

## THE PRACTICE OF PRAYER

Sister Margaret Howarth

Sisters' Day 8<sup>th</sup> May 2010

I feel I need to begin with a disclaimer. I am no expert in this subject, just a fellow-learner and fellow-struggler. I can only speak from where I am at present in this lifelong journey of coming closer to God and will be glad to learn more from your comments in discussion later.

I chose the title The Practice of Prayer because the word practice has two meanings and both are applicable. Personal prayer is one of the practices of the spiritual life and in order to progress we must practise it regularly. We are finite sinful human beings trying to converse with the infinite, Almighty and holy God. No wonder we struggle with prayer and yet we have a desperate need for it and a longing to pray effectually.

There will be times when we cannot pray or when our prayers seem to go nowhere, as if God is hidden behind a wall or beyond a cloud. God has not moved away. The difficulty is in our own perceptions or feelings or can be accounted for by illness, pain, guilt or depression. Sometimes, I believe, God takes us or allows us to go into a wilderness and it is hard to feel his presence but he is there all the time. We need to hang on with the knowledge of our faith, continue to trust, continue to keep our regular appointment of prayer each day, even if we struggle to find words, until the sense of his presence returns – and it will – and our faith will be stronger. We must trust more in our faith than in our feelings; hang on to the knowledge that God is faithful and God loves us. Keep the appointment, accept the silence and wait on him and for him. Knock – keep knocking - and it shall be opened.

I don't want to talk about the practical details of praying. Body position will be prompted by your spirit; sometimes it will be one way, sometimes another. I believe if we get the inside right, the outside will take care of itself. We just need to find the best time and the best place for our circumstances that allows us quiet solitude and the absence of distractions – 'Go into your closet and close the door', said Jesus, 'and pray to your Father who is unseen. Then your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you'.

Whatever place we select, we come to the place where God is already waiting for us. Jesus withdrew frequently to seek his father. How can we do without what Jesus considered essential? Many of us lead busy and noisy lives with many demands on our time and attention, whether it is paid employment, or caring for families or dependent older relatives or, at times, all these so it is not easy to find space and solitude – a sanctuary. But find it we must.

There are occasions, of course, when we offer a brief spontaneous prayer wherever we are – a heartfelt thank you for successful medical treatment or birth or the overwhelming sight of a glorious sunset. Or we cry out in anger or sorrow and that is right for we are acknowledging the concern of God for our lives. Or it can be a cry for help, ‘Stay close, Lord, I am afraid’. It’s like being able to send a brief e-mail to someone with whom we already have a regular communication. It reminds me of the story of the Bishop and the Curate who shared a room at a seminary. The Curate, in order to impress the Bishop knelt by his bed each night in lengthy prayer, while the Bishop knelt only briefly before getting into bed. The Curate didn’t understand this and asked the Bishop on the last night why he offered such short prayers. The Bishop said, ‘When you have spent a good deal of the day conversing with someone, it doesn’t take long to say ‘Goodnight’.

And that is the point. Our brief prayers can only be built on the foundation of strong regular prayer. They are like postscripts to a longer letter. Nehemiah’s brief prayer as he stood before the king was preceded by days of praying and weeping and fasting. No doubt the same was true of Hannah’s prayer in the Tabernacle and Tyndale’s prayer at the stake.

We need the skeletal structure of planned regular prayer, on which the muscle and tissue of unceasing prayer can take shape. The promptings of our feeble hearts to pray only as and when we feel like it are not enough to hold us close to God. We, in our weakness, need the discipline of structure. Our meeting for breaking of bread each week, our daily reading of God’s Word and our daily prayer are as vital to our spiritual life and growth as food is to our natural health and development. Our soul should hunger for these things as our stomachs hunger for food; and you know how uncomfortable and weak you feel if you go just one day without food. We cannot expect to grow spiritually with an erratic prayer life. In Scripture regular, fervent prayer is always a mark of the faithful. Jesus is in this, as in every aspect of prayer and the spiritual life, the supreme example.

Jesus mostly withdrew to a solitary place and spent long periods of time alone with his Father in deep prayer. It is said that he was heard for his reverence. If Jesus, the holy Son of God, approached His Father with reverence, how much more is that required of us.

Although we approach God, at his invitation, we should never be casual about this, never amble in and start chatting about our needs. Yes, we are his loved children but he is still the almighty Sovereign Lord and Creator; there is nothing approaching equality in our relationship. We must come near to him with great reverence.

Because life is sometimes hard and we are assailed by worries, pain, stress or grief, we tend to come into prayer full of those pre-occupations. Our concerns loom large, fill our vision. We come loaded with baggage, our stuff. Can I suggest that we

put the bags down just inside the doorway. Let go – for the moment - of all that is bothering us and focus our attention wholly on God as we approach Him. The consciousness of being in his presence can leave us speechless as we contemplate our God, who is all powerful, all-knowing, holy and righteous.

