

House of Prayer 1

A candle burns – a sign of God's presence among us.

The Prayer of Caedmon

I cannot speak unless you loose my tongue; I only stammer and I speak uncertainly; but if you touch my mouth my Lord, then I will sing the story of your wonders.

These evenings find their inspiration in the words of the late Brother Roger of Taizé, who said: *'When the Church becomes a House of Prayer, the people will come'. Actually he said they will 'come running'.*

His belief was that prayer creates such a safe and healing and revolutionary community that people will actively seek us out.

Make no mistake, prayer will change us; it will take us into new and sometimes unsettling territory, so be advised this is not an exercise in mastering techniques or ticking conscience boxes, it is about nothing less than changing the world, beginning with me.

Tonight we're going to be thinking about what prayer is and what it does. Tomorrow we will look at how God answers prayer and how we pray with all five of our senses. On Wednesday we will be thinking about the place of silence and meditation and the imagination and how we pray when God seems absent from our lives, and then finally on Thursday, Ascension Day, we will share the meal of our salvation, and as St Augustine said we will pray twice by singing the chants of Taizé, as well as exploring the Lord's Prayer together.

Each night we'll benefit from hearing testimonies about different experiences and perspectives of prayer.

It will all, however, be futile if it does not lead us to pray; my prayer for myself and us all is that we begin to fall in love with prayer.

Whole libraries have been devoted to prayer, and we will only, of course, just scratch the surface over these four days. There are no experts - here we each have something uniquely insightful to offer, whether we know that yet or not.

'I would rather show someone my bank balance than talk about my prayer life. I would rather confess that I am a rotten godmother, that I struggle with my weight, that I fear I am overly fond of Bombay Sapphire gin martinis, than confess I am a prayer weakling. To say I love God but I do not pray is like saying I love life but I do not breathe much.'

Those honest words were written by the American priest and author Barbara Brown Taylor.

I think some of us feel guilty that we don't pray enough. Some of us perhaps suspect we don't pray right. Maybe the whole idea, frankly, of prayer just bores us. Or maybe we have legitimate questions about just how effective it really is. Maybe we feel disillusioned by a lack of response or answer to prayer. Maybe we just can't bring ourselves to believe in an interventionist God, and, even if we could, would he be interested in this minute life in the grand scheme of things?

Well relax, it's Ok, you're among friends; we are all fellow strugglers.

Often, I come across people whose image of God has been so twisted that they cannot even bring themselves to pray.

Writer of the novel 'The Shack', Paul Young, advises:

'Pray (then) to what you can believe in... if you believe in love, pray to Love, if you believe in truth, pray to Truth... because in time you may discover that Love is a person and Truth has a name.'

Barbara Brown Taylor again writes:

'The only way I have found to survive my shame is to come at the problem from both sides, exploring two distinct possibilities – 1, that prayer is more than my idea of prayer and, 2, that some of what I actually do in my life may constitute genuine prayer.'

Grandad's prayers of the earth

I want to share with you one of my favourite stories. Many of you have already heard this but this time, as you listen, I'd like you to listen out for one thought, one idea, one epiphany within the story that speaks; something that surprises you, perhaps, or excites you or makes you think twice.

It's called 'Grandad's prayers of the earth'.

When I was little, my grandad was my best friend. Being with him always made the world seem just right.

Grandad and I liked to go for walks in the woods together. We didn't walk very far, or very fast, or very straight.

When we walked, I would ask him questions about things I wasn't sure of.

'Why is it grandad.. ?' I would ask, and 'What if...?' and 'Does it ever...?'

One day, I asked my grandad about prayers.

For a long time grandad was quiet. He didn't say anything until we came to the tallest tree in the forest. And then he answered with a question.

'Do you know, son' he whispered, 'that trees pray?'

I listened closely, but I couldn't hear them.

'See how they reach for the sky', he said, 'They reach, and reach – for clouds and sun and moon and stars. And what else is reaching for heaven but a prayer?'

'There are all kinds of ways to pray', said grandad. 'The tall grass prays as it waves its arms beneath the sky, and flowers pray as they breathe their sweetness into the air. The wind prays as it whispers and moans and sighs. It is saying a prayer and singing a hymn at the same time.'

'All the beings of the world pray', said my grandad. 'As they slip through the forest or sparkle in the water... as they climb mountainsides or soar into the clouds or burrow into the earth. Each living thing gives its life to the beauty of all life and that gift is its prayer.'

Then we were quiet, my grandad and I. He was watching something far away, and I was thinking about all he had said. Finally I asked him about the prayers of people.

Grandad smiled and ruffled my hair. 'People pray some of the most wonderful prayers of all', he said.

'Bending down to smell a flower can be a prayer', said my grandad. 'Quietly watching the sunrise, feeling the slow turning of the earth and saying hello to a new day is one of the oldest prayers'.

'Standing in a snowy wood on a winter's day and watching your breath become part of the breath of the world is a way to pray. Making music or painting a picture can be a prayer. Holding hands around the table with family and friends, remembering all that holds us together and giving thanks is one of the greatest prayers. Sometimes,' said grandad, 'people pray when they are sad or sick or lonely, or have a problem too big to carry themselves. They may say words they have learnt from their fathers or mothers or grandads or great grandmothers. But often they must find their own words. The important thing to remember is that the words will always be right if they are real and true and come from the heart'.

