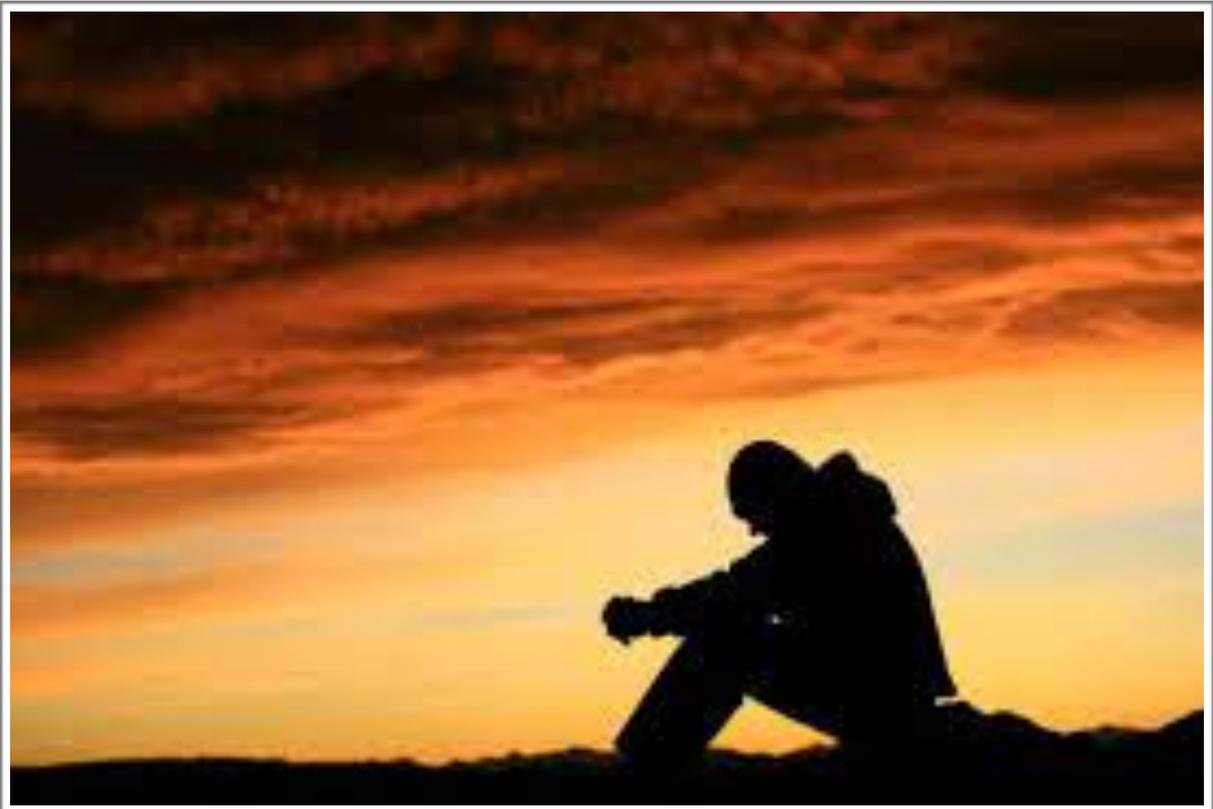


What are we doing when we pray?



When it comes to prayer I am finally realising I shall always be a beginner and never an expert at praying.

I shall always be a beginner at prayer, no matter how hard I try. However, I am reassured by these words from Thomas Merton. **"We do not want to be beginners (at prayer). But let us be convinced of the fact that we will never be anything but beginners all our life!"** So

if I may, as one beginner to others, offer these reflections on what we are doing when we pray.

Prayer is not learned as one would learn a task like driving a car – gain this skill, pass the test and you can do it. It is more like a relationship, like falling in love and desiring, delighting to be in the presence of the one who is loved. Prayer is **first and foremost** about the joy and mystery of being intentionally in God's presence.

For the Christian, prayer is about being with Jesus. The disciples were so fortunate. Jesus taught them how to pray, but much more importantly they had the close proximity of Jesus and his prayers. We do not have the advantage of the physical presence of Jesus, but we do have the assurance of scripture, especially Hebrews 7:25: ***"Consequently he (Jesus) is able for all time to save those who approach God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them"***.

Therefore when we pray, we join with Jesus (our brother) as he prays to (our Father). Prayer then is primarily about being with God. In that sense prayer is not about words, it is about relationship. It is being with a friend who, is 'the one who listens'. So my silence, my half-made requests, my sighs and longings along with my words are all part of

the prayer I offer.

This makes perfect sense to me: I realize that I relish times with good friends and recognise some of the same reasons for spending time in prayer. If I have not had good conversations with close friends for some time, I feel out of sorts, somewhat lonely, and ill at ease. When I am with good friends, I feel more whole and alive. I do not believe that my only reason for wanting time with them is to feel better. I want to be with them because I love them. I am genuinely interested in and concerned for them. The beneficial effect that being with them has on me is a happy by-product. Moreover, I have often spent time with friends when it cost me trouble and time, and I did it because they wanted my presence. Haven't we all spent time with a close friend who was ill or depressed, even when the time was painful and difficult? We spend that time because we love our friend for his or her own sake. Of course, there are times when we need the presence of close friends because we are in pain or lonely. Friendship would not be a mutual affair if we were always the ones who gave and never were open to receive. We spend time with our friends because of our mutual care and love. I pray because I love God and I know, through the cross of Jesus, just how much and how overwhelming that love of God is

for me and for everyone else in the world. With this in mind, I realise with wonder, at the awesome personality of God, and of God's love and grace, God's greatness and life: I guess we call this **adoration**. I am grateful for all God has done for us and others and we call this **thanksgiving**. I, being ashamed of the things I have done, thought or said or indeed the things I have avoided. This we call **confession and penitence**. And in thinking of others who are in any kind of difficulties or trouble and are in need of help I feel I need and want to share this with our Lord Jesus. We call this **petition or intercession**.

