

Finding the way



Thoughts on prayer
Fr. Ian Walton, OSJ

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Dear Reader,

This book is made up of a collection of articles written over the last 20 years on prayer which are based on personal experience.

It is not intended to be a definition of what prayer is or how it is practiced.

Neither is it intended to be a theological treatise on prayer. I am no expert.

It is intended to be of some help and support to those who are concerned about aspects of prayer, those who perhaps may be uncertain or confused.

Everyone is different and expresses their love of God in their own unique way, and that means that forms of prayer may be quite individual.

That in itself can be quite unsettling, but just because these forms of prayers don't fit within our own personal experiences or 'church tradition' doesn't mean they are wrong.

It just means that they are different.

The important thing is that prayer works effectively.

Prayer is a great form of ministry that every Christian can be involved in and there is no mystery to its practice.

I hope that you will find some consolation, encouragement, support and clarification within these pages, and you come away feeling more secure in your prayer life.

May God bless you in your life's journey,

Fr. Ian Walton, OSJ.

Prayer in natural and God wants us to talk to Him.

Why do we pray?

I do not know except to say it is a natural response to circumstances which is truly amazing. Even those who would say they do not believe in God admit that there are times when they cannot help themselves and go against all their reason and pray. It is a truly remarkable feature of our existence and comes from deep within us, beyond our consciousness.

Perhaps we were created with the need to pray and perhaps within that we have the natural ability to pray.

For many of us it is part of our Christian background. We have been exposed to prayer but I wonder whether we really understand the power and responsibility in love we have because of prayer.

We pray because we have concerns, fears, worries and problems. We pray because we feel we can offer or do nothing else in the circumstances. We then resign ourselves to whatever life throws at us. Is this what prayer is about, a last ditch effort to delay the inevitable?

I won't attempt to answer that question. I'd really like you to find out the answer for your self. We each have to work this out for ourselves otherwise it has no real value.

Let me help you on the way though by giving you an example I hope you are not over familiar with in real life.

If you have a toothache you can take pain killers but somewhere down the line you will have to see the dentist if you want the problem resolved. You will have to talk to the dentist about the problem because there is nothing left to do. The dentist cannot do anything until you commit yourself to him. You may have to wait, you may get an immediate appointment, but you will be seen and the dentist will assess the situation and do what he or she can do. It may hurt for a while but it will bring healing even though there is an emotional and probably financial cost to bear for a while. You may even realise that if you had spoken to the dentist a little earlier that the problem wouldn't have been so difficult to deal with.

How does that relate to prayer?

In prayer you begin by accepting that there is a problem or worry that needs dealing with.

You talk to God and explain the situation.

You give over the problem to God and wait for an answer.

Then God acts on the problem and you wait for the healing process to begin. Some time later you find healing has taken place and if you remember you can say your thank you in whatever way you think is appropriate.

Unlike the dentist, unless you have a very special dentist, God has a deep and lasting love for you and this goes much further than whatever you think about yourself. Some people say or think that they are not very nice people and they feel embarrassed about approaching God. Let me tell you that God loves you more than any other creation. He is waiting for you to talk to Him. He wants nothing more than for you to talk to Him, to share your worries, fears, hurts and concerns with Him. He loves you more than anything you could have done or not done , more than anything you could have said or not said.

What is more, regarding prayer, the time and method is unimportant. He has so much love for you He will do everything He can to help you. All you have to do is to start talking to Him, regardless of whatever sort of person you think you are. No one is barred from talking to God.

Wow, that is a big thought. How do you talk to God?

Just do it. There are lots of ways and no one way is better than any other. It may feel peculiar but just do it.

I pray a lot when driving on my own and the different places on my journey to work reminds me about the different people I pray for on a regular basis. I just talk, it is as if God is sat in the seat beside me, and I tell God everything because I trust Him and trust in His love for me.

I pray at work, quietly so as not to upset other people, when problems arise.

I pray at church. I pray with others and support their prayers as I feel led.

I pray as I rest and just think about the day, things I have said, things I have done, things that have happened, people I have met.

I ask for big things and small things. I try to remember that everything that happens in my life matters to God. There is nothing that I cannot ask for. I do not worry about the things I pray for God answers all prayers in some way.

I know God's love is greater than anything I can imagine and He acts out of that love. I know that I can pray and then forget about it because it is being dealt with. He knows what I am going to say and that means if I can't get the words out I don't have to worry because He knows, He feels, He understands my prayer.

