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Introduction

There are two sections to this guide. The first section contains some descriptions of methods of prayer and modes of prayer. These are presented to help you in your prayer life, and hopefully to help you help other people too. It is intended to be a practical use guide and is laid out accordingly. Space has been left for you to add your own ideas and to make notes from your experience of using the methods described.

The second section is intended to be a reference section explains some of the thinking that inspired me to write this guide. I have included some sample prayers where I put my thoughts into practice. They are included because various people have been said that they have been helped by them, so it is my hope that they will be of use to you. I claim copyright on them but not for profit scanning or copying of these prayers and artwork is allowed provided that you credit the work I've done in producing them and reproduce them in full with the intention of using them in Christian worship.





Section one - Tuning in

God is with us every day, just like we are continually surrounded by radio waves and TV signals. Unlike radio waves we don't need technological equipment to pick up the signal, humans are born with the ability to perceive and communicate with God. This doesn't mean that we are always aware of God however, and it is well worth spending time shaping our environment and learning how to develop our natural abilities to talk with God.

I have tried to avoid the temptation of using an arbitrary activity to make praying seem more interesting or fun. I believe that there is a purpose driving creation. When we engage with our bodies and our cultures seeking to deepen our relationship with God, God the Holy Spirit is waiting and breathes life into our creative efforts. This is a redemption of the whole person not just your mind and intellect, words are important but raising your hand or imagining a picture or a colour can be prayer too. As adults we should strive to achieve this. If we are successful then instead of adults trying to make prayer more interesting for young people by making prayer look like Ludo, the young people (and many others who the Church finds hard to reach) will be showing adults what to do as they discover God revealed through creation.

This section outlines some of the prayer methods that I have found helpful. I have divided them into methods of praying and modes of prayer. This is not meant to be a definitive guide, just a collection of suggestions.

Methods of Praying

Using your Body.

We have bodies, they are our first artistic instrument. God even reckoned that bodies were so important that he became incarnate taking a body himself. Here are some suggestions about using your body to help you pray.

Shampoo position.

This is one of the most common positions I have come across. Don't be distracted by the comedy name, this is a sound and helpful practice. The name comes from the practice of sitting or standing with your head down and eyes closed, much like you would if you were about to be rinsed by a shower. Some people rest their heads on their hands, but there are many variations.

Advantages

This is a comfortable position to stay in for some time. Your body is at rest and you are shielded from distractions that may be going on around you. It also feels natural to pray from this position, and as everybody else is probably doing it your body is unlikely to distract you or anyone else. It is also possible to use subtle variations within the base position to help you visualise your prayer without drawing attention to yourself. These factors make it especially good for using in groups of people who may not know each other very well.

Disadvantages:

I find it quite easy to doze in this position, and although dropping off is less dramatic from this position there are other positions which help me focus more on praying, especially when I don't have to worry about distracting other people. Over use of any method of prayer can also be less than helpful.

Variations:

Standing up can help, especially if you are feeling sleepy

Hands can be used to help visualise what you are thinking. Some suggestions include; cupping your hands palm up to receive from God, clasping your hands in petition, holding objects or letting them go.

Kneeling

This is another position that is familiar, but should not be underestimated. Contemporary society has almost totally devalued acts of submission in general, and what was once a widely understood symbol survives only in rituals such as proposal of marriage or state affairs. The opening of the Lords prayer recognises both the intimacy and awe that characterises a Christians relationship to God. Deliberately kneeling can help us recognise the awesomeness of God, which in turn helps us appreciate how gentle God is.

Advantages

Physical movements help us visualise thoughts that may otherwise go unnoticed. They also help me stay awake!

Disadvantages

As with all physical activity use some common sense. If it's going to threaten your health, distract you or other people from focusing on God or compromise the reputation of the faith be very sure why you are doing it. The kingdom of heaven is not concerned with eating the right foods, wearing the right clothes or performing the correct rituals. This freedom from religiosity is given to benefit individuals and the church as a whole and requires us to take responsibility for testing our motives and activities, so if it's not beneficial don't do it.

Variations

Try this in combination with various other positions, or as an aid to preparation or dedication. Or develop it to:

Prostrate

Sometimes we just have had enough and feel like we can't go on. At other times we are overwhelmed by the awe inspiring nature of God. Whether in petition or in responsive respect, it is good sometimes to lie flat and prostrate in front of God. This position may follow on from kneeling or simply be lying flat out on your bed. It symbolises dependence, humility and vulnerability. These are all things that most people try to avoid in everyday life in the UK, and so perhaps the discipline of submitting totally to God is one we need to practice.

Cross vigil

Some Irish monks used to pray standing up to their waists in the sea with their arms held out in the cross vigil. The cold certainly keeps you awake, and the fire in your arms after praying like this for a while can be a powerful aid to focusing your mind. Not everyone live near enough to a secluded section of beach to be able to use the sea in this way, but the cross vigil is just as relevant in your kitchen at home.

The idea is that you stand with your arms held out on either side of your body. As you pray your muscles will start to ache, the objective is not to inflict pain upon yourself, but to bring to mind thought such as our own frailty, Jesus suffering for us, a focus on the present moment and determination.

Advantages

This one keeps you awake. It is a very physical form of prayer too, and if you find that your mind wanders can really help you focus. The symbolism is all about the cross, remembering what Jesus has done for us and our call to love our neighbours. I find it helpful to pray in cycles of remembering and thanking Jesus, followed by interceding for people and situations. The symbolism of the position reminds me that as Jesus intercedes for us in heaven, we represent him on earth interceding for others.

Disadvantages.

Not to everyone's taste! Could be misunderstood as well. It is important to be sure that it is a responsive act, and isn't carried out just because you are an adrenaline junky. You need to make sure there is enough space around you to hold out your arms safely.

Variations

You can think about the direction you are facing. Use your position to help visualise praying for a particular area, or perhaps facing east to remember where Jesus actually died. You could open your hands palm up in supplication or clench them in determination. Lowering your arms can be part of the prayer as well, we can only understand a fraction of what Jesus went through and of the suffering that God sees when he looks at creation. When we lower our arms we can be glad of the good things God has given us and that our suffering is only temporary.

Breathing

Unlike the previous descriptions there is no specific action associated with this but it can be helpful to lie down. This exercise involves focusing on your breathing to become aware of your body and help you relax. Our lives can be very busy, and so it is worth taking time to slow down and retune your mind. God knew us before we were born, and has prepared a welcome for us in the future but we meet with God in the present. This is where we can effect change and act. By finding a quiet place to meet with God, perhaps at a regular time, we can break free from our past memories and future worries. With Gods assistance we can then re-encounter them with a renewed attitude. In your quiet place sit quietly and close your eyes. Concentrate on what you can hear around you. The present sensations you feel. Then allow yourself to concentrate on your breathing. You may find it helpful to then say a particular formal prayer to start of with and help you focus your mind on meeting with God.

More ...

This is just a small selection of ways in which you could use your body to hopefully inspire you to work out others with God. Some suggestions that I'm not going to go into here include; fasting, symbolic hand positions, dancing and so on.

Object assisted

People exist within relationships. Most people interact with the world primarily in conversations with other people. We have many skills to help us tell stories and to get to know people. The idea that we can have a relationship with God is central to Christianity. This means that many of the interpersonal skills we use in everyday life can also be used in our prayer lives too.

There are obviously some differences between the relationship you have with friends and family and with the creator of the entire universe though. When it comes to object assisted prayer the most obvious difference between God and any other person is that God has no one physical presence on the planet at this time. This absence of a body to relate to has caused problems for people throughout time. Scripture and later church history contains many examples of criticism of idolatry and inappropriate attempts to worship objects.

