’s return more than the son desires to return. The Holy Spirit convicts us for our own good, so that we may return to God, who is our true home and resting place. This is so different from the general and vague sense of guilt that many of us carry around and which simply weighs us down and does not bring a stronger connection with God.

“If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1. 9). Such is His glorious promise to all who seek to love Him with their whole heart, mind, soul and strength.

In our discussion on prayer to this point we have looked at three aspects of prayer in which we do the talking. We ask, we give thanks and we confess. It must be emphasised again that all prayer is a response to God’s initiative and working upon the human heart. When I pray I am responding to a desire that God has already initiated within me by His grace. As Eugene Peterson states, grace means that I am always coming in on something that is already going on. I pray because God desires to meet with me, more than I desire to meet with Him and has made me aware of His desire. This principle runs through our entire life. God continues to work first. “We love because He first loved us” (1 John 4.

19), and as St Augustine reminds us, “true, whole prayer is nothing but love”. In the *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, Samuel Coleridge declares, “He prayeth best, who loveth best.” We should ask ourselves from time to time, “how well do I love my God?”

There is another aspect of prayer that cannot be neglected: Prayer not as talking, but as **listening**. The philosopher Søren Kierkegaard once said, “a man prayed and at first he thought that prayer was talking. But he became more and more quiet until in the end he realized that prayer is listening”. Prayer is the means whereby we move from knowing about God to actually knowing Him. Merely knowing about God will only get us so far. There is no substitute for actually knowing and being with Him. (See Jesus’ stern rebuke recorded in Matthew 7.21-23). In prayer we are simply with God and we open ourselves to Him and allow Him to reveal Himself to us and to speak to our hearts. As with all the spiritual disciplines, prayer is not so much an end in itself, as it is a means to an end, the end being union with God, which is the goal of all human existence. With this in mind we may plead with Charles Wesley, “Jesus, Lover of my soul, let me to Thy bosom fly.”

Let us now look at three further aspects of prayer which guide us to prayer as listening to God.

☞ *Divine Reading (Lectio Divina)*

Lectio Divina is a very ancient way of reading the scriptures and was at one time practised by most Christians. There are many ways of reading the Scriptures; *Lectio Divina* is a deliberately prayerful way. It is a slow, prayerful passage through the scriptures, which causes the word of God to become our means of union with God. Time set aside for such a prayerful reading of the scriptures enables us to discover more clearly an underlying spiritual rhythm to our lives. We also begin to notice more clearly within ourselves a growing desire and ability to offer to God more of ourselves, our relationships and our circumstances, and we find ourselves more ready to accept His embrace, which He is continually offering us in His Son. We discover that there is no place in our hearts that we cannot offer to God and we come to consecrate all of our memories, hopes and dreams to Him. As words from the Celtic Night Prayer book explain, “He is able to walk through all of our memories until they become a peaceable kingdom”.

Lectio Divina has four stages to it. All of these stages in themselves are good disciplines for the spiritual rhythm of our lives as each stage helps

to bring a growing openness to God's presence with us. Let us now look at each stage.

1. Reading

In *Lectio Divina* we read the scriptures by listening to them with our hearts. When we come to read a passage our attitude is one of reverential listening. As we read we seek to pay attention to the still small voice of God present in His word to us, God's voice touching our hearts. This gentle listening is a tuning-in to the presence of God found in the scriptures. If we are constantly speaking and surrounded by noise we cannot hear gentle sounds. This is why it is important for us to find a quiet place for divine reading. We do well to heed the ancient cry of the prophet, "Hear O Israel".

This first stage requires us to take some time to allow ourselves to settle and quieten down. Although this discipline often feels counter-cultural it is vital to any life of prayer.

When we come to read a passage of scripture by listening, we need to read that passage deliberately slowly, and if possible aloud. This helps our attentiveness and gentle listening for that still small voice of God to highlight a word or a phrase from the passage being read. We are listening for God to say to our hearts, "this is my particular word for you today". This way of reading is very different from the speed reading that we often apply when reading books and even the Bible itself. But it is important for us to read slowly in order to hear properly what God's word is for us today. We are seeking the Word revealed in the words.