It seems clear to me that we do not really need to tell God anything. God knows already. However like lovers and friends who share their deepest feelings, when we give voice to our prayers it strengthens the relationship and accelerates change. The very act of sharing moves people closer. In God's presence as we share the burdens of our heart and as we hold the people for whom we pray, we move closer to God. Inevitably our lives change. Our attitudes, our prejudices, our desires, our values are transformed by his grace.

Every Christian needs to be taught how to pray through Jesus Christ in order to gain access to our Father in

heaven. Here is a story I once heard that might help to explain this:

During the American Civil War, as a result of a family tragedy, a soldier had been given permission to have a hearing with the President, because he wanted to request exemption from military service. But when he arrived at the White House, he was refused entry and he was sent away, and he went to sit in a nearby park. And as he was sitting in this park, a young boy came across to him and just remarked about how unhappy he looked. And the soldier found himself pouring out his heart to this young person. And eventually the boy said, 'Look, come with me,' and the dejected soldier went back to the White House, they went round the back. None of the guards seemed to stop them — even the generals and the high-ranking government officials stood to attention and let them pass through — and the soldier was amazed.

Finally they came to the presidential office. Without knocking they went into the west wing, the young boy opened the door of the Oval Office, walked straight in, and there was Abraham Lincoln, standing there in conversation with the Secretary of State. And the moment they walked in, Abraham Lincoln turned to the boy and he said, 'Todd, what can I do for you?' And Todd said, 'Dad, this soldier needs to talk to you.' He had access, through the son.



Abraham Lincoln

And that's what St. Paul says, in his letter to the Ephesians, that we have access to God through the Son, through Jesus. Jesus takes us into the presence of Almighty God. And although we have no right of ourselves to go into God's presence, through Jesus, through what he's done for us on the cross, we have access to the Father.

Praying like and with Jesus is so important to the Christian. In the Gospels Jesus comes to bring in the kingdom of God and we are to pray, "Your kingdom come" (Matthew 6:10). Throughout Jesus' ministry he was intent on overturning evil, suggesting we could dispense with temple ritual with its unjust taxes, freeing people from the focus on a place (Jerusalem), and making a relationship with God a true priority. There is no doubt that the religious leaders of his

day saw Jesus as a threat, one who undermined their authority and position.

Remarkably we have a role in praying in the kingdom (thy kingdom come). It is to bring in a new way of being community, of establishing peace and justice. So it might be said that prayer has a subversive element. There is an aspect of prayer which is there to overturn the known order. The theologian Karl Barth reminds us: "To clasp the hands in prayer is a beginning of an uprising against the disorder of the world".

At Caesarea Philippi Jesus gives the charge to the disciples to "bind" and to "loose" (Matthew 16:13- 20). This responsibility comes in Matthew's Gospel at the moment of disclosure of the meaning of Jesus' coming and gift of leadership in the community of disciples. For a long time I did not really understand what was meant by the expressions to bind and to loose. however I got some help from reading the New Testament scholar J. Jeremias, who explains it as "grace and judgement". So when we are called to pray for others, for situations of suffering and violence in the world we are binding evil and loosing God's grace in these situations. None of us should think of this as glib or without cost, for we may be asked to be the answers of our prayers. We may well be given the

responsibility and the obligation to bind and loose in this world, righting wrongs and spreading god's grace into the lives of others.

When reading Luke 13, it appears that all we need to do is ask, seek, knock and everything will be answered. This has sometimes led to selfish prayers and a health and wealth theology. However John 15:7 helps us to resolve this: "If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you". Here abiding and asking are linked. For to pray in the name of Jesus is to pray in union with him. We 'abide', and we are grafted into him; therefore our desires are moulded by his longing for the world, for the Church, for others we know and ourselves.

So, what are we really doing when we pray?

- When I pray I feel better about myself. I feel more centred, more in tune with the present, less anxious about the past or the future. So I suspect that I do pray for the purpose of psychological or physical health. But this is not all I pray for.
- I know that prayer is a conscious relationship, or friendship, with God and this draws me ever closer to

God's loving heart and this makes me feel more whole and alive.

- I know that I was created out of love, and I am drawn by the desire for "I know not what," for union with the ultimate Mystery, who alone will satisfy my deepest longing. So I pray.
- I pray because I have a deep desire to be in tune with God's intention and when this happens I cannot help but experience deep well-being.
- I pray because I have a deep desire to praise and thank God because of his great kindness and mercy. In contemplating Jesus, I see in Jesus God's deep kindness, love and mercy.
- I pray because I have a deep desire to pray for others in all circumstances and to speak out against evil and injustice, which I see in others and in myself.

THIS IS WHAT I BELIEVE I AM DOING WHEN I PRAY.

I have referenced the following in this article

William A. Barry, SJ

The Revd G Howard Mellor

Nicky Gumbel

Kent Crockett

William Barclay

C. S. Lewis

J. Jeremias

Ian x.