We had walked far enough and grandad said it was time to go back, but I had one last question. 'Are our prayers answered, grandad,' I asked.

Grandad smiled. 'Most prayers are not really questions,' he said. 'And, if we listen very closely, a prayer is often its own answer. Like the trees and winds and waters, we pray because we are here – not to change the world, but to change ourselves. Because it is when we change ourselves... that the world is changed.'

My grandad and I went for many walks after that one and I often listened for the prayers of the earth, but was never sure I heard them.

Then, one day, my grandad was gone. And no matter how hard I prayed, he didn't come back. He couldn't come back. I prayed and I prayed and I prayed until I couldn't pray any more. And so I didn't... for a long time.

And the world seemed dark and lonely without my grandad in it.

Until one day I went for a walk. I found a big rock under some tall trees and sat down on it. Overhead, the branches swayed and a breeze whispered in the leaves.

I heard a stream flowing nearby and a robin singing from a honeysuckle bush. And I heard something else, too – something in the sounds of breezes and birds and water... I heard prayers.

The earth was praying, just like grandad had said.

So I joined in. 'Thank you,' I prayed, 'for tall trees and sweet flowers, for still rocks and singing birds... and especially for my grandad'.

And, as I prayed, something changed and my grandad seemed somehow near. And for the first time in a long time, the world seemed just right.

Turn for a moment to someone near you and share something from the story that spoke to you.

Another question...

How does prayer change us?

The essence of prayer is communion and communication. In human interaction we know that less than 10% of what we communicate is verbal... could it be, then, as Barbara Brown Taylor suspects, we might actually be praying more than we think we are; might it be that a thought, a whisper, a sigh, a tear, an action could be a prayer?

Thought for today contributor Brian Draper believes so:

'Prayer can take many forms, it need not just be about words - prayer can be taking a walk, or painting a picture. Prayer can be writing a poem, or sitting quietly. It can be feeling the smooth contours of a stone on the beach, or the rough edges of bark on a tree.'

Now before you say that's a cop out, I need to draw a distinction here between the work of prayer (the setting aside of time to commune and intercede) with the life of prayer (prayer as life). If we consciously bring God into every moment then every moment, I believe, can be prayer, even the most mundane.

You see, we are designed to pray, hardwired to reach beyond to the More.

The spiritual writer Kenneth Leech says, *'The best preparation for a life of prayer is to become more intensely human'*. That, I think, is what grandad in the story was trying to teach his grandson. We become more human when we learn a reverence for all of life; when we open our eyes to the daily miracles, to the God who is the ground of our being, the X beneath our feet.

Because, when we do, then life becomes prayer.

Someone shared with me this quote just earlier today:

'We are not here to make or say words of prayers but to become prayer by living in and for God; ready to surrender to His call and His greater Glory'.

It is a question of enlarging our awareness; opening our eyes to the burning bushes that surround us.

Personally, I find this idea of life as prayer liberating.

I want to focus now a little on the work of prayer.

Prayer as oxygen

Prayer is the oxygen of our souls. It sustains us; in prayer we breathe in the breath of our God and our God breathes through us, bringing our imaginations, our compassion, our faith

to life. Without this oxygen we starve; we become less human; at best we exist; at worst we are dead. Without prayer the church is dead.

The shorter catechism, which I grew up, with poses the question: 'What is man's chief end?' In other words, what were we created for? And the answer is, 'To glorify God and to enjoy him forever'.

Prayer is glorifying – giving God his right place at the centre of things... because that is where he is meant to be. When God takes centre stage in our lives, that is when we are most free, because that's how we've been designed.

Glorifying and **enjoying God**... prayer is learning to enjoy the presence of God as much as God enjoys our presence; learning to sit with him as a child would a parent, not needing words, not asking for anything, just being present.

Prayer as trap

The literal meaning for the word 'prayer' in Aramaic, the language of Jesus, is 'to set a trap'. Prayer then literally means, 'To set your mind like a trap and wait patiently; still and alert; to catch the thoughts of God; that is, to trap inner guidance and impulses. The word also means, 'To make adjustment or tune in, to get reception' in Aramaic - asking you to turn on the television, I would have to use the word for prayer.

So prayer is catching the thoughts of God. Opening ourselves, tuning in... waiting for that kingfisher moment of recognition.

Prayer is a two-way street; and it begins with our listening: 'What does God want me to pray for?', rather than, 'What should I be praying for?'.

And as we wait, sometimes a name or a face or a situation will pass across the screen of our minds... and all we are called to do is to hold that name, that face, that situation for as long as it feels right, and then let it go, back to the divine embrace. Prayer is holding.