Scripture also contains more subtle references to the use of objects in prayer and worship however. The patriarchs set up stones and alters as sites of worship, and memorials of Gods action. The artists and craftsmen who constructed the ark of the covenant did so according to the design principles for building a portable shrine that were current in the area at the time. Great care and detail was then taken in designing the surroundings of the ark of the covenant, facilitating people in their relationship with God.

It is this focus on relationship that distinguishes iconography from idolatry. If an object contributes to a deepening relationship with God, challenging as well as comforting and opening our minds to the mystery that is incarnation then it is appropriate. Use of an object can encourage us to rely on habit and disengage from the effort of worship. Or to become narrow minded and resistant to change, making the things humans have created god. In that situation, then the object is becoming an idol and substituting itself for a relationship with God

Icons

Part of a Christians role on earth is to represent Jesus, God, to other people. Although we are not gods and therefore make mistakes or even deliberately do wrong, God through his Grace has made us his children and the work of the Holy Spirit can be seen through our actions. This is not limited to our own area, or even our own time, and we are therefore a part of a collection of personal histories that spans the ages. It can be helpful to be reminded of Gods actions through other people, and we can evaluate our own relationship with God by prayerfully considering other peoples stories.

Pictures of famous people from the history of the church can be helpful in this process. Much of what goes on when you use an image is instinctive. This is one of the reasons why icons can be so useful, particularly for people who are not

academically minded or inspired by long tracts of text. This should not be viewed as a failure in a person, or seen as a less intelligent way to worship. If God has been active and relating to people since the beginning, text based interaction must make up a small proportion of this activity. Using images is also sophisticated activity. If you are not used to this method it is well worth taking some time to think about what is going on when you look at an image

Whilst the beauty of a work of art can be inspirational on its own, these pictures should not be treated in isolation. When an artist creates they represent their thoughts in a complex symbolic language. When you view a work of art you do so from a unique perspective, with your own assumptions about this symbolic language. If you encounter the art in an attitude of prayer then you open yourself to guidance from the Holy Spirit and this will affect your experience as well. Take your time, and think about these three threads and how they contribute to your experience of prayer. The picture can then become like a stained glass window, Beautiful in its construction, designed to tell a story and illuminated by a light that is both far greater than the object and also within it bringing it to life. As in all things if you experience something that disturbs you or conflicts dramatically with what you believe to be true discuss this with people you trust.

Calligraphy

In northern Europe the ability to represent thoughts and sounds in written words has been valued highly for several thousand years. Ogham and Futhark are both runic scripts said to have been given to mankind by gods. In a very practical way Futhark was also used for writing shopping lists. Having grown up in a literate society many of us are only used to the shopping list use of words. The ancient sense of wonder at our ability to capture thoughts in written language is being lost in a post literate mass of information overload.

We depend upon a common sense connection between a written word and its meaning to get through everyday life, or to read and write this book. The connection between a written word and its meaning is much more complicated however. Do nouns derive their meaning from the objects they refer to, or are the objects that are so named defined in the action of naming them? Have you ever used a chair as a table and if so did it cease to be a table when it became a chair again? One of the first tasks given to Adam (or Mankind including Women) in Genesis is the naming of things, and this is a task that the human race continues to carry out as creation unfolds through time.

When you pray using calligraphy you can become consciously aware of this process. It is possible to participate in both an active and passive way. If you are someone who finds that they think best whilst carrying out an activity try meditating on the meaning of a word or phrase whilst you draw it. Try adapting the letter shapes to reflect the impression a word makes on you. You may also find it helpful to continue

to embellish the words as thoughts come to you after you have finished the main writing of the word. Make sure that you recycle any paper that you that you no longer have any need of, or use a sandbox and stylus (or beach).

To passively meditate on a word or phrase you may find it helpful to have it written in front of you as a visual focus. Slow your mind down and think past your common sense understanding of it. Explore where this understanding of the word comes from. Is it from your practical experiences associated with the word? Are there uses of the word that you know of but which don't ring true with your understanding of it? Can the word mean different things depending on it's context, what does each use share in common and what does each subtle difference in usage contribute to the richness of the words meaning?

Some good words to start with are Love, Peace, Hope, Faith, Fear. Love in particular has many different usages, meanings and contexts. Use the word as an anchor around which your prayers can wander lingering on other related words without getting lost. If you find it too hard, give up and ask God for help in your weakness, then start again.

Maps

Just as we are in danger of losing our sense of wonder at words, the standardisation of mapping has a hidden downside. Because we learn to understand how to read a standard map, usually in order to navigate, we get used to the idea that a map represents the landscape as it is. The danger is that we then start to understand the actual landscape in terms of the map. The error in this is clearly seen in the use of a diagrammatic railway map. Such a map represents the position of stations in relation to each other on the railway tracks, and is therefore ideal for working out which train to catch. It does not necessarily convey the distance between stations very accurately, or the surrounding landscape and so it can be unhelpful or even misleading should you decide to walk. All maps are like this to varying degrees, and it is a danger inherent in all forms of representation. However, once you are aware of what is going on in the process of mapping you can start to use maps creatively, and this is awesome.

Some medieval maps were drawn in such a way that the relative significance of places was indicated by their size on the map, and their placement on the paper. For example, the site of Jesus death and resurrection where creation was reborn, Jerusalem, would be big and at the centre of everything. As people navigated by following roads or established trade routes, landmarks and cities were shown in the correct order according to journey times. If you tried to use such a map to navigate in the same way as you would use an ordinance survey map it would not be much help. If however you want to use it to understand the ideas of the map artist and their culture it will contain a wealth of information hard to detect in a modern map.

Use maps in prayer to help organise and order your thoughts and experiences. You will also find that this is a creative act that will help you discover relationships between things that you were not previously aware of. You can do this on your own or as a group activity. You might want to start with someone else's map modifying it to represent your information, or with a blank sheet that will enable you to make your own map from scratch.

Some ways of using maps include:

Start with a copy of a map of your local area. Take time out to ask God to open your eyes so that you become aware of things from Jesus perspective. Then explore the map. Highlight areas where you are aware of good things happening (church related or not), and areas where evil is more obvious. Use the map to help you identify issues that are of concern as you imaginatively walk round the roads. Mark examples of Church presence in the area. You can then look at the map and reflect upon whether it shows you needs that the Church should get involved in, or examples of God being at work bringing good things into being outside of the church.

Think about the routes you walk through your local area. You might find it helpful to think about it a day at a time and write down landmarks you pass and places you visit. As you go through the days if you think about a place you have already written down put a tally mark next to it, so that the place you go most will accumulate the most marks. Remember to include the place, or places where you live. Then make cards for each of the places, you might want to make the ones with most tally marks bigger than they others or write a number to show how often you are there. Use blue tack to attach the place you go most onto the middle of a piece of paper. Then using a piece of string to represent each days journey start from the middle and attach cards in the order that you visit them. The distance between each card doesn't matter too much, so try and leave plenty of space around each card. Sometimes the strings will cross over when you visit the same place on different days. Now think about each of the places on the card individually and write what comes to mind when you think of them. Who is there? what do you see? What worries you? What makes you happy?

Stand back from the map and look at it s a whole. Offer it to God, it is a drawing of what our life is like and God is interested in it. You can then use this map to talk to other people about how they see the same area, to share concerns and hopes. It can become an inspiration for many types of prayer, and can be modified as prayers are answered, people move on and your opinions change. If you made a series of maps then each could be like a snapshot in time and the collection of maps would display the changes in your perception of the area throughout the years.