2. Reflecting

Once we have taken the time to hear that word from God we reflect upon it. We make ourselves at home with it. The ancient image of reflecting when doing *Lectio Divina* is of "ruminating". We chew over the word in our souls the way a cow chews the cud. This is an old picture of what pondering the word of God looks like. We take the word into ourselves, we digest it, we memorize it and we turn it over and over in our hearts and minds and allow it to interact with our memories and emotions. We gently and slowly repeat it to ourselves. We stick with it and don't rush on to the rest of the passage. It is as if God were saying to us in the words He has brought to us, "this is who I am for you today". In this second stage we allow God's word to really become His particular and direct word to us and for us now, a word that touches us and affects us at our deepest level. Indeed His word is medicine to the soul. As we

do this we acknowledge that through His word to us God is inviting us more deeply into His loving embrace.

3. *Responding*

For this third stage we enter into loving conversation with the One who has spoken to us. As we do this we also enter into a deeper consecration of ourselves to Him. Here we do what C.S. Lewis described as laying before Him what is in us and not what ought to be in us. We are who we are and it is to that person that God comes. For example your passage for divine reading may have been John 20. 19-23, the account of Jesus appearing to His disciples after His resurrection on the evening of that first day of the week. As you slowly read and listened to that passage you noticed the gentle presence of God drawing you to the words of Jesus, "Peace be with you!" These words of His became His still small voice for you today. You then moved to stage two and began to reflect on those words. You repeated them slowly to yourself, you savoured them and began to allow them to fill your heart and mind. As you did this you noticed a particular unsettling event from your past come to your attention and you felt uneasy as you observed this. That event and the accompanying emotion become part of our praying at stage three. Here the word of God, in this case, "Peace be with you!" interacts with and heals our memory of difficult and pain-filled experiences. We simply recite the word/s that He has given us and let them wash over that memory and emotion the way the ocean washes over the sand. Let us remember that it is the Holy Spirit who leads us in our praying and that the initiative is always His. Our job is to simply stick with the word that He has given us and let the Holy Spirit do His work. This stage of *Lectio Divina* then is simply responding to God through the prayer of the heart using the word that He has given us. We use no other formula than that. We simply offer to Him what His word has revealed to us and we pray using that word as our guide. His word to us does indeed transform us. He is the Wonderful Counsellor.

4. *Resting*

Thomas Merton once said, "By reading the scriptures I am so renewed that all nature seems renewed around me and with me. The sky seems to be a pure, cooler blue, the trees a deeper green. The whole world is charged with the glory of God and I feel music and fire under my feet." Such is the fruit of the discipline of praying seriously and not just casually reading, the scriptures, which is what Merton is talking about

This fourth and final stage of *Lectio Divina* is simply lying back and

resting in the arms of God. Like the Apostle John at the Last Supper we lean back against Jesus (John 13. 25). This experience is often wordless, like the experience of two lovers holding hands. This final stage reminds us to use words when they are helpful and to let go of words when they are not. Here we simply sit and enjoy God's presence and marvel at His love. We learn to enjoy His embrace. We sit still and know that He is God, and we are thankful that He has just spoken to us and met us in His word. As we do this we are sealed in His peace. It may be that in the stillness He invites you to dialogue with Him further using the word/s that He has given you. If so, this is His invitation to go deeper with Him into the truth that sets you free. If not, simply enter the silence of rest in God.

If *Lectio Divina* is a new concept to you and you would like to try it, I recommend beginning with a twenty minute block of time. You can spend 5 minutes on each stage. Don't forget to keep a journal and record God's word to you and what you found within yourself.

It was a Saturday evening in early spring. I was leading a group of people in a *Lectio Divina* exercise on Luke's account of Jesus' visit to Mary and Martha (Luke 10. 38-42). I asked the participants to prayerfully imagine the events in Luke's account and to consider where they would be in the story as it unfolded in their hearts and minds, and to consider what Jesus was telling them through this. I also encouraged them to write out their findings and what they were hearing from Jesus during this exercise. In doing this I was simply encouraging people to use this particular passage of scripture to allow God to speak to them and to lead them into conversation with Him. Here's what happened to me as I prayerfully read the scriptures that evening;

