

When I was listening to that beautiful second reading from St Paul's letter to the Ephesians - 'Blessed be God the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with all the spiritual blessings of heaven in Christ,' I was reminded of how important fixed prayer is, and meditative prayer in particular. That form of prayer we have just heard, is one of the many canticles from the New Testament. It appears in the Evening Office the priests are obliged to say. We have the Old Testament canticles in morning prayer and they become friends. I've been saying the office now for over 40 years and know most of the Psalms as soon as I hear them but I never bore of them, because they express so many of the passions and yearnings which make us human beings.

But today I want to address prayer, and in particular teaching young people to pray. I was very impressed this morning listening to First Confessions because it's one of the few times I've heard children say they pray. I don't think the children were just trying to be nice when I asked them, "Do you say your own bedtime prayers?" Nearly everyone of them said, "Yes". In the past they nearly always said, "No" or "sometimes." Developing that habit of prayer is so important. It's a habit that nurtures our faith. In the Old Testament reading we've just heard, Amos, the prophet talked about the fire that burnt within him. That fire wasn't there without prayer, and a knowledge of the living God. When the disciples went out, Jesus actually said to them, "This needs prayer to cast this out", and so they were trained in prayer. Prayer opens us up to the presence and mystery of God in our lives.

If you're struggling with prayer, there are certain fixed prayers like that canticle from St Paul, that we can get from the scriptures or a prayer book. We could invest in a prayer book, and prayers can become great friends. Prayer is not about the intellect, it begins in the heart. When I read a text like that from St Paul my first thought, having been taught theology, is to ask what its meaning is. But when we approach prayer Jesus said, "Become like little children". We need to have a second naivety. Not the naivety of a child, but the naivety of a person willing to be fresh and see something afresh, something new in what we are familiar with. I was thinking as I listened to that second reading, how in prayer you could personalize those words. If you open your Bible or Mass Book at home, and find that text, which is the very beginning of the letter to the Ephesians - read it again, very slowly, in a quiet moment. Personalise it - 'Blessed be God the Father of MY Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed ME with all the spiritual blessings of Christ.' Sit with it, and listen to what is being said in your heart, not in your head.

"Blessed be God, the Father of MY Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed ME with all the spiritual blessings of Heaven in Christ. Before the world was made, he chose ME, chose ME in Christ," and so on. St. Paul was addressing the Church at Ephesus, but he meant his message to be individual, as well. When you personalise the Scriptures they come home to you in the heart and still you. In fact, one of the ingredients of prayer is about preparing to

pray by stilling the mind because thoughts are not prayer and we're full of thoughts. First thing in the morning we are thinking - what have I got to do today- last thing at night, once again - what have I forgotten to do and need to do tomorrow? If prayer is going to be successful, and help us put ourselves in the presence of God, we need to STILL the mind from thinking, and go into that inner-self and LISTEN to the heart.

Now for young people, that's very hard and I don't know, as parents how you would conquer it, except maybe early on in your children's' lives sharing prayer with them. The distractions of the world are worse than when I was a child, with iPhones, ear pieces, and so on. Often, people can't sit still and be quiet. They are unable to have no noise in their ear, but that peace is so important to learn as a child. Silence plays an interesting part in school, doesn't it? When a child misbehaves or has a temper tantrum, one of the things the teachers do is to send the child to a quiet reflection area to calm down. It's so important to find peace and quiet, especially as an aid to prayer.

Fixed prayers, formal prayers if you like, are a great way of stilling the mind before you speak to God. I've brought an old friend with me today, a prayer I discovered long ago and it contains a very powerful and beautiful message. I've been using this prayer for nearly 30 years. There's even a coffee stain on it. It's typed with an old typewriter, pre-computers and it's next to my bed. I say this before I turn the light off, and I'll just read it to you, and then I want to tell you why it's a good friend.

"Lord my God, I thank you that you have brought to end this day. I thank you too, that you have let soul and body find their rest. Your hand has kept hold of me preserved and sheltered me. Forgive all littleness of faith and all injustice on this day, and help me to forgive all people from whom I suffered wrong. Oh, let me sleep in peace and in your care, and save me from assailants of the dark. I entrust all of my life, to you. I commend all who live here, and to you I commend my body and soul. Your holy name be praised, Oh Lord. Amen."

It's been a powerful friend because it was written by Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a Lutheran Pastor who was murdered in a Gestapo jail for opposing Hitler. He said that in a Gestapo jail for every hour on the hour, the guards used to bash on the railings to wake the prisoners up and give them sleep deprivation. So imagine, "Protect me from all assailants of the dark, protect all who live here, and forgive all injustice that's been done." That reminds me how easy my life is, and how I really have to give thanks to God and ask for sleep.

Prayers can become great friends if they're said with that naivety of freshness, not just repeated like we often do with the prayers of the Mass. Every time I say that a prayer it has become a friend. I don't just rattle it off though, I say it in the heart before I switch off my light, and last thing at night, I put myself in the presence of God.

This stillness in the Presence of God can open us up to another form of prayer which is harder, but probably more suitable to adults, and that is to be meditative, to be still. I hear lots of confessions, and in every confession I hear from women who are wives and mothers, they confess to a lack of patience with their children, and they wish they didn't lose their

temper as much with their husband and children. I always sympathise and say, the problem is, particularly for a wife and a mother, that they don't get any self-love time because they're so busy being the focal point of unity in a family.

I think it's so important if you are that busy, that you negotiate with your partner for just once a week to have 15 minutes alone and maybe come into a church when it's open, or in good weather go to a nice park, and just to imbibe the presence of God. You can then go back into things refreshed. There are simple things we can do as adults, we can say prayers like, "Lord Jesus Christ have mercy on me, a sinner." Try repeating that with the Rosary beads, adding the Our Father and Glory Be, at the beginning and end of each decade. That is a very calming prayer. We can use Rosary beads not just for the Rosary, but to count out the little moments of prayer, "Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me, a sinner."

I wanted to cover this topic of prayer because so many people tell me they struggle with prayer. Maybe, it's a good thing to go to somewhere like Saint Paul's bookshop at Hinsley Hall, or to look online and find any books on prayer or an actual prayer book and invest in those things for yourself - because if you're praying as an adult in this gentle way of calming your spirit, you're more likely to impress and imbue your own children with the spirit and habit of prayer.