Bangle or Necklace

If you tend to fidget while you pray this may be of particular help to you. Running a bangle, necklace or even a piece of string through your fingers can help you focus on praying. The habitual repetition of an action can be soothing and help to clear your mind from distractions. Knots or shaped beads can help you think about points of prayer and worship periodically as you cycle through an endless loop of prayer.

You could use this with any formal prayer, or explore the depth and symbolism of traditions such as the rosary. You could also find or make a necklace that you like, and then create your own prayer pattern to go with it.

Remember that the use of the object should be an aid to prayer that provides a base from which you can freely wander under the Holy Spirits guidance. The action of running the bangle through your fingers is no substitute for praying, and a bangle is no substitute for God!

Activities

These methods of praying are particularly suited to praying in groups. Thinking about how you can use your body to help you pray on your own is important. When we meet in groups we interact with each other through our bodies, unless you know any telepaths! This makes it even more important to think about possible ways to facilitate praying together. This ranges from simply finding somewhere quiet to meet with another person in quiet contemplation to elaborate ceremonies where large numbers of people from a variety of cultures and languages can pray together using a commonly recognised collection of symbols and actions.

Directional Prayer

This is a simple and subtle activity you could try at your next prayer meeting, or in your personal prayer. In the middle ages works of art and even maps were often drawn to show the significance of objects to each other, rather than just to depict their physical appearance. For this reason a map of the world may have Jerusalem at the centre. Churches were also built facing east so that as people prayed they prayed facing the land where God walked in human form. Facing a particular direction can symbolically represent the importance of a belief, ordering the world around it. Direction can also be used to symbolise common intent as a group of people focus on a particular area.

Advantages:

This is a simple action that doesn't require much effort or even mobility. It is also not too weird and the symbolism can be explained without much fuss. People can also participate in the prayer activity and not the symbolism and still be part of the group, because you have to face somewhere when you pray and it might as well be the direction that everyone else is facing.

Disadvantages:

Make sure you know which direction you are meant to be facing. Obviously this isn't some magical rite that will be ruined if you use magnetic north instead of true north, it can be distracting though if a prayer leader in London is directing the group to pray for Scotland and all you can think about is why are we facing west?

Variations:

You could use a variety of directions. The changes in direction can break the prayer time into manageable chunks, with a chance to stretch in between. The change in direction can also help draw attention to a change in the prayers as well. For example, you could start off facing Jerusalem giving thanks for the life of Jesus then pray round the points of the compass interceding for areas and issues as you go.

Walking

This has been used in a variety of ways, corporately and in personal prayer. Basically put it is praying while you are walking somewhere. This activity works on physical, symbolic and environmental levels, and if done with others can show solidarity as well.

Advantages

This activity shares all the general advantages of other physical forms of prayer. It is particularly effective in aiding a prolonged period of prayer, as you can go for a long walk. I find that the physical tiredness I feel helps me slow down and mull over the detail of a matter with God. Possible symbolism includes personal symbolism such as walking with God, representing Gods presence in a particular area and a visualisation of the internal efforts we make to build our relationship with God. If carried out with other people the symbolism can range from a subtle expression of solidarity with each other in your local area to joint pilgrimages and marches that celebrate and demonstrate the presence of a faith group in the locality. The principle advantage of this prayer activity is that you use the environment that you live in to inspire and aid your prayer. You can use the time to observe God at work in the world through the wonders of nature, sentimental locations and unplanned meetings. You can also open your eyes and become aware of what is going on around you that we need to intercede for. In a busy city, house and life a walk round your local area with your mobile phone switched off can also be a good way to find solitude and anonymity.

Disadvantages

You need to remember to consider your personal safety. Although switching your phone off is a good idea, it might be good to take it in case of emergency, particularly if you aren't almost six foot with a beard and leather trench coat. Try remain aware of where you are as well, so that if you get lost you can find your way back again. You may find praying unfamiliar in this environment, or that it is hard to concentrate. Try sitting down in safe places, or dedicating the next mile or street to a certain issue. This activity is probably best suited to intercessory prayer, repetitive formal prayers and meditation.

Labyrinth

The challenging in a labyrinth is not how to find your way through a maze on the floor, there is only one way. The challenge is how to use the time you have in the maze to learn more about yourself, God, and your relationships. What follows are some questions to help people think their way through the labyrinth. They were written in a youthwork context, but should convey the general principles. Each stage corresponds to a dot on the drawing of the labyrinth.

Introduction:

“Ogres are like Onions” ^{Shrek}

On the way in, use the time to think through your layers and to remember what is important to you. At the centre, think about what is most important to you.

On the way out use the insight you have gained to approach the whole of your life from a new perspective, re-thinking, accepting, changing or giving up things you thought about on the way in.

Stage 1:

Welcome to the labyrinth. This time and space is set aside for you to meet with and think about God. As you walk, chill, calm yourself and forget the thoughts and worries that you had a minute ago. Like you take your coat off at the door when you go into a house, leave your worries and awkwardness behind you. You may think about them later, but this is time off.

Stage 2:

Who do you care about? Part of who you are is made from your relationships with other people. That's why it hurts so much when friends fall out. Use this time to think about your relationships. Are you arguing with anyone, do you like someone who doesn't know? How are your family?

Stage 3:

Who are you? What do you like, what do you do? Your unique personality is important. Use this time to think about the top five things that make you, you.

Stage 4:

What makes you get up in the morning? What is the most important in your life? When it comes to the crunch, what do you think counts, who will be there for you? Why won't you give up and what will make you get up and keep on going? Some people describe religion as a ladder to heaven. If it is then God is at the bottom holding the ladder and helping you to climb it.

Space in the centre to reflect. Provide a jug of water and a cup:

Jesus broke religious practice and social custom to talk with a woman who needed help. He told her that he was the water of life. He gave her, and gives you now, the option of a “drink” that is God helping you to live, Love, work and play. The cup of water is a symbol (a physical thing that represents something that words cannot fully describe). If you need Gods help, drink, feel the refreshing water as you swallow it and remember Gods Love and help that fills you.

Stage 5: (on the way out)

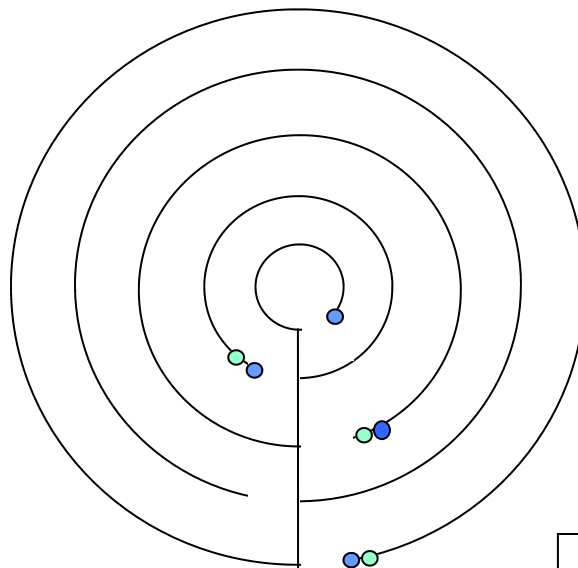
Who are you? Remember what you thought on the way in about what you care about and do. Is there anything you would like to change? God loves you as a whole person, if anything is worth doing, God will help you to do it well.