If we find it difficult to stop the self-chatter in our heads, it is useful to read or recite a few verses of Scripture or a hymn to settle our thoughts on God.

We approach him with nothing but wonder and empty hands and we recognise by coming close that he is awesome not just in power and greatness but awesome in the depth and quality of his love and grace – not only Almighty Creator, but tender Father, whose love for us is greater than we know. We come from our dimness into the radiance of his glory. Our speechlessness gives way to worshipping him for all that he is, though we sometimes struggle to find adequate words but we can take inspiration from Scripture or hymn writers – ‘My God how wonderful you are, your majesty how bright ...’. In adoring God, our perspective changes hugely. Now his greatness fills our view and we are reduced to our proper smallness by comparison. We are told to humble ourselves before God, and worship him as is his due.

This change of perspective leads us to acknowledge, in humility, our helplessness and unworthiness and our total dependence on God’s grace. We need to confess our faults – not a vague, ‘Please pardon all the things I have done wrong and the things I have failed to do’. That won’t do. We need to be – and are told to be specific. We need to own our guilt, feel remorse and bring a spirit of true repentance to our prayer for forgiveness. God is looking for a contrite spirit, a heart broken by our sin. A contrite heart is the doorway through which grace can enter. Through Christ, God has dealt with sin and extends to us his grace, because we have believed in his Son. His arms are open wide to receive us with immeasurable love, our sins put behind his back. I imagine my baggage of sin and failings taken away and obliterated. We are free of that weight of guilt. Grace covers not only what we do or fail to do, but what we are – God receives us as we are – believers - forgiven sinners. So our contrition, daily elevating God and humbling ourselves, allows us to grow in grace and become increasingly aware of the enormity of God’s grace and love. ‘This one thing I esteem’, said God through Isaiah, ‘he who is humble and contrite in spirit’.

And Jesus said there is a way to be assured of forgiveness, ‘If you forgive others their trespasses, then your Father will also forgive you your trespasses’. It is a matter of attitude of mind – a contrite spirit towards God and a loving spirit towards others. There is also a stern warning from Jesus, ‘If (what a big word is ‘if’) - if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins’. Failure to forgive is the very opposite of a contrite spirit. Do we take that seriously? Our salvation is at stake! As we appeal to God to put our sins behind him and affirm his loving grace

towards us, so we must – MUST - forgive from our hearts any who have offended us and pray for them and take steps to be wholly reconciled with them without resentment; in so doing we clear our conscience and relieve them of guilt and sorrow. As someone said, 'Love is giving someone a second chance – for the hundredth time'. We have been forgiven so much – sin so great that it deserved the death sentence; how can we not forgive others the smaller debts. We have received grace – let us be gracious in all our relationships. We must live as we pray.

The relief and joy of having been forgiven leads to thankfulness and peace that comes from having been freed from a guilty conscience. What feeling is more potent than that to produce thankfulness in us. Freed from sin and death! Accounted righteous, through faith and grace! So we thank God for what he has done for us, continues to do and will do. How can we thank him enough? I find there are not sufficient words to express my thankfulness; I just feel it. It is a matter of attitude again. As one American brother memorably said, 'You gotta have an attitude of gratitude'. 'We enter his gates with thanksgiving in our hearts' and we live each day, 'always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ'. Our thankfulness brings joy to the heart of our Father.

I am also moved to thank Jesus for all that he did for us, in defeating sin and surrendering his sinless life to an agonising and ignominious death in order to give us sinners life. Contemplation of the price Jesus paid for us should not be limited to the breaking of bread service. There are some who think we should not pray to Jesus but only to the Father, but Jesus is our Saviour, our shepherd, our High Priest, our King, our friend, our example, our counsellor, our master and Lord – this one whose words and pattern of life we try to follow and who invites us to come to him in our need.. It seems then inconceivable to me that we should not talk to him, thank him, worship him, consult him and seek his help. He has been raised by God above all rule and authority and every name that can be named. Jesus said that 'all should honour the Son just as they Honour the Father. He who does not honour the son, does not honour the Father who sent him'.

As we think of the glorified Christ, we are prompted to pray to the Father to send him back soon for we long to see him in his glory bringing God's righteousness to the earth. As we watch for that day, are we not also watchmen, responsible for warning others and for encouraging each other in our faith 'all the more as we see the day approaching'.

With our minds full of God's purpose and promises, we can just rest in his presence. We are now able to bring our own concerns to him. We thank God for our many blessings. And as with confession, generalities won't do. We need to be specific. 'Thank you, Father, that I have your Word in my own language so I can read it at any time' or 'Thank you, Father, that my sister is well again.' – whatever blessings there

are in our lives, let us acknowledge that all good things come from God and give him the thanks, for that pleases him.