I pictured the scene as Luke records it. I began then to visualize what the house that Jesus was in, might have looked like and I saw Him sitting on a seat there. I pictured Mary sitting at His feet listening to His every word, and I saw Martha busy in the kitchen. I then imagined where I would be in this scene, and there I was; sitting next to Mary at the feet of Jesus. I was somewhat pleased about that and quietly congratulated myself that I was in the right place! But then something happened as the scene continued to play out in my mind. After a few moments, I got up and walked out of the house and called to a few people in the street, telling them that Jesus was in the house and that they should really listen to what He had to say. I escorted some people into the room where Jesus was and they sat down with me and listened. After a few

moments I got up and did the same thing again, and as before, some people followed me into the room and sat down and listened to Jesus. Again, I listened for a few moments and repeated the process. At this point I realized that each time I left the room to find more people, I was missing something that Jesus was saying. I kept missing His conclusions, or punch lines.

Through this simple exercise I sensed that God was showing me two things. The first was that I do indeed love to introduce people to Jesus. I love to tell people about Him. That's one reason why I am a Priest. The second thing was that in my ministry, I must be careful not to neglect the greater thing, the one thing necessary that Jesus spoke to Martha about when she was getting flustered in the kitchen. The lesson for me that night was this: In the midst of Christian service and activity, do not neglect this greater thing. Simply being with Jesus and listening to His every word is the one thing necessary for me. Through that *Lectio Divina* exercise based on Luke 10.38-42 God clearly spoke to my heart.

☛ *Silence and Solitude*

“We are silent at the beginning of the day because God should have the first word, and we are silent before going to sleep because the last word also belongs to God,” (Dietrich Bonhoeffer).

“The LORD is in His holy temple; let all the earth be silent before Him,” (Habakkuk 2.20).

Society today is characterized by noise, hurry and crowds. For the most part we have turned our backs on silence. Albert Einstein once counselled, “the individual who has experienced solitude will not easily become a victim of mass suggestion.” As Christians we are to follow the cloud and not the crowd! If we are to cultivate a deep life of prayer we must welcome and create moments of silence and solitude. Silence is not simply the absence of speech. Silence in essence is about listening to God. “Be still and know that I am God” (Psalm 46. 10). Without stillness our experience of God will always be more limited than it need be. As human beings we often fear being alone and we often fear silence. These fears however must be faced and conquered. In time we will discover God's presence in times of solitude and silence in a way that sets us free from loneliness and fear. We will not fear being alone because we know that we are not alone. Solitude is not so much about being alone as it is about being with God. It is not so much about withdrawal in

order to get away, as it is about withdrawal in order to be with someone who usually gets crowded out of our lives, Our LORD Himself. We take times of silence and solitude in our often busy and crowded lives as an act of love and of trust. Silence and solitude are closely linked, they cannot be separated, which is why I discuss them here under a single heading.

As we read the gospels and look at the life and ministry of Jesus we notice a pattern of what we might call withdrawal and activity. At times Jesus was interacting with the disciples and the growing crowds of people who began to follow Him. We see Him teaching and healing the sick, living His life in the company of others. At other times however we see Him withdrawing in order to be alone with His Father. He inaugurated His ministry by spending forty days alone in the desert (Matthew 4.1-11). Before He chose the twelve He spent the whole night praying alone on the desert hills (Luke 6. 12). When He received the news of John the Baptist's death, He "withdrew by boat privately to a solitary place" (Matthew 14. 13). After the miraculous feeding of the five thousand, Jesus "went up on a mountainside by Himself to pray" (Matthew 14. 23). After a long day of work "very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where He prayed" (Mark 1. 35). When the twelve returned from a mission, Jesus told them, "Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest" (Mark 6. 31). Luke tells us, "Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed" (Luke 5. 16). With Peter, James and John He sought out the silence of a mountain as the place of His Transfiguration (Matthew 17. 1-9), and was praying when the change took place (Luke 9. 29). As He prepared for His great Passion, Jesus went to the solitude of the garden of Gethsemane to pray (Matthew 26. 36-46). This pattern of withdrawal and activity seen in the life of our LORD is essential for our own spiritual wellbeing. We neglect it to our peril. We too need time with others and time alone with our Father.