Stage 6:

Do your relationships reflect who you are? It is sometimes hard to be yourself in different situations, and hard to know who you should be when there are different demands on you from friends, family, teacher ... everyone ... Think about what you have decided during your time in the maze, be strong and remember that even when you get it wrong, God loves you, and that , means that you can start again.

Stage 7:

You are about to leave the labyrinth. You leave at the same place you started from. Nothing has changed, except you. I pray that you are refreshed and feel stronger. If something has helped you, help someone else.



A plan labyrinth layout

Advantages

This is a concrete, activity, based way to meditate. It shares the advantages of other physical and walking prayer methods. Labyrinths are easy to construct and are very adaptable. The questions used above are only one of many thought processes that can be entered into. If participants are comfortable with the idea of meditating the simplicity of the pattern uncluttered by someone else's thoughts can be very powerful. In a way nobody ever walks the same labyrinth. One person can walk using the guide thoughts, another can meditate on their own thoughts. This makes the labyrinth particularly useful for facilitating people from diverse backgrounds in taking part in a communal act of worship.

Disadvantages

Unless participants engage with the activity it will just be walking in a circle. The pattern alone is not self explanatory and some guidance is necessary. If too many people use the labyrinth at once they will distract each other. This technique takes time and space to set up and clear away.

Variations

Labyrinths can be made from a variety of materials. They are variable in size, tracing your finger round a pattern on a piece of paper could be an accessible way for less mobile people to participate. The pattern shown above is a fairly standard one, and is elegant in its simplicity. Labyrinths can be square based though, or even developed into a more abstract pathway. Stations can be set up within the labyrinth to help convey a theme. Portable TV and video links or MP3 players can be used to enhance the experience. Care should be taken not to lose the symbolism of the labyrinth in a Technicolor show however. Otherwise you will find that the labyrinth is little more than a path connecting tableaux together. This isn't a problem if you are intending to run a multimedia experience, or miniature pilgrimage, but there comes a time when it is no longer a labyrinth.

Team Prayer.

One half of the group chants the other prays specifically. If you are unfamiliar with chanting you should make some enquiries. Some of the more musically simple modern choruses work well as chants, for more traditional style there is Taize music. For this exercise the basic idea is that one section of the group repeats a simple phrase, the phrase is simple so that it doesn't take much effort to remember it or think about the mechanics of what you are doing. The full meaning of the phrase will be rich and complicated, with many associated thoughts. This combination of simplicity and complexity allows a person to focus their thoughts on one of the many mysteries at the heart of Christianity. By setting it to music a group of people are facilitated in carrying out this activity together. They can draw comfort and strength from each other as well as participate in the activity in a way that involves the whole body.

While one half of the group is chanting, the other half can pray more specifically. As there will be the sound of chanting in the room already, people may feel more able to speak their prayers out loud. There is, of course, no obligation to do this but hearing the prayer of another person can help inspire a person to pray themselves. You may wish to use an overhead or other display to give a visual focus for the specific prayers, whether this consists of words, passages of scripture or more general artistic imagery.

When we tested this out we chose two people to lead the sections of prayer. We gave them a sword and while one leader held the sword out, their section was to chant. When their arm got too tired they handed the sword over to the leader of the other section who raised it as a signal to their section to start chanting. The section not chanting prayed more specifically about issues, loosely following the structure of the Lords prayer.

In this way we represented the way in which our prayer efforts as individuals are a part of the wider Church prayer effort. At all times someone somewhere in the world is praying. Monasteries were given tax relief by the authorities because of the recognised benefit that their prayerful presence had on the community. The chanting section represents this background of support. Of course at times we are part of the background of support which is why the groups change over.

Advantages:

This method is flexible and can be applied to many different situations. By varying the chants or the displays you can respond to specific seasons or needs. It is also quite easy to use it with groups of medium to large sizes, as long as the majority understand what is going on, the rest will soon pick it up. It is also quite an active method and will help people who are worried by silence or who need the anonymity of crowds but like to be involved.

Disadvantages:

This can work very powerfully as a visual image, some people do not think in this way though and may not find the symbolism helpful. You should be careful who you choose to lead the sections. If you use the sword example it is better to avoid picking strong young men, as then there is the danger that holding the sword will become an endurance competition. It is after all in recognising our weakness that we learn to hand things over to God and appreciate his support.

Variations:

Most of the variety in this method comes from the choice of music and visual display. If your session is to have an intercessory theme you could choose a chant that focused on the way in which Jesus acts as an intercessor for us in heaven. Specific issues of concern could then be displayed. If you are seeking guidance as a group you could use a chant that reflects on God's presence with us in the person of the Holy Spirit, comforting us. You could then use a general images to remind people of God's love, power and involvement with humanity together to inspire people by reminding them of what we hope for in certainty. You could also use words or pictures that provoke specific questions relevant to the situation and inspire prayers about things which we hope for because we are not yet sure of them.

Abstract

God wrought peace from Chaos, not order. The created universe does not always conform to our expectations or understanding. Growth involves change which can be uncomfortable, and even frightening at times. A relationship with God is marked by Awe and love however, and if you have any experiences while you are praying that frighten you or confuse you I recommend that you talk to another Christian about it. Just because something happens when you are praying does not mean that it is of God. Most of the prayer described in this book is similar to conversation you might have with another person. These techniques are unlikely to be a part of your everyday discourse unless you happen to have surreal friends.

Colours

Many people understand colours on an emotional level. Black and yellow stripes communicate danger and fear, red can give feelings of warmth and blue can be cold. Prayer does not have to be filled with chatter all the time. Resist the tendency to feel that you have to talk and take some time to listen. Sometimes you may see pictures, or hear words. At other times it might be that you become aware of something as abstract as a colour. For more information about this sort of thing I recommend the writings of St Ignatius, there is plenty of information available on the internet or in bookshops.

You can also deliberately think of a colour and allow this to guide your thoughts.

Advantages

If you are stuck for words, this type of prayer doesn't use any! It is a good way to remain in an attitude of prayer whilst concentrating on listening to God, uncluttered in your thoughts.

Disadvantages

It is important that abstract prayer is not confused with religiosity or falsely pious prayer. God is the creator and sustainer of all things, this means that a way to find out about God is to meditate on her invisible qualities revealed through creation. One way of doing this is to abstract from particular instances in order to seek to understand universal forms. For example it is possible to understand more about what green is by examining many things that are green. However if your focus is limited to thinking about greenness, rather than God in the green, then you will start to create green in your own imagination rather than opening yourself to the transforming power of God.

Variations

You could try using a word, picture or shape instead.

Modes of Prayer

There is more to prayer than just asking God for things. You are probably very used to using different modes of conversation throughout the day. You may not even notice when you switch between praising, petitioning, confessing or informing the person you are talking too. This means that it is worth taking a bit of time to think about what is going on in each of these modes of conversation, because we can understand more about our relationship with God if we understand more about the way we exist within relationships in general.



Worship

Awe and Love

I understand this type of prayer as focusing on the glory and nature of God and being transformed through entering and remaining in his presence. As is the case with much Christian jargon the word worship is currently almost exclusively used in a religious context. It's wider use can still be seen in the names of organisations such as the "worshipful company of Blacksmiths" or in forms of address such as addressing a Magistrate or Mayor as "your worship". Unless you have actually seen a smith turn scrap metal into a work of art, or been rescued from poverty by the ruling of a magistrate, you are unlikely to fully appreciate the respect for their position that makes that form of address appropriate.