Prayers can be feelings and emotions that cannot be put into words and are given to God in trust.

Prayers can be as short as the urgency of a situation demands.

They can be long, poetic and beautiful.

They can be stumbling, disjointed, half formed and with long pauses in between the words, phrases and sentences.

There is no right way or wrong way. There is no better way or worse way.

It begins with talking to God, however silly that may seem. Once you utter a single word of prayer you have connected with God and God will not break that trust you have shown by saying that first word. He is patient and will wait longer than you can imagine for you to share the things that happen in your life. He will listen whenever you speak. He will act because He loves you more than anything else.

All He asks is for you to try. Trust your deeper instincts and go for it. Be ready to be surprised about how far God will go for you..

Breaking the chains that hold us back.

Sometimes I want to pray, I need to pray, and I find I can't. The words just won't come out, my mind wanders, I just don't feel right. I am held back from doing the thing I most want to. I know it is not God that is holding me back, it is just me.

What is the problem?

It is not God for we know that He is waiting for us to talk to Him and that He welcomes us and wants to answer our prayers, whoever we are. His love for us is unquestionable and the only thing that separates us from God is ourselves.

Is it that we feel insecure about talking to Him, about coming into His presence?

We all do things that we are ashamed of and if we let them, they can become a self imposed barrier. An example might be that we have said something critical about a colleague and when we next see them we find looking them straight in the eyes difficult, in fact we may even try to avoid looking at them. We have distanced ourselves from that colleague and, if we do not put things right quickly, this could turn into a major problem. The point about this is that we caused the separation and we continue it by leaving it unresolved.

God is very understanding of our nature and failings and we have no need to fear Him because His love for us absolute, constant and big enough to handle anything we can do. When we do something that holds us back from God we should be honest and admit it in prayer. God cannot wait to forgive us and wants us to have a complete and unbroken relationship with Him. It may be difficult to admit that we have made a mistake but we can have absolute confidence that God will not turn us away or reject us when we come before Him in prayer.

If you do feel that you have separated yourself from God in this way then have confidence because He will not turn you away. A contrite heart(heart that seeks forgiveness and reconciliation) is loved by God greatly and is always accompanied by a gentle, compassionate and complete forgiveness. You need have no worries on that particular score.

What may be a problem is that we can sometimes be unwilling to forgive

ourselves. We know God will forgive us, but

That 'but' is a really hard one to deal with. All I can ask is that you try to see that this is a problem you can overcome with prayer although it may take a little time. It is important that you do pray and you need not worry that your prayers will not be heard.

God is wonderfully patient and loving and is always by your side. You may not appreciate it but He feels everything you feel.

If you can, tell God what it is you are unable to forgive yourself for and then ask Him to work His healing in your life. If God can forgive you (and He will) then you can learn to forgive yourself in time.

If you cannot find the words then ask Him to help you find the words but don't rush yourself. Be patient and the words will come in their own time in their own way. If that is too hard ask God to accept your feelings as a gift and ask for Him to touch you, to bless you, to heal the hurt.

It is as simple as that, believe me. Trust God and when or if you feel it all coming back to haunt you then you can remind yourself it has been dealt with by a loving, considerate, tender, gentle and forgiving Father who loves you so very much and would have nothing separate you from His presence. When something is forgiven by God, it is forgiven permanently

I realise from my own experiences that it is not always easy to be confident as a Christian and that we sometimes rely on our feelings when we should rely on God. These points may help you if you can remember them when you feel low and vulnerable:-

~God loves you so very much more than the things you may have done,

~all things can be forgiven and will be forgiven if you can only ask,

~there is nothing that can distance you from God's presence except yourself,

~He always listens to and answers all your prayers, even the prayers that cannot be put into words,

~you can be confident and know that His love is always there for you, whatever, where ever, whenever, and that He will never, ever turn you away, but always welcome you with open arms,

His love for you is immeasurable, constant and cannot be lessened in any way. You are His most important creation however you feel about yourself.

I hope this has encouraged you and that you now feel able to approach God with real confidence if you have found prayer difficult lately. We all need encouragement and we all find prayer difficult at times.

Prayers that seem dull and uninspiring.

Prayer is a gift of love. Prayer grows out of love. Prayer encourages love. Prayer causes love to grow towards maturity. Prayer brings wisdom, contentment, peace and an awareness of the interaction of God with all creation.