It takes faith and love to go on a path of being alone with God. It is indeed a narrow path and one rarely taken. Ever since the fall of man recorded in Genesis chapter 3, human beings have tried to hide from their Creator. If we are to be truly honest with ourselves we have to acknowledge our tendency to hide behind the bushes of busyness, fear, shame, restlessness and even church activity. We also need to acknowledge our tendency to use words in order to manipulate, self-justify and control. The call of God to Adam found in Genesis 3. 9 continues to

echo throughout the ages to every man, woman and child: “Where are you?” God is continually calling us out of hiding in order to face up to Him and ourselves, and allow ourselves to fall directly into the hands of the living God, which is both fearful and wonderful all at the same time. In silence and solitude we come out of hiding and leave any speaking to God. We hold our tongue in order to listen properly.

Silence and solitude do not just happen to us; as with any aspect of prayer they involve action as well as a state of heart and mind. With this in mind here are some steps into silence and solitude you might like to try:

- ✦ Try to find a place where you can be alone and quiet for a while. Put in that place some things that speak to you about God. For example have a Bible there, a candle, a cross or a crucifix as well as a notebook and journal. The more you use this place for prayer the more you will come to automatically associate being there with God. This then becomes an important place of prayer for you.
- ✦ In your allotted time for prayer and Bible reading, give yourself 10 minutes to sit in silence and say nothing. This length of time can be extended as best suits you later on. Remind yourself that the purpose of these 10 minutes is to listen to God. Close your eyes and become aware of your breathing. Remind yourself that you are in the presence of God and that He is holding you. These 10 minutes are an act of love and worship. It helps to sit straight backed in a comfortable chair, with both feet flat on the ground with your legs spaced slightly apart. Breathe deeply as you sit with God. If you find your mind wandering, don't fret. You might like to call to mind a word from the scriptures that you have been reading, or to simply repeat the Name of Jesus. A helpful exercise you might want to try as you enter into a time of silence is to sit firstly with your hands resting on your legs with your palms facing down. While in this position release everything in your world to God. Surrender yourself again to Him. Offer to God your whole self as a living sacrifice, as well as all your hopes, concerns and fears. When you have done this and are ready, then turn your hands so that your palms face upwards. As you do this you are wanting to receive whatever God has for you. Having released all to God, you are now able to receive from Him. Now let there be complete silence. Simply allow God to love you where you are. The key is not to rush and to start small.
- ✦ Consider your average day and take advantage of any little times of solitude that already exist, and can be redeemed. For example:

time spent driving the car on open roads, times in the home when the children are at school, times when you walk around the neighbourhood. These too can become times of quiet listening as you are alone with God. Take a close look at your day and bless what already exists. Enjoy these moments with God, they are a gift.

- * Consider taking a retreat for a day, a weekend or longer. Talk to your church leadership about the best way to do this.

Here is a prayer you might like to use before entering a time of silence. My Spiritual Director gave me a copy of this prayer which I often use at the beginning of a retreat; the author is unknown.

*Holy, Blessed Trinity, My LORD and my God,
I firmly believe that you are here,
That you see me, that you hear me, that you know me, that you love me
and that by choice I am yours.
I love you, sometimes hesitantly, often times haltingly,
Yet very deeply.
I humbly accept your pardon for my sin.
And in these moments of silence set aside with you,
I ask for the courage and the grace
To be open
To the transforming action of your unconditional love.
I pray in Jesus' Name. Amen.*

So far in this booklet we have looked at six particular ways of praying. Three ways of primarily speaking in prayer; asking, thanksgiving and confession; and three ways of primarily listening in prayer; *Lectio Divina*, silence and solitude. Two further topics need our attention; dryness in prayer, and the importance of "The Daily Office."

☛ *Dryness*

When we first begin to take prayer seriously and commit ourselves to a life of prayer there may well be an initial period of elation. This is also true when we first begin an approach to prayer that is new and unfamiliar to us. In these seasons of prayer we sense and feel God's presence with us, and it is not hard to see answers to our prayers in our lives and in the form of favourable circumstances. After a while however the elation fades and things change. Answers to prayer seem less obvious, God's presence is no longer felt and life seems less favourable toward us. The

temptation after a while is to simply give up. This temptation is based on the false assumption that because we no longer feel anything, nothing is happening. Nothing could be further from the truth!