Prayer as mountain

I've often found myself retreating to the mountains. Back home in Ireland there's a certain mountain where I have often found shelter within its abandoned quarry face. Often, it would be a growing tension or an unresolved issue or a torn relationship that would lead me up the mountain. There, I could whisper and shout it to the wind. There, I could slowly feel its power deflate as I began to breathe in a bigger picture. The mountain's gift so often was a peace of mind that comes from glimpsing a new perspective. The mountain would always change me because the mountain helped me to pray. Prayer lifts us out of our crowded minds; it raises us above the anxiety and the stress that so often cling to us. Prayer helps us see a bigger picture. It can lift us up upon the shoulders of God; help us see more of what and how God sees.

The prayer of the mountain helps us process the stuff of our lives.

Prayer as cooperation

Prayer is a joint venture; a cooperation with God. In prayer, God works with us to bring about his shalom; his desire for the wholeness of all creation. That actually blows my mind. God has limited himself to working with our prayers; that's how significant they are.

John Pritchard wrote:

'The point of our praying is that it enables him (God) to do what might otherwise have been more difficult. Such is his self-limiting humility in this world order that he works by collaboration rather than by edict. When his will and ours are tuned then ... the extraordinary truth seems to be that he relies on our co-operation to make his kingdom come.'

Intercession, standing before God with the people on your heart, takes on, I think, another dynamic; a new power when two or three gather in cooperation.

The extraordinary truth seems to be that God needs us to be part of his solution and we are called to be persistent; not to give up praying.

You see, prayer is founded on a truth called resurrection. Resurrection proves that in the end love wins; in the end life triumphs; in the end evil is defeated. So, in the meantime, we hold to that hope in prayer, knowing that resolution may not perhaps even come in this life but will, nevertheless, come. That's the hope that has sustained countless people throughout human history in cotton fields and gulags, in prison cells and protest marches, in hospital waiting rooms and refugee camps.

Prayer as protest

The Psalms are among the most quoted, most loved of scripture; we go to them for solace and wisdom and an aid to worship. And yet we read them very selectively because, as I'm sure you've discovered, they also contain some of the most brutal passages in all of scripture. What do we do then with what's called the Imprecatory Psalms - literally to pray evil against someone or invoke a curse upon? Here's, perhaps, the most famous and shocking example: Psalm 137. It's written in exile where the Jews have been carried off to Babylon: 'By the rivers of Babylon I sat down and wept....' This lament ends with these words, which, funnily enough, didn't make it into the Boney M classic: 'Happy is the one who seizes your infants and dashes them against the rocks'.

C S Lewis believed that verses like this didn't belong in scripture. I have to say that's what I thought until recently. We live in relative comfort and security. Many of our brothers and sisters, however, throughout the world have undergone or witnessed unspeakable things. Although we can never condone imprecatory words, might they actually speak what, no doubt, many of our persecuted brothers and sisters actually feel? You see, honesty is the true heart of prayer. I, personally, am thankful for the whole range of human emotion voiced within in the Psalms and elsewhere in scripture; there is no pretence, no gloss, just real, raw prayer. If we cannot be completely honest in our prayers, even if that means screaming the air blue at God himself, where can we be?

The last image or type of prayer I want to say something about is gratitude.

Prayer as gratitude

Grace is everywhere; life is gift. Opening our eyes to the new born mercies of each morning will provoke an instinct within us to say 'Thank you'. When we give thanks it is the completion of the grace. The gift is given, received, and the gratitude completes the circle. Cultivating gratitude transforms us – it releases an energy that blesses both giver and receiver. Gratitude changes our perspective into glass half full. Gratitude is one of the great spiritual disciplines; even in the dullest or darkest of days, if we can only see the gift, the day is transformed. Some of you will be familiar with something called the examen – there are many different variations, but one of the most helpful, I think, is at the end of our day to ask ourselves two questions: 'For what am I most grateful today?' and 'For what am I least grateful?'. These two questions uncover everything we need to take into prayer.

Prayer is an ongoing, honest and vulnerable sharing between ourselves and God for the good, not only of that individual relationship, but ultimately for the good of all relationships; all creation. We are called, in fact, through prayer to engage in re-creation... in God's redemptive, healing, creating work. That's mind blowing, I think, but how?

When we pray for something or someone, we are not bargaining with God, asking him to change his mind, it's not like those arcade penny falls ... the more prayers we put in the bigger the pay-out. Prayer is tapping into the divine creative energy; the same energy that created the universe; it's waking up to what God is doing right here and now and asking 'How can I be part of that?'. Prayer is our whole posture towards life; it's about how we see everything. It's about God lifting us onto his shoulders to show us what he can see. In prayer, God invites us to come with him under the cosmic skies to see what he sees and engage in what he is engaged in.

Prayer changes things, most profoundly it changes us... in prayer we can begin to stand in another's shoes; to feel what another feels. It is the beginning of true compassion and empathy and sympathy and understanding. Prayer gives us bigger hearts - it increases love because, in prayer, we begin to feel what God feels. This tuning-in is what we were created for.

There are images or types of prayer that I haven't touched upon; confession for example. I've done too much talking - tonight is about a shared learning so, again, turn to someone near and take a moment to reflect on any of what I've just said... and then ask yourselves, 'What would I add to that list of images or types of prayer?'

Any other images of prayer?

Prayer of loving kindness

May you know love; may you be free, may you be healed.