Most people are more used to the secular use of the word worship when it comes to a human love relationship. Have you ever felt what it's like to have your whole body caught up in the adoration of someone? To find yourself speechless in their presence or babbling inately because your mind is still trying to cope with the fact that they actually noticed you? It is this experience of coming alive when you are in the presence of someone, and being crushed if they reject you, that helps us understand the respect with which you have to treat something that you worship. It has power over our very being, for better or worse.

Fortunately, God in the person of Jesus, has made it clear that the Creator will use this power for the better. Christian worship stems from this Divine act of Grace, and as Jesus is God it influences the character of all our worship of God. God is bigger than this one act though, and the content of our worship should not end with our understanding of salvation, because then we may forget that we have been saved to live. Bearing this in mind what follows is a selection of themes for worship. These themes are ones that have helped me become more in Awe of God and to understand Gods love for the created order which I am privileged to be a part of. These are just starting points for thought. As you pray your mind will opened to the wonder of God and will be able to make your own list.

The cross

What actually went on when Jesus was crucified? What does the cross mean? The account, that he was crucified under Pontius Pilate and died, and the third day rose from the dead, brings us together as Christians and our understanding of it affects our understanding of the rest of his life and resurrection. Such a momentous mystery as God dying though has inspired many different interpretations. What follows are a few aspects of Jesus action The whole mystery is well beyond my power to communicate but hopefully these insights, handed down through time, will help you discover more in prayer.

Jesus as a victorious warrior.

“...Then the young hero (who was God Almighty)
Got ready, resolute and strong in heart.
He climbed onto the gallows-tree,
Bold in the sight of many watching men,
When he intended to redeem mankind. ...”
Dream of the rood¹ 8th century anon

Jesus is worthy of worship because he conquered sin. If you are aware of the presence of evil in the world, be thankful because Jesus has defeated it. We may continue to suffer, but this will eventually end and the proof of it is that Jesus has beaten death. He is worshipful as a mighty warrior who descended to hell and returned with captives. There are many other examples of Gods glory and power being displayed throughout the scriptures, in history and in contemporary life. For the Christian however, the first Easter morning is when creation is reborn and life in all it's fullness is revealed. This is why time is recorded counting back before Christ and forwards after Christ.

¹ Dream of the rood, p. 163 “A choice of Anglo-Saxon Verse” Richard Hamer Faber and Faber 1970

Jesus as sacrifice and substitute

“Jesus Christ I think upon your sacrifice
You became nothing, poured out to death
Many times I’ve wondered at your gift of life
And I’m in that place once again,
I’m in that place once again.”
20th century Matt Redman

Jesus is worthy of worship because he fulfils the law. All of creation was subject to frustration, bound to decay, and death. Jesus paid the cost of freedom, one perfect sacrifice for all of time and the whole of creation. When we suffer it is for a limited amount of time, and hope of healing takes the bitterness from the suffering. Jesus bore the suffering of creation, so that we can hope for the healing of all creation. The better able we are to contemplate our own deaths and the reality of suffering and pain, the better able we are to understand the depth of the sacrifice that Jesus made when he became our substitute. Of course, this doesn’t mean that we should seek suffering for it’s own sake, but it does mean that when we suffer for God’s sake, our suffering can remind us of Jesus suffering and help us draw closer to God.

Jesus as a lover

“... The Lord replied, ‘My child, I love you and I would never leave you. During the times of trial and suffering when you see only one set of footprints in the sand, it was then that I carried you.’ ...”
Footprints 20th century anon

Jesus is worthy of worship because of his faithfulness. His action on the cross is a symbol of Gods faithfulness to us and an encouragement to us to follow his example in being loving and faithful. He is God with us. Not only is God showing vulnerability, but God also is participating in a personal and caring relationship. All these themes for worship overlap and compliment each other. It might be helpful to use more than one theme in a session. For example; we can be helped in understanding the depth of Jesus love through understanding the cost of his sacrifice. We can understand the cost of Jesus sacrifice by understanding his majesty and motivation.

Creation

We can relate to God through what we see around us. We are a part of Creation and all things came into being through the Word. If, as it is written, Gods invisible qualities are made visible through the created order, do we have any excuse not to look around us for inspiration for our prayers.

Festivals

Look round you and think about the festivals and celebrations that go on in your culture. People like to worship things that they believe are good, and will find a way to do this even if societies leaders and religious authorities fail to facilitate them. Some of these celebrations worship things out of proportion or that conflict with Christianity, but most of the time they recognise good things that Christians attribute to Gods goodness. Christianity was not formed in a vacuum, and festivals which we now think of as being traditionally Christian often are adapted from much older celebrations.

When you pray, ask for discernment. Then take time to understand what is going on at a festival and focus on the good and beauty you can see in it. Learn to recognise and worship God who is at work throughout the whole of time and space, not just the church. Allow yourself to become more optimistic and be prepared to expect to meet God in the words of strangers.

Countryside

Most people living in cities have become separated from the rhythm countryside. We still recognise the changing seasons, and perhaps some of the old festivals such as harvest. However the vast wealth of symbolism formally provided by a liturgical year which was linked to the production of food and working lives of people has lost its significance and so is falling from use in many places. Christians may not worship creation, but we do believe that God is revealed through creation and that just as we come from the earth, we will return to it. The church in the British isles has gone through cycles of intimacy and divorce with nature. What is needed now is for people to learn to understand and re-appreciate the beauty of nature in their prayers. Then harvest festivals will become inspirations to green activism and the cairngorms windows looking onto the majesty of God.

Industry

Similarly, as the Church and much of urban culture has become divorced from nature, many spiritual and artistic people would find it hard to worship using industrial themes. Partly this may be because industry is very man made, and it is hard to find wonder in something that has been made by people for a utilitarian purpose. Another reason may be that in Britain we are very aware of the negative results of colonialism and the industrial revolution enhanced by the decline of heavy industry and consequent unemployment. We are less aware of lasting achievements such as the forth rail bridge, Glasgow's drinking water supply or London's sewers. Many of these structures carry dedications to God, and we should be able to worship God for the things which he has enabled people to do.

Praise

When we have learned to worship God, praise usually follows naturally. The practice of praising is a discipline however. There is a fine line between appreciating the Gods work in the detail of life and using the phrase "Praise the Lord" until it seems meaningless or even daft to those who see you. For praise to be effective it has to communicate your worship to those around you. God already knows the innermost thoughts of your heart so shouting and other sacrifices are given for our benefit.

The other extreme is to be excessively dour and to treat praise so preciously that it takes someone a lifetime to realise that Christians are ever happy or pleased about something. We should be childlike in amazement but not childish in our actions. Otherwise we will be like stereotypical middle class parents, afraid to cry at a funeral or dance at a party. We should practice the discipline in prayer of reminding ourselves about the glory of God and communicating this effectively to those around us using our adult social skills.

Practice of the presence of God

Sometimes we face a crisis. That's usually when we hit the panic button and try to become aware of the presence of God. This is of course the correct thing to do in a crisis. What is more difficult is to maintain an awareness of God every day, seven days a week. Sometimes this is because we are so used to panic praying that we assume that all praying should feel the same. The practice of the presence of God is a gentle form of prayer, more like breathing than hitting a panic button. There is less adrenaline and less inspiration to use many words. What there is though, particularly after the discipline has been practiced for many years, is a sense of peace that is contagious.

The need for this mode of prayer drives the popularity of WWJD and PUSH bands (What Would Jesus Do) (Pray Until Something Happens). Christianity and in particular a prayer relationship with God is a whole life experience and cannot healthily be confined to set times, places or crises. Get into the habit of remembering God when you wake up, when you brush your teeth and when you walk the dog. Just a simple act of acknowledging God quietly to yourself and asking him to be with you in whatever thing you are about to do is enough. Remember to listen, and if you find that it is becoming an unconscious habit this is partly a sign of success and partly an inspiration to slow down and take more time to listen and be aware.