The issue of dryness in prayer has been discussed throughout church history. (Dryness has also been called the “dark night of the soul,” a phrase first used by St. John of the Cross). It is a recurring experience in the life of every praying Christian. We may not be able to prevent it, but the thing that can help the most is our attitude to what we are experiencing. There may be times when dryness in prayer is a result of our own foolishness or wrongdoing, and it is certainly worth asking the Holy Spirit to reveal to you the cause if this is the case. A lot of the time however, dryness in prayer comes as a result of God’s action. If the Holy Spirit does reveal to you a specific cause of your dryness, repent and move on. If He does not reveal a cause it is important to stop blaming yourself, stop trying to resist the dryness and simply persevere. Don’t give up! The journey to spiritual maturity in God is not about our gaining more and more control over our lives and experiences; it is about the giving of that control to God. In seasons of dryness in prayer God is wanting to take us deeper into Himself and to teach us more of what it means to walk by faith and not by sight. It is through the difficulty of these seasons that we learn to meet God not through our emotions but through our faith. We move from the gratifications of feelings to the conviction of faith. Put simply we are learning by the grace of the Holy Spirit that our emotions are not to run our Christianity. We move from a surface level spirituality to a deeper wisdom in the inner man. We are not dependent upon our emotions or favourable circumstances in order to live with God. Our only refuge is to be God Himself!

The most difficult thing about dryness in prayer is that God seems absent. The truth is that He is not absent but that our usual way of relating to Him through our emotions has been removed by His initiative. In seasons of dryness we don’t feel or sense God’s presence as we used to and this can be alarming. The wisdom that we learn in these seasons however is so precious that in time we can actually come to appreciate seasons of dryness as much as any season of abundant and felt blessing. A good lesson for us is to enjoy God’s presence when we feel it and to enjoy our faith when we don’t. We can value dryness for what it teaches us. A final thing to note here is that dryness does not last forever, it is a season. The emotions will return and when they do there is an added joy coupled with a greater maturity. In all things God is in control and God

can be trusted to take care of us. Throughout the scriptures we see a God who sometimes takes His people into the desert in order to prepare and teach them in specific ways. The desert is usually a very dry place with little to hide behind or distract us.

For a longer and more in depth treatment of this important subject you might like to take a look at the writings of St. John of the Cross regarding, “The Dark Night.”

☞ *The Daily Office*

When it comes to deciding how to pray we do well to remember the words of the former Archbishop of Canterbury Donald Coggan who once advised, “why be poor when you don’t have to be?”

There is a wealth of resources available to us to guide and assist our praying. For Anglicans the natural launchpad is “The Daily Office.” Coming to God at particular times of the day on a regular basis helps to create a daily rhythm of prayer that has been deeply rooted in the lives of God’s people since the 4th century. *The Book Of Common Prayer* has four daily offices for both corporate and personal use; “The Order for Morning Prayer,” “Prayers at Mid-day,” “The Order for Evening Prayer” and “An Order for Compline” (or Night Prayer), as well as an order for “Family Prayer.”

The Book of Alternative Services contains the Daily Offices of “Morning Prayer,” “Prayers at Mid-day” and “Evening Prayer.”

In addition to these there are vast amounts of wonderful liturgical resources to help give shape and form to our praying. If you would like to look further I would recommend *The Daily Office SSF*, *Celtic Daily Prayer* and the Common Worship material produced by the Church of England.

Each of the Daily Offices includes set prayers, space for Bible readings, reflection and spontaneous prayer.

Whatever pattern of praying you adopt it is important to start small and go from there, to create space in your day where you can be alone with God and in those moments not to hurry or rush. Prayer, as we have seen, is about being with God. Whatever steps you need to take and whatever resources you need to help you, go for it. Nothing, positively nothing, matters more.



Questions for Study and Discussion

1. What is your current pattern of prayer? Do you feel a change is needed and if so what might that change look like?
2. What answers to prayer have you seen most recently?
3. Have you ever practiced *Lectio Divina* as described in this booklet? If so how did God speak to you through it?
4. When was the last time you were silent and in solitude? What was this like for you?
5. Looking back over a season of dryness that you experienced in prayer, what did you learn through it?
6. What do you think God is saying to you about your walk with Him these days?

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