Prayer grows slowly and imperceptibly from small beginnings. We are often unaware of how much we grow over a long period of time, but grow we do with every prayer.

God delights in our prayers, whatever they are. He loves listening to us and spending time with us. We invite God to spend time with us when we pray. He will not come uninvited and often waits longingly for our invitation. God treasures the moments He spends with us more than we can imagine.

With this in mind, do you sometimes wonder, as I do from time to time, what God makes of our prayers, especially the regular and routine prayers.

I sometimes used to feel very guilty inviting God into my prayer time because my prayers were frequently boring, dull and repetitive. I know God is very patient, loving and encouraging but surely my dull and repetitive prayers must have been very testing.

God reminded me once that to keep a garden in good condition and productive it was necessary to keep doing lots of repetitive, dull and time consuming work which involved working over the same ground time and time again. So it is with prayer.

There is a lot of routine and seemingly mundane prayer work and it is essential.

What God treasures in these prayers is our commitment and dedication and especially the love within us in keeping these prayers coming. He loves to see our love demonstrated through prayer in this way. It is not a lack of faith to go back to a prayer but a loving concern shared with a loving and caring God for whom nothing is too much for any of His children.

We will have times when our prayer life has something special that happens to it and we may feel an inexpressible closeness and confidence, a new reality in our spiritual perception and discernment.

These times will not be frequent for most of us and they may make us feel like we are failing when we slip back into our normal routine. This is the time to keep going and not to give up. God loves our commitment and dedication in prayer, even if it seems dull to us. He sees more than we see and accepts with joy the things we cannot see in our selves.

It is not the words that we speak that matter so much or the way we speak them but where the words come from, and that is from deep within us, from our love and concern for other people, for the ministries we share with God and the trust we show in bringing our prayers to Him. God delights in our prayers, all of our prayers, and they all matter deeply to Him. Not only that but He answers every prayers faithfully and lovingly.

When love grows cold.

When we are 'in love' we spend a huge amount of time talking and just being with our partner. We can't find out enough about this person. We love being in their presence and love finding out all there is to know about them. We love discovering new things about them. Our partner seems to be our only focus in life. It seems as if we are almost in love with being 'in love'.

Then, gradually, we become more confident and relaxed. We find we talk less and are just content to be with the person we love.

We do not love less. We love more when this happens. We do not rely on our love of being in love. This new love may not be as exciting but it is a greater love. It is more consistent and less reliant on feelings.

We may regret the passing of this first phase of being 'in love'. It was certainly more consuming and exciting than the phase we have moved into, but against it is the fact that as love goes it may have been wonderfully intense but had a lot of insecurity. It was based mostly on feelings.

As our love develops it goes through different phases, each seemingly less exciting than the one before it. What matters is that our love is growing, maturing, becoming more securely founded on experience and faith in the person we love.

Our prayer life has the same sort of elements as this.

For some of us the conversion experience or 'being born again' was an intensely emotional time. Our prayers had that same intensity. As we grew in maturity we moved from feelings into faith, our unbounded enthusiasm became tempered by true spiritual wisdom and growing discernment.

For those of us who 'just quietly grew into Christ' we learned the same lessons but in different ways.

What mattered was that our prayer lives became transformed.

We may want to go back to that time of being 'in love' because of its intensity of emotion but we have to move on to grow. Love is not 'being in love' but is

something more substantial and lasting.

The question 'do I still love God?' has be viewed with all this in mind. The answer is 'Yes, you have just grown up'. You don't have to rely on your feelings any more, you rely on your faith and experience, you don't seek God every minute to check if He is still there because you know He is still there. I could go on but I won't. You know what I am saying. Yes, you not only still love God but you love Him even more and it is a secure love.

You are where you are in your Christian faith because you are growing. Nothing stays the same without stagnating. You must grow to survive and that will mean that things change.

Where there is change then you may feel a little insecure but it is all part of growing up as a Christian.

Have faith in God. He Loves you so much. He will not let you fall away. Within you your heart calls out to Him and constantly draws you to Him. You still love God and that love is greater than before. It is just a different kind of love and it needs recognising as such. It is more firmly founded in Him rather than in your feelings.

Be happy, you are growing and you do love God, even more than before.

Sorting out the way forward.

