

# PRACTICAL PRAYER - NO WORDS

*(Romans 8.9-30 and Mathew 6.5-8)*

My mother had a photo on her kitchen wall. It showed my stepfather sitting in a garden chair reading a book and close by him sat my son aged about 7 also reading a book. It's a lovely picture of togetherness - two people at ease in each other's company with no need to speak to each other.

Today we come to the end of our short series of sermons on practical praying with a sermon on praying without words. Up to now the emphasis has been on using words in speaking to God. After all we communicate using words - but it isn't the only way.

There are five individuals in our house. Only two of us - my husband and I - use words to show our love for each other. Lucy our dog, Cuthbert our cat and Chloe our granddaughter use other ways to show and respond to love. After all we have the same creator and all of us reflect God's love. We don't need words to show this love.

Praying without words begs the questions - 'what is prayer and why do we want to pray'? Prayer is a response to God's love for us.

He wants us to be with him as we were intended to be. We want to be with him because we belong with him. The psalmist says, 'As the deer longs for the water so longs my soul for you'.

St. Augustine said man is restless until he finds his rest in God.

Before the fall, God is described as walking in the Garden of Eden with Adam and Eve.

When I was confirmed I was presented with a book called 'In His Presence'. It is a book of prayers - lots of them! I never used the book. I think I would have been on my knees all day if I had followed its advice. It is very legalistic very one sided and totally inappropriate for an 11 year old. This is how you pray - use lots of words.

What's wrong with lots of words? Well nothing really but in both our readings there are warnings about using too many words. Jesus says that our Father God knows our needs before we ask for them and we shouldn't think that the longer our prayers the better they will be. And Paul says much the same adding that God's Spirit lives within us and prays on our behalf.

If we aren't careful prayers can be very prescriptive like measures in the Health Service or they can assume a magical power. You used to see adverts in the Gazette you know - say 3 Hail Mary's for 9 days and St. Jude will answer your prayer.

John Pritchard points out that even words have silences between them and around them. This then is how to concentrate on the spaces between the words.

To pray without words means to reduce the words said and increase the spaces. It turns prayer from what we do to be in God's presence to simply being in the presence of our Father God and listening to him.

What can we do to help us do this? Jesus tells us to remove distractions and go somewhere where we will be alone and not be disturbed. - go into your closet and shut the door. For some finding a private place can be difficult. However it is important to find somewhere because what we want to do is between each individual and his or her creator alone.

Jesus often went up into the hills to pray to where he knew he wouldn't be disturbed. Presumably this was his special place.

St, Mary's may well be being used as special quiet place. Perhaps we could help people who want to use the church in this way. There are places in our cathedrals reserved for private prayer. I did most of my revision in the one in Durham Cathedral and fed my babies in the one at York Minster.

In Middlesbrough the Cathedral was used as a place to go to be in the presence of God.

There are other 'thin places'. T. S. Elliot described them as places where prayer is valid. One is described in Genesis when Jacob saw the ladder to heaven.

For me we have a place in Teesdale that is just right. I can stand by the fell gate like my stepfather did before me and just look.

To start to pray in the spaces isn't difficult - we just need to be still and enjoy our surroundings and invite God to be with you. Personally I just say to the My Father 'Lord I receive your love'. He is there already and will be waiting for you to do just that.

If when we are praying conventionally or indeed at any time we find within us a longing to be still or quiet with God we really should listen to the voice within.

The trouble is we live such busy lives. We are doing things all the time. And that is the same for the church. Prayers can become part of this busy - ness, an obligation instead of an honour and a joy. We should try letting it all go and let God be God. Our Father wants us to enjoy being with him as he enjoys being with us. God loves us - He is love. He accepts us as we are and will live within us if we let him be there. I think we would prefer it if we remained in control.

This is what the second reading is about. Paul as a trained Pharisee finds it so difficult to get his head round this - and so do we.

Paul reminds us and I suspect himself as well that this close relationship with God is a free gift and doesn't depend on us doing good things.

Our Lord reaches out to us. Do we know when he does or are too busy talking to him to hear him when he talks to us.

It would be good for us as individuals and as a church to increase the time we spend just being ourselves before God.

As we go forward to receive our Lord in Communion and go through the screen let us know that we can come to Jesus as we are and can accept from him his love and be fed by him. And let us resolve to spend more time just being in his presence and waiting on him as he speaks to us. And he will, often in the most unexpected ways.

O Lord your tenderness melting all my bitterness,  
O Lord I receive your love.  
O Lord your loveliness changing all my ugliness,  
O Lord I receive your love.