“ At every forward step and movement, at every going in and out, when we put on our clothes and shoes, when we bathe, when we sit at table, when we light the lamps, on couch, on seat, in all the ordinary actions of daily life, we trace upon the forehead the sign of the cross.” On The Soldiers Crown, Tertullian c 200AD²

Imaginative

One of the most common questions young people have asked me is “How do I know what God wants me to do?” This is a question that I'm sure most people never stop asking, even if they are a little less public about it as they become respectable. People who seem certain that they have found the answer are probably the most terrifying people I have met. This is probably because revelation is notoriously hard to test, and in modern society where religion has become viewed as a matter of personal faith, even within the Church, communal means for testing revelation are not normally practiced.

Another trend has been to restrict the scope of valid revelation to scripture alone. This is very different to the role attributed by the apostle Paul to scripture of teaching training and rebuking. Regardless of the theological issues which have

² The rise of the Church p.144 Norman J Bull Heinemann Educational books Ltd 1967

influenced this, in practice the prayer lives of many Christians have become restricted to the context of a bible study.

All of this creates a climate where the role of the imagination is treated with suspicion, and when it is used it often is uncontrolled like wildfire with harmful results. The ability to imagine and to daydream is a God given gift however, and we will need to learn to pray in this mode if we are to engage with the hunger for mystery, revelation and authority that our age exhibits.

Imaginative prayer is more than just using different materials to facilitate prayer. It is praying in a different way, perhaps in the same way as you discussed the future with your friends in study leave once your exams were over. It is daydreaming with God. It is going from what is known and imagining what could be, or could have been. It is accepting that reality could be other than what we think it is and allowing our mind to be bent until we can believe that people can walk on water or move mountains.

Examples of how you could do this include;

Read a passage of scripture, imagine you are there. What do you see? What are your feelings? Are you one of the characters or an onlooker who is not mentioned in the text? What happened after the account stopped?

You can use your imagination to create a place within your mind where you go to pray. What would such a place look like? What is there? What does that say about you?

The Caim prayer from the Celtic tradition is growing in popularity within church circles. This involves drawing a mental circle around you when you pray, visualising Gods presence within it and clearing space to meet with him. This practice most probably originated in pre Christian practice and recently became popular in neo pagan practice before the Church readopted it. What other practices have you seen to aid the use of the imagination in prayer? What is acceptable about these methods for a Christian and what is not?

In the Christian tradition of prayer we start knowing that we love because God first loved us. This means that we have a hope that God wants to meet with us and desires the best for us. When you pray therefore, do so with optimism and confidence. Try things out, asking God to test them. If you are worried talk to someone about your worries. In the celtic tradition people were encouraged to develop a relationship with their soul friend. If you develop such a friendship then you will be able to test your experiences together.

Intercessory prayer.

When someone intercedes, they mediate between two parties, representing each to the other. Intercessory prayer is where we carry out this role as Christians. But before describing this form of prayer in more detail it is good to think about the answers to a few questions.

Why we should we pray? And if we do pray, why should God listen or act?

We should pray because God already has acted. We are not trying to persuade God to act, we are just doing our job as representatives of Jesus on Earth. When Jesus introduced his mission he used the words of the prophet Isaiah:

“The Spirit of the Lord is on me,
Because he has anointed me to preach the good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind. To release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lords favour.” (Luke 4:18,19 Isaiah 61:1,2)

His life and death made this possible, and countless examples recorded in the Bible and observed throughout the world today show that the possibility is real and relevant.. It is our task to make it actual. First we must do this in prayer. Then we can act practically, having made sure the way is clear spiritually.

But if God has already done it, why are we needed to pray?

Through his death and resurrection Jesus now intercedes between mankind and God. In this work, he releases us from the world, sin and death and presents us to God as his own - a royal priesthood. This is a privilege, but also a responsibility.

When we take part in intercessory prayer, we represent this work that Jesus has completed in the situation within which we are placed. This is the priestly part. We do this with authority, enforcing the reign of God. This is the royal part. Each is imperfect without the other. God cares about the world, acting within history, and does not encourage abstract piety. Equally we are not little gods, and we are given authority to intercede, not plough ahead under our own steam creating our own little kingdoms.

Intercessory prayer happens in as many different ways as there are situations, but to use one situation that is at the heart of the gospel as an example, I encourage you to use the following exercise to help you pray for those in society who are suffering, experiencing injustice or who are otherwise in need of help.

You will need:

Somewhere quiet to sit

A piece of paper

A pen

Get all the stuff together and go somewhere where you are unlikely to be disturbed. Doing this just after watching the news, or coming home from work might be good.

Fold the piece of paper in half and then focus your mind on God. (see the tuning in section for help in doing this). Ask God to help you see things as he sees them and to feel about them as he feels. Think about the news, events during your day and bring events or situations before God that concern you.

To make this easier to understand I'll explain what I mean in more detail:

Allow yourself to become aware of the basic reality of the situation. This is not as easy as it sounds. It is easy to become desensitised to suffering, because suffering is wrong. It is a blight on creation and even if you are not directly affected by the situation, just accepting that the situation exist and is real can cause pain. In response to this it is very tempting to block out the feeling, making it somebody else's problem. We have to avoid this hardening of the heart and allow ourselves to get involved.

This feeling goes beyond moral outrage, which is a powerful emotion but still only a response to the violation of your personal or cultures moral sensibilities. When you allow yourself to recognise the basic reality of a situation you experience an ethical indignation. This is a response that is basic to all humans, and the distinguishing feature that sets apart people of faith from those who are only religious. Having this response to poverty and suffering does not mean that someone is necessarily religious or a Christian, as this further step is a conscious decision. The teaching of Jesus however makes it very clear that ethical indignation and not words or claims of commitment is what is required of us.

Ethical indignation demands a response. You cannot feel at this level and remain unaffected. This is why we can become desensitised, as if we can see no positive way to respond the other alternative is to harden our hearts and block out the feeling. This is where Christianity can help, as it is based on an understanding that God loves us

and provides both a positive way to respond and a confidence that this response is not in vain.

So make a choice choose to become involved and open yourself to Gods suggestions. Expect God to speak and reveal ways in which the situation can be resolved. This may take the form of faith in particular outcomes that you can hope and pray for, or it may be more abstract words or images that will help guide your prayers further. God works in as many different ways as there are people, the important thing is that if you are distressed or worried you should talk it over with another Christian who you trust.

When you are praying if an issue stands out, write down something to remind you about the issue that concerns you in the middle of the piece of paper. Continue to pray and on one half of the piece of paper write down or draw things that occur to you as you pray about the basic reality of the situation. On the other half of the paper make notes inspired by your response to the situation.

It is good to focus on one or two issues at a time, because there will always be issues and there is a limit to the amount we can handle at one time.

Tear the half with your response to the situation from the sheet to represent Jesus action in releasing us from the grip of the enemy. Hold it in your hand and bring the situation before God in Jesus name, as Jesus is THE intercessor in who's name we act. Allow your mind to wander around the issue, it's relationship to other issues and your relationship to it. Pictures, phrases or songs may come to mind, bring them to God and if it all gets to much relax. We rely on Gods love and the Holy Spirit carries our prayers even when we can't find the words to express them and our feelings failure should just remind us of how much we need him.