One of the great things about the love God has for us is that it is constant. The love God has for us does not increase if we are 'good' or decrease if we are 'bad'. It is a complete and full love from the moment of our creation. Whether we love God or not, whether we accept or reject Him, He loves each one of us as if we were His only child.

When we pray we invite God to spend time with us. This time is a very personal time and we share our feelings and concerns with Him. We ask God to intervene in our lives and the lives of others. We ask for things out of love for others. We ask out of faith for God has promised to honour all of our prayers and answer them. We know He will respond to and answer our prayers.

So then we ask God for advice - 'how shall I, when shall I, who shall I, why shall I, what shall I do/ say, where shall I, can I,?'

At this moment it can sometimes seem as if it God is just content to sit with us and say nothing. We do not hear His comforting voice.

Don't rely on how you feel at this moment. Don't panic. Let God speak to you from deep within you for He gave us His Spirit to be our comforter and guide. We need the sense of peace God brings to show us the way forward.

We do need to be aware that there are two sorts of peace, the peace the world gives and then there is the peace God gives. It is the peace of God that we are searching for: it is the same sort of peace that comes from knowing and understanding that we are loved by God (whatever we have done), even if we don't feel loved.

Let me give you an example: if we make mistakes in discerning God's will it doesn't affect the way God loves us. We could screw up completely and yet would still be loved totally, absolutely, eternally. This is the peace of God at a practical level. As a comparison, just think of what would happen if this was applied to the 'peace of the world'. Imagine the consequences of screwing up completely in your job, with your friends and family, with your bank: would they be as supportive as God, would their love still hold true?

When we pray therefore, we can be confident that God is with us. When we ask

we will have an answer. If we fail to hear Him speak it does not diminish His love of us. We are in a 'no lose' situation.

This leads on to understanding how we know what God is saying in answer to our questions in prayer. We have the peace of God to lead us onwards.

In practical terms it may work like this.

We ask God a question and let our minds contemplate the issues and outcomes of all the different combinations of possible answers. Which options brings us a sense of deep, inner security and confidence? Which options leave us feeling insecure, desolate and in confusion? Which options leave us with a sense of deep relief and rightness? Which options trouble us and stir up darkness? It is easy to determine which of these come from the peace that God gives.

This is a little over simplistic but it encompasses the basic principle. Consider the options, let the Holy Spirit prompt you and lead our thought. Consider the options. If the way ahead is clearly based on a deep sense of peace, inner security, rightness and gentle relief, then you know which option God is calling you to take.

Guilt feelings are not generally a secure or sound guide. If we gave way to our guilt feelings in determining God's will for us then we would not find God's peace or God's way forward. We would just disappear slowly into a darkening spiritual place.

God's way is a forgiving way, not a judgmental way. God wants people to share His Love, not drive them away from it. This sort of self-condemning guilt is not part of God's desire for us.

Sometimes there is no clear way forward and the answer to a prayer maybe in choosing what we see as the lesser of two evils. We have to remember that what we see is not always what God sees. This may be hard to accept but it may be the right way forward. Sometimes we have to trust that we have discerned rightly and patiently wait. If we got it wrong God will not love us the less. Getting things wrong is as much part of the learning process as is getting things right.

Just occasionally there may be total confusion and no indication of an answer

or direction to go, even after considerable prayer. What do we do? Here are some suggestions but there are others. (You may have other ideas and you should consider trying them. We are all learners.)

Make a decision of our own choosing. Which way forward benefits God the most? Go for it.

Write down all the advantages and disadvantages of each option. After due consideration ask yourself which on paper is the best way forward.

Not make a decision but leave it wholly in the trust and care of God.

Pray with others or ask others to pray for you.

Ask for a clear sign.

Stop worrying, leave it for a few days and come back to it.

Just occasionally it may be a case of 'don't pray' about this particular thing because someone else is dealing with it/it is not time to pray about this thing. This is a particularly difficult option and needs real discernment and trust.

Most of all, don't let the lack of direction or answers get in the way of your daily walk with God. God loves each one of us more than we can imagine and we can safely let God take care of the details when we can't see the way ahead. We also have the support of other Christians we invite to pray with us and for us. You also have the support of the Order of St James.

Best of all God's Holy Spirit is deep within each one of us and seeks to encourage, lead and help us in our very different circumstances.

