

SOME THOUGHTS ABOUT PRAYER

Reflecting on the Lord's Prayer has led me to thinking again about prayer in general, and to share some of these thoughts with you. It's probably fair to say that most of us find prayer difficult, sometimes tedious, and often puzzling. If I had ten pounds for every 'spiritual manual' I've consulted I'd be very wealthy, but no single spiritual guide has all the answers. What works for some doesn't work for all. I shall aim to write very personally, and without any claim to be an expert. If there were a *Great British Pray-Off* I would certainly not be the Paul Hollywood figure - in fact I should be surprised and delighted even to be able to apply to get into the tent at all! The most I can claim is that I have been practising prayer for a long time, and care deeply about it.



I'll begin by thinking about why we pray, and go on to ways of praying.

WHY DO WE PRAY?

When Dr Samuel Johnson was asked to put forward the strongest argument for prayer, he replied:- *Sir, there is no argument for prayer.* By this he did not mean that praying is unreasonable - rather, that prayer comes as naturally to everyone as breathing or eating. Prayer is a natural function of human life. The reason why we do pray is that we cannot help praying. In some form or another, prayer is found everywhere, in all ages and among all peoples.

Archaeologists tell us that there is evidence that our remotest Neanderthal ancestors were reaching out to a world beyond this

one. Every great world religion, with the arguable exception of some schools of Buddhism, features prayer, and so it permeates every culture.

I actually believe that prayer lies hidden in the life of every human being, even if they have given up on it, seem to get on very well without it, and maybe even say they don't believe in it. That is at the level of their *opinions*, but not of their *instincts*. Often a crisis of personal danger prompts prayer. A World War II army chaplain said: *There are no atheists in foxholes!*

Tear Fund recently launched an investigation into spirituality in the midst of a pandemic, and turned up some intriguing results. Prayer appears to be a vital part of life for people in general. While only 11% of British people registering as regular church-goers, just under half of UK adults (44%) say they pray, and among those who pray a third (33%) say that they have prayed since the COVID-19 lockdown because they believe it makes a difference. A quarter (24%) of UK adults say they have watched or listened to a religious service since lockdown (on the radio, live on TV, on demand or streamed online) - many more than regularly attend church services.

But this statistic really surprised me: a third (34%) of UK adults aged 18-34 say they have watched or listened to a religious service since lockdown - this compares to one in five (19%) adults aged 55+. While some may view religion as more appealing to the older generation, the research shows that younger adults aged 18-34 are significantly more likely to say they pray regularly (at least once a month) than adults aged 55 and over (30% vs. 25%).



(I'm afraid I couldn't resist these statistics - it's quite novel to be able to quote any sort of survey when reflecting on prayer!)

Besides personal danger, sometimes an overwhelming responsibility makes people pray in spite of themselves. When they have done everything in their power, there remains nothing but the help of God. Anything - peril, responsibility, anxiety, grief - that shakes us to our core, is likely to lead us to pray. And that is true of whole populations as well as individuals.

More happily, experiences like a new birth, falling in love, a thrilling sunset, the memory of a long life shared together, can result in an upwelling of joy and thanksgiving that seems to want to go somewhere, or to someone.

These 'crisis-moments', be they threatening, challenging or deeply joyful, by themselves alone call out prayers which are spasmodic and occasional. But the God we recognise in the love and teaching of Jesus wants to be to us more like a constant friend, guiding and guarding us, loving and upholding us throughout our daily lives.

And, even if someone has never been tipped over into prayer by extreme pain, or anxiety, or fear or joy, certain questions lurk in the mind of every human being: Who am I? Why am I here?



What am I worth? What's it all about? Where am I headed? Questions to which some psychologists and philosophers give the fancy title 'existential anxiety' and which, they claim, explain away religion. As if a simple description of the tidal

movement of the ocean were a sufficient explanation of the force of gravity.

These questions go to the heart of what it is to be a human being. And they provoke very different reactions. People can fend them off in countless ingenious ways: with food and drink, with money, with shallow relationships, with power, but none of them is the

answer. I believe these questions are at least part of the restlessness of which St. Augustine speaks when he says: *You have made me for Yourself, and my heart is restless until it finds its rest in You.*

We are made to find communion with God and to experience his love. It is only in God that our restless hearts can rest.

Of course, a relationship of this quality does not come about by accident. And we know, from our own social life, that a good and enduring friendship is based not on 'speed dating', a few trial conversations, but caring attention to one another and time spent together. In the same way, prayer is a cumulative life of friendship with God - but it's never too late to start.

Prayer offers a personal encounter with God and an intimate understanding of God's love for us. Let's offer our restless hearts to God and rest in his love.

A Prayer of Saint Thomas More



Father in heaven, you have given us a mind to know you, a will to serve you, and a heart to love you. Be with us today in all that we do, so that your light may shine out in our lives.

We pray that we may be today what you created us to be,
and may praise your name in all that we do.

We pray for your Church:

May it be a true light to all nations;

May the Spirit of your Son Jesus

guide the words and actions of all Christians today.

We pray for all who are searching for truth:

bring them your light and your love.

Give us, Lord, a humble, quiet, peaceable, patient, tender and charitable mind, and in all our thoughts, words and deeds a taste

of the Holy Spirit. Give us, Lord, a living faith, a firm hope, a fervent charity, a love of you.

Take from us all lukewarmness in meditation, dullness in prayer. Give us fervour and delight in thinking of you and your grace, your tender compassion towards us.

The things that we pray for, good Lord, give us the grace to labour for: through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Fr Robin