Now we can bring our bag of petitions, our needs and our hurts, things large and small. Jesus taught us to pray, 'Give us this day our daily bread' (which incidentally confirms that we need to pray daily) or it could be enough money for the bus or petrol for the car, or shoes for the children, or safe travel, or courage at the hospital or comfort in our loneliness or grief – in all our personal concerns we acknowledge that we are dependent on our God. He knows our needs before we ask. His answers to our prayers will always be the best for us though we may not recognise that at the time. Sometimes we will ask for a stone that looks to us like bread and God gives us the bread that to our short-sightedness looks like a stone.

We sometimes feel that our prayers go unanswered, even unheard. There is no easy way to still our anxiety about this. We remember that we are children and, like all young children, we do not understand the Father's perspective and his greater wisdom. We must hang on by faith to the fact that God is the Sovereign Lord, full of wisdom and love and mercy and he has a purpose with us, beyond our present state, to bring us to eternal joy. So we accept humbly – even without understanding – that he knows what he is about; he knows what we are as yet unable to understand. So we pray, 'if it be your will'.

We know it is his will to grant us wisdom and patience, in fact all the gifts of the spirit so we can ask freely for these, but changing our circumstances or healing us may or may not be granted. Paul's refused prayer for healing was accompanied by the assurance, 'my grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness'. Acceptance is not fatalism but a positive affirmation that God's Will is best and is for our eternal good – all things do work together for good for those who love God and who are the called according to his purpose. We are privileged to be part of God's good purpose, always in the embrace of his love, whatever our present sufferings. Little by little, as we submit to his Will, we are changed into his obedient children – we are being freed from self-preoccupation to serve our God and our fellows. Prayer isn't about getting what we want, but engaging with God who wants to lead us to something higher than our natural selves. Prayer changes us.

And we receive God's love, not to hug it to ourselves but to share it with others, so in our prayer our thoughts turn to the many people about whom we are concerned. We have the honour and the privilege and the solemn responsibility of taking to God our concerned care for other people for we desire for them more than we can give. So we call on the greater power and the greater love of God for them. This is a priestly ministry. Jesus intercedes for us and we are invited to intercede for others. 'Pray in the spirit', wrote Paul, 'with all kinds of prayers and requests; always keep on praying for all the saints'.

We think of those on the prayer line, or in our ecclesia or our neighbours, friends or family members, or those in the wider world affected by war or drought or famine or disease or persecution and we seek God's mercy for them. God sees; God knows before we mention them. And I believe he grieves too for the sufferings of his created people. His compassion was seen in all that Jesus did. But only God sees the big picture and the future he has planned for each one who calls on him. I find I need less and less to ask for a specific answer to prayer. I bring people to him – in fact, I imagine carrying them and laying them down in front of him - to seek his love and mercy, knowing – trusting - that the Sovereign Lord God will do right. By praying thus in the spirit, we not only touch the heart of God with our petitions, but we also enlarge our hearts and deepen our love for our brothers and sisters and neighbours and are moved to try to understand their needs better and to do whatever we can to help them.

The consciousness of the human condition reminds us that there will be no lasting joy or peace until Jesus comes, no relief for the world's sorrow, so we are led to pray again for his coming. We strengthen our hope that all that God has promised for his people and for the earth will one day soon be fulfilled and we take courage. God has it all in hand.

So we come full circle and worship him again. Prayer changes us. I believe that prayer is the link between our knowledge of God's Word and our life of active love. Prayer moves things from our minds to our hearts, preparing us for service. Prayer is the pathway into the spiritual life. As we worship God in prayer, so we go on to honour him in our words and actions; as we seek forgiveness for our faults, so we go on to forgive from the heart and be reconciled with any who have offended us and seek reconciliation with those we have offended; as we thank God and our Lord Jesus in our prayers, so we live with an attitude of gratitude in our hearts; as we pray for the Kingdom to come, we live in constant expectation of it and desire for it and seek to promote the good news among the people we meet; as we seek for help for ourselves, we devote ourselves to his service; as we plead for others in need of help, so we must be ever ready to give whatever practical help and encouragement we can. We must live as we pray.

So we come to the 'Amen'. I would love to have time to talk about this word 'amen', but I don't. So I encourage you all to get out your concordances and research the word for yourselves. It is a powerful word – even a name of God and a title of the glorified Christ – a word used by Jesus far more often than the English translations convey. It is not just 'so be it', not just a sort of 'Roger, and out', but 'Amen' is a strong affirmation that God is the one true and holy God and Jesus is his Anointed Son. It's like saying 'YES!'. Paul wrote, 'For however many promises God has made, they are 'yes' in Christ and so through him, the Amen is spoken by us to

the glory of God'. (2 Cor 1,20) Let us not mumble this meaningful word but speak it out with conviction, affirming our trust in God's glorious name and in the name of Jesus our Saviour.

We can linger in his presence for a while without words, resting in his love, accepting the blessings of his grace, before we continue our daily life. We go without the bags we brought, leaving all our concerns with the Father to be disposed of by his grace; we go with hands full of forgiveness and hearts full of peace, elevated and strengthened to do his will, and to live the prayer.