We are not alone when we say our prayers. The answers we seek are often within our reach but if we cannot find them then we will not be condemned. Our God is a loving and supportive God. We are still growing in understanding and in faith. God walks by our side wherever we go. We will probably be unaware of the real power of prayer and of God's capability to meet every circumstance for much, if not all, of our lives. We are as children and we have a truly loving and gracious Father who delights in us and wants us to succeed.

Be confident and do not be discouraged. We all make mistakes but we all have successes. Keep a prayer diary and see for your self. God will not fail you in any way.

Remember, Jesus said 'Knock and the door shall be opened up to you, seek and you shall find'. You can have every confidence that this will be so, even if it does take a little time.

Shouting at God.

When we love someone we share a whole range of emotions with that person. Some of those emotions are not very not always very nice like anger and jealousy for example. However, these emotions are just as important in helping us to grow towards a secure love.

There are times when it right to shout in anger, in frustration, in despair. It is not only right but it is good. If we want to share all the parts, the whole of our lives and experiences with God then these experiences are part of that sharing and we need not feel guilt because we feel this way.

It is all right to shout at God. Yes, because we are human, we may feel guilt afterwards but we should not worry. His love is so intuitive, compassionate and understanding that we are, in a sense, already forgiven. That means that we can be completely open with God. He knows what we are like and will accept our anger and frustration (and whatever else we throw at Him after a really bad day) with complete and unconditional love.

Our God is a God who completely understands the way we feel and continues to love each one of us without holding back in any way. We can say anything in love to God and we can say it in any way. We will still be wrapped in His love and enclosed by His loving arms.

This really sets us free. We can, as the saying goes, 'Let go and let God'.

It is a wonderful saying. In giving God everything, as it is, freely and wholly, then we enable God to intervene in our lives completely and fully. It is all right to let go and shout at God without holding back.

Not only is that very liberating but there is another side to this. Try shouting 'I love you' at God when the mood takes you as well. Everyone likes to be told they are loved and I'm sure it delights God. It sets us free when we tell God we love Him without condition. It confirms in our head what we feel in our heart.

Looking for answers to prayers

All prayer is answered.

There is no doubt about that.

God loves answering prayer because He loves us so much.

It is not true however to say that if we do not see the answers to our prayers then God has stopped loving us.

It is surprising how many Christians feel that God's love for them has diminished in some way because they feel He does not answer their prayers. They can quote lots of bible texts that show God has promised to answer all prayers but something has happened and they have somehow stopped believing it for themselves.

Loving God relies on trust, not feelings alone. Sometimes we have to learn to stop measuring love by our feelings and learn to measure it by trust.

As an example I'd like you to consider the first miracle that Jesus performed at the wedding in Cana. What I want to focus on is his mother Mary's attitude. You know the story, the hosts ran out of wine and Mary approached Jesus and told him. If you want to remind your self of the story you will find it in John's gospel, chapter 2.

Mary saw the need of the hosts and out of love and concern told Jesus. She did not need to respond to his remarks which challenged that trust. She trusted him absolutely and nothing would change her mind about that, not even his apparently harsh words. Jesus responded to her request and water was changed into wine of even a better quality than had originally been provided. The problem Mary took to Jesus was resolved in action and there was the evidence, even though it was short lived. I suspect it was consumed all too quickly. Note that she only asked once and then left it all in Jesus' hands

Here are the same principles as applied to prayer:-

the prayer originates out of love and concern,

the prayer is given in complete trust,

it is answered by action,

faith is confirmed,

and at this stage that someone hopefully says 'thank you'.

(It was the master of ceremonies who gave thanks at the wedding at Cana. No doubt there would have been a few more "thank you's" had the shortage of wine been generally known!) We sometimes forget to thank God for answering our prayers. It may be that we have forgotten what the prayer was!

Mary's trust of Jesus was so well founded that she knew she only need ask once. She didn't even need to check up on Jesus to see if he had remembered. She knew, not felt, it would be done. She left the details to him because he was the expert. How wonderfully and abundantly it was done. Jesus responded to her love and concern and trust.

This is where we are aiming to be in our prayer life and even to grow beyond this.

How do we do it?

Start small and see if God can be trusted in the small things. As you become more confident then ask for more. Remember that the things you ask for should grow out of your love and concern for other people and for your own needs.

Look to see how those prayers have been answered. The answers to prayer can come in many different ways, some so naturally/normally/ordinarily that you may even miss them totally unless you recall your prayers. Here is an idea for you: start a prayer diary.