For the next week or so you could carry the paper around with you to remind you to continue to pray and to be aware that you may be blessed to see a direct response. It is good practice to define the length of time you will do this for. You can always extend the time if God tells you to, but the discipline will help focus your mind and avoid the demoralising effects of seeing things just taper away.

After the time you have set you may want to do something like burn the piece of paper to symbolise totally handing the issue over to God. Don't get too hung up on it and remember if you lose the piece of paper, it is what Jesus has done, and what you are doing that is important. The paper is still just a piece of paper and can be replaced.

Some useful bible passages, that have inspired this chapter.

Examples of Divine compassion which reveal God's character and Jesus mission.

Exodus 3

Mark 4 35 – 41

Mark 6:30-44

Jesus sends out seventy of his disciples to proclaim the kingdom of heaven. We can learn from their example and take confidence from their experience.

Luke 10 21-24

The response that God requires

Luke 10 25-37 [What must I do to inherit eternal life?]

Matthew 21:28-32 [Which Son did the fathers will]

Matthew 25:31-46 [Separation of the sheep from the goats]

It also owes a great deal to

Pedro Casaldáliga and José Maria Vigil and their book "The Spirituality of Liberation"

And

Dutch Sheets "Intercessory prayer"

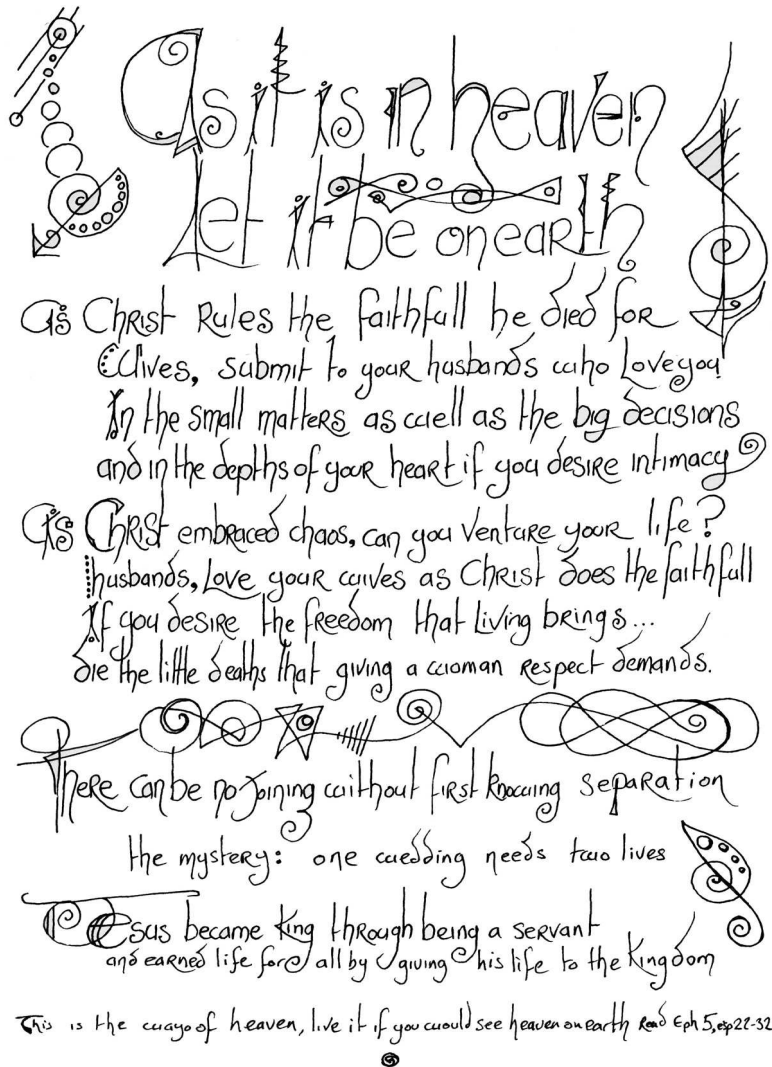


Section Two

This section of the guide contains some prayers that I have written, in the hope that they may be of some use to people. I also hope that other people will be encouraged to experiment and write prayers more relevant to their situation.

Sample Prayers

marriage



As it is in heaven
 let it be on earth

As Christ Rules the faithfull he died for
 Usives, submit to your husbands who Love you
 In the small matters as well as the big decisions
 and in the depths of your heart if you desire intimacy

As Christ embraced chaos, can you ventare your life?
 husbands, Love your wives as Christ does the faithfull
 If you desire the freedom that living brings...
 die the little deaths that giving a woman respect demands.

There can be no joining without first knowing separation
 the mystery: one wedding needs two lives

Jesus became King through being a servant
 and earned life for all by giving his life to the Kingdom

This is the way of heaven, live it if you could see heaven on earth Read Eph 5, esp 22-32

Context:

This was written at the request of some friends for their wedding. It was hard for me to write at the time and it is still hard to read. Like the text it is based on it should be read as a prayer rather than an instruction. Only Grace makes it humanly possible.

Walk Carefully

Where is God Today?
Can't you see him?

You are standing in a mirror.
The stars in the sky are reflections of his eyes.
A storm in the Caribbean is the whisper of his breath.
The oceans of the earth are trickles of his tears.
Do you love your Father?
Then why do you treat your mother so ill.
Do you love his Son?
Then why do you treat his children so harsh?
You cry out with the pain of life!
He feels a universe full of strife.
Each time we hurt one another,
God feels the pain like an estranged lover.
She is the spirit that gives us birth
And that not of enough worth, continues to a second.
Free from the womb of physical dust
We live, free as we must, for our spirits to shape.
Grow, develop, choose.
Do you love your mothers?
Spirit and Earth.
Will you follow your brothers free second birth?
Have you found your father ...

Context:

One day I just had to get out. Not that my life was particularly bad or anything but I responded to the need to go and walk until my mind slowed down enough to listen to God. This was written barefoot in a forest somewhere in the trossachs after walking for a day or so.

Elemental

Surround me with a halo of fire
Encircle me in your spirit
My desire to be pure burns from within
But the fear of the pain makes me quiver

Cocoon me in the living water of your Spirit Lord
Heal what the fire has exposed
Your Love has always been the start for me
And it's my thirst for more that keeps me going

Breathe deeply in my mind and calm my turbulent soul
Blow away the dark and give me sight
Vision to see the world as it should be
Clear thought and creativity to make it so

I love to feel the sand between my toes
Bridies and BRU delight my tongue
I rest and stand on solid rock
A servant of earth, for Gods anointed Son

Context:

This prayer was written deliberately using the four elements as a theme. I often use the combination of fire and water in my prayers to help prepare myself. The first time I used it was when I was praying quietly at a scripture union camp in Scoughall and it came to me unbidden. Since then I have found that the picture of a waterfall full of fire, transforming into water helps me become aware of the presence of God.

Inspired through reading Psalm 66

We praise you Lord, Creator of the heavens and the earth.

We acknowledge you as master of tides, of seasons

And as the master of time itself.

Awe inspiring as the pictures from the Hubble telescope are, your vision is wider, and your ways are more mysterious than the wonders of the universe itself.

We thank you that you have been at work in this land since time began,

And that for over one and a half thousand years established your church here.

Working with the rulers of the English, before there was even an English nation.

We work and debate politics, but our destinies and the movements of cultures are decided in your mind.

The great stock exchanges of the world are as a game of monopoly to you.

We thank you that our histories record that when peoples have called out in faith, you have answered

And that you have given us your Word, made living in Jesus, that you have a personal concern for each of us.