A prayer diary is a record of the people and situations you have prayed for. Keep going back through your diary and write down how and when your prayers were answered. Some may be answered very quickly, some may take longer, so keep reviewing your diary at regular intervals. You will be amazed at the many ways your prayers have been answered and more especially that most, if not all,

have been answered in one way or another.

Keep in touch with the people you have prayed for and ask.

Pray with other. Praying with others can help you develop quite significantly, particularly if they are 'people of prayer'. Learning from the example and testimony of others is an excellent way forward, but it isn't for everyone. It should also provide you with a context for talking over your prayer worries and concerns. Everyone, including the 'people of prayer', is learning so don't have any worries about seeming foolish. You will be amazed at the number of people you meet who are sharing your problems and worries.

Read. There are many good books on prayer. Take out of each book what is good for you and leave or set aside the rest. There are no experts in prayer. The more you find out about prayer, the more you realise there is to learn. From experience avoid anyone who says they are an expert and who tells you they know it all.

Learn. Go on good courses about prayer and mediation. Try lots of different ways and discover what you are 'comfortable' with in prayer. Be open minded and again hold onto what works for you. Remember your needs will change and so will the way you pray. Don't hold onto habits that are not helpful. Growth frequently brings the need for change so try to keep in mind that there may be better way of doing things. Be cautious of people who tell you that you 'must' do things certain ways: listen to God.

In all these things keep looking back on your prayers and keep looking for the way your prayers have been answered. God promised to answer all prayers and He will answer all prayers.

Hold onto these short texts:-

'Ask and it shall be given unto you'

'Seek and ye shall find'

Learn to be confident through your daily experience and don't give into feelings but hold onto trust in God. Feelings are, as the saying goes, not always a good judge of character. Feelings are subject to moods, weather, tiredness, health,

stress, the people you are with, etc. These are not a good basis for stepping out in faith and prayer.

Forgive my irreverence but try to imagine the scene at Cana if Mary had based her actions on her feelings and not her trust in her son. Scripture may have recorded this:-

'The wine gave out, so Jesus' mother said to him (Jesus), 'They have no wine left.'

Jesus answered, 'That is no concern of mine. My hour has not yet come.'

'Well suit yourself then...' (An argument follows, the wedding is a disaster, etc.)

Trust God, not in your feelings alone. See for your self how faithful God is in His promises to answer our prayers out of His immense love for us. Search out how your prayers were answered and see for your self how God keeps His promises. He will not let you down in any way although His answers to your prayers may surprise you.

Keep praying.

Walking the Way.

This may be a challenge to many of you. I hope that you will consider this particular page carefully and take out what you feel is for you.

This page is about serving God faithfully and obediently but I do not want you to be put off reading it. Rather I hope to surprise you.

God's spirit is constantly at work within our lives and prompts us as we are in need. We recognise that the Holy Spirit works as our helper, guide, friend and comforter and works within the love God has for us. The Holy Spirit is the constant presence and power of God in our lives.

The Holy Spirit cannot act within our lives unless we give our permission and this means we can, if we wish to, turn Him away.

Sometimes we do turn the Holy Spirit away. We do it in many different ways. We are often afraid of what might happen to us if we really do 'let go and let God'. We sometimes want to do things we know are wrong for us or other people. We are often unaware of what we do because we have not been aware of that 'still small voice' within us. We find it hard to do what is right and we frequently fail. We are what we are and cannot change by ourselves. It is important we begin by accepting this.

This is where we really do have to rely on the loving, understanding and compassionate nature of God. He knows what we are really like. Despite any failures we might have, He cannot wait to offer us His cleansing forgiveness. He will forgive us an infinite number of times. All we have to do is ask, and we can ask as many times as we need knowing that we will be forgiven completely, unreservedly, without condition and wholly.

However, if we want to move on and make changes in our lives then we cannot do it by ourselves. It is beyond our human capabilities. It has to be with God's help. This is now a matter of faith.

We ask God to make changes in our lives. We believe from that moment He is working to change our lives.

We do not worry or despair when or if we fail again.

We have faith that God is working deep within us and changes are happening, slowly and securely. We rest in God and allow Him continue His work uninterrupted.

There may or may not be a sense of inner peace or reassurance. Feelings are not important right now. We trust. We believe. We have faith. We remind ourselves that we stand in the wholeness of the love of God and His arms enfold us perfectly. We rest and do not struggle.