So as a group we come before you in Jesus name, to ask you to remember us in our daily lives, in our troubles and our joys and as witnesses to your promise.

In particular we ask you to remember the leaders of our local congregations, and all those who serve the Church worldwide.

In silence now we remember those known to us experiencing times of illness,

Trouble,

Or grief.

Please grant them, their friends and their families your peace.

Thank you that through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus we know that we have a God who understands what it is like to be human

And that through his sacrifice we know that you listen.

Bring us through this coming week so that we can return here glowing with Joy at the works of your Spirit through us.

Context:

I was asked to lead the congregation in prayer one Sunday. The leader of the service said that he was using psalm 66 as a theme. At the time I was sensitive to the depth and structure of formal liturgy and so tried to use my memories of Episcopal services to give a backbone to my prayer.

Inspired through reading psalm 105

Give thanks to God and call upon his name
Remember what he has done among the nations
And praise the works of his hands
Bask in the glow of his Holy fire
All those who live in his Sons name.
Draw strength from the knowledge of the love of God
And live in the Love that brings Life

Caesar and Odin fought to control territory and wealth
But Christ won the hearts and minds of Europe
Ninian, Patrick and Columba nurtured a Holy tree
That became a forest in the west
Gregory, Augustine and Aiden
Built a church of wood and stone in the isles
But it was God who brought us through a time of fire and sword
Christ who called us and the Spirit who unites us, even when we disagree.

It is the Lord who grants victory to warriors and kings
He gave strength to Charles Martel
And land to Carolingian knights
He gave Charlemagne and empire
And Saved Christendom from attacks
The example of Jesus inspired proud knights to become pure
They gave their lands and their blood to grasp the red cross
It is the Lord who decides when we live and when we die
We only decide how we will live and what we will die for
Let us not, in a time of peace, scorn those who fight in war

It is the Lord who gives knowledge and wisdom
He teaches minds to heal and hands to write
His Truth confounds are wisdom and mocks our piety
Give thanks for the scribes who illuminated the Bible
For the Holy orders who nurtured schools of study and houses of healing
Praise God for those who stand for God against corruption and establishment
Seek the Lord lest we become stale and complacent in our time.

He gave riches and technology to our culture
He made our islands a meeting place of minds at the heart of an empire
Give thanks that Livingston's missions to Africa freed British slaves
Give thanks for the BBC, the Royal Navy and the Welfare state
Remember that with our allies we survived and helped liberate Europe
Many tribes, old and new, one Kingdom is the future.

Give thanks for God who is faithful and generous
Seek out his works among the nations
Recognise his touch and give credit where it is due
Be challenged and refreshed, inspired!
Servants of the Kingdom, ruled by faith
Authorised to be catalysts for Life and Love

Respect

Context:

After the service where I used the prayer above, I decided to look at some other psalms in a similar way. Unsurprisingly, many of the psalms are about the history of Gods relationship with Israel. More surprising to me though is just how much imagery in contemporary songs is transplanted directly from the middle eastern context. I have never seen the cedars of Lebanon, but I have walked in the ancient Caledonian pine forest. (what's left of it). I tried to take into account the history of God working with my more recent ancestors when I wrote this, there are 2000 years of history which I feel are largely untapped at the moment.

Thoughts

Why beyond the book?

Every book has limits

In titling this guide “beyond the book” I in no way intend to distract from the significance that scripture has in Christian faith. I believe (as it is written) that all scripture is God breathed and useful for teaching training and rebuking. I also believe that meditating on the law of the Lord and the canon of scripture as a whole helps a person to participate in the grace of God empowered by the Holy Spirit and to grow in relationship with God. I’ll even accept that the particular circumstances of the composition, compilation and editing of the canon generally regarded as acceptable by mainstream Churches in the 21st century give scripture a unique and unmodifiable place in the history of the Church and the history of salvation.

Everything that is written in here has been subjected to the rigours of biblical scholarship, scrutiny by Church leaders and of course the test of my conscience and the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. It may contain mistakes, but they are honest ones and I am keen to enter into any discussions that will help identify such mistakes, lead to their healing, and the growth of understanding of the Truth.

I do however want to emphasise that Scripture is a means, not an end. We are people of the Word of God, but the Word of God can never be reduced to a book. This guide has been written to counteract a tendency in some parts of the Church to reduce the faith to a text, or even to a particular selection of texts that have been found to be helpful. This is a human tendency which I recognise in myself, but it limits the growth of faith, encourages intolerance and is a very “churched” form of idolatry. If you think this doesn’t apply to you think about how you use the word “Word” in a religious context. Do we talk about the glory of the gospel, or the glorious gospel? Think about how the words Bible, God, Holy Spirit and Jesus are used in your sermons and everyday speech. Does your use of the words actually represents what you believe when you think about the trinity that is God.

Scripture helps us understand who we are and what we believe as Christians, defining us as a religious group. Scripture does not however define God and the whole relationship of God with creation, it is not the last Word or the whole Word. Christian understanding of scripture itself teaches that there was more to Judaism than the Law, and throughout the texts we read of people encountering signs of Gods presence beyond the established parameters of their religious practice.

Rather than thinking of ourselves as Christians taking scripture to the world, which in practice often becomes a mission to make people like us. We should instead look for the Word of God at work in the process of creation, and test what we experience through the disciplines of prayer, rigorous thought, maintaining relationships with our heritage and contemporaries in faith as well as scripture.

Scripture should be a base from which we can expand in the creative diversity God has called us to, whilst retaining unity. The Word became flesh, not paper, and dwelt among us.

Revelation through relationship

I have heard it said within Christian circles that there is a demon behind every religion or faith that is not Christianity. I find this very hard to believe as it seems to require far too much creative effort from forces that are by nature destructive.. It also seems far too similar in outlook to the early stages of depression, where the whole world seems to be against you and you begin to attribute hostile motives to events that you don't understand or conflict with your comfort zone. In contrast Jesus has an optimistic approach to the diversity of religious practice. He does not deny that a time of turmoil and war is approaching where even the close bonds of family will be ripped apart in conflict. He does, however, say in his conversation with the Samaritan woman at the well that there will come a time when rather than worshipping on the mountain tops or in the temple in Jerusalem, people will worship in Spirit and in Truth.

This optimistic outlook suggests to me that we should live lifestyles of worship, where we appreciate our daily experiences and then offer the best of it back to God. As we do this we will notice that other people are doing similar sorts of things. We then have to ask if it is right to condone or adopt these other practices. This is where Christianity retains its distinctiveness from general spirituality. Although many contradictory practices can be described as being in Spirit, the essentiality of Truth requires us to be selective in what we do.

The temptation then is to proscribe certain actions legalistically, acting in order to preserve stability and understanding within a community. A legalistic proscription depends upon human understanding of the Truth and a lawlike system of customs. This is contrary to early church practice where the apostles were instructed by God to accept gentiles as gentiles into the community.

Instead we should decide on the basis of what is beneficial to a person living in relationship with God and the community. This process can be aided by the use of laws, as they are tempered through time and debate. However a thought dies as soon as it is written down and unless it is resurrected as a new thought and made vulnerable to change it is disconnected from the point at which a decision needs to be made. The

practice of making a decision of about what is beneficial takes this process into account. It requires a person to decide what is true through conformity with the good, rather than to rehearse what is already understood and conform. Legal systems at their best recognise this and include debate and evolution of judgement within their systems.

We are therefore encouraged to be open to new ways of worshiping God, permitted to be inspired by the practices of those outside our religious parameters but cautioned to ensure that our actions are beneficial.