We cannot change our nature. Only God can do that and we ask, trust, wait. God is completely faithful and trustworthy in this matter. The changes within us will be gentle and small more than likely. They will often be un-noticed by us although the first indication we get may be from other people. It is strange that we are probably always the last people to know.

We continue to rest in God and allow Him to continue this work. It is a work that will last the rest of our lives. The struggle for us will be to leave God in charge. The temptation to wrest control from God now a little progress has been made will be enormous. We are patient. We leave God at work in this area of our lives.

Whilst the Holy Spirit works changing the things in our lives we cannot change there are some things that we can do. Apart from continuing in our daily lives, we can try to listen to the promptings of the Holy Spirit and 'learn to go with the flow'.

This is not as easy as it sounds and we may need to ask God to show us how to listen to the His Spirit within us. Back to prayer. Pray, trust, try.

There will be mistakes but there will be successes. The mistakes will begin to become less and successes will increase but we will never be perfect. That 'still, small voice' can be very difficult to hear in busy lives.

Again, this is a work that will continue the rest of our lives. Success or failure, we will always be loved completely by God and we can be completely reassured by that. We need not fear failure in any way.

Responding to that 'still, small voice' in whatever way we can is where we learn how to respond to God in our actions. I suspect that this is what the writers of

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the old and new testaments really meant when they used the words 'obedience to God'.

'Obedience to God' is not about rules and regulations. It is about discovering how to be free of the things that hold us back in living our lives as fully as we were intended to. When God created us He wanted us to have wholeness and to enjoy all creation with Him, to experience the fullness and joy of it all.

Would it surprise you to know that each one of us is treated differently because God created each one of us individually. Consequently we will each travel slightly different routes on our faith journeys, see different aspects of God's love, interpret His words and creation in unique ways. How else will the church come to know the fullness of the love of God?

Being 'obedient to God' is going to be different for all of us. He will ask different things of us because we each have been given special gifts, some of which we probably be completely unaware. All of the things He asks us to do will be grounded in love. This is a love that is given freely and brings complete freedom. It is a patient, encouraging, supportive, gentle, forgiving, powerful, constant, faithful, trustworthy and holy love. It grows within us but is more than we are, more than we will become. It is a wonderful and amazing love.

As we listen to that 'still small voice' more and more, we come a little closer to discovering the completeness of that love more fully. That is 'walking the way'.

Being uncomfortable with God.

Sometimes, being with God is not easy. It can be quite disturbing to sit in the quiet place we share with God at prayer. His calm, order and peace may not sit easily with our troubled minds and we can soon find ourselves feeling very out of place.

It does not mean that we are failing as Christians or that our faith is somehow faulted. More than likely it is because we are becoming more sensitive to the presence of God.

This will make us more aware of our own 'selfness' and , as a consequence, more aware of our humanity and frailty.

The closer we come into the presence of God, the more clearly we see ourselves.

Our motives, our actions, our love may seem so clouded. It is sometimes hard not to feel uncomfortable in the presence of God in this state. It would be easy to stop coming into His presence for our own comfort, there are a thousand and one reasons to be too busy to spend time with God.

We do not come into the presence of God to feel uncomfortable however. We come because we want to draw close to Him. We do not want to be made to feel unworthy or laden with guilt as this can push us away from Him.

These feelings do not come from God. God wants to draw us closer to Him, not keep us at a distance. Anything that turns us away from being in God's presence in any way, however small, is not from God.

If we feel unworthy and laden with guilt we need to remind ourselves we are completely and wholly forgiven. Not only that but God made it possible to be reconciled with Him through Jesus Christ, it was His initiative, not ours. God counted us as being worth the pain and suffering of the cross and all that went with it. His love was unconditionally offered to us, and we as people of faith accepted it. We can come into God's presence with great confidence and trust, and there is nothing to stop us, only ourselves.

Holding onto feelings of guilt and unworthiness indicate that we are still

hanging onto parts of our past that hold us back. We need to let go of these feelings and relax into God's presence. God wants us to be in His presence, it is His greatest desire to enfold us in His great love. He has removed all the barriers and made the way clear for all of us to approach Him with confidence and to sit with Him. We need to hold onto this from deep within our very being and not let anything turn us away from this.

It does not matter what we think about ourselves. God sees things in us we cannot see for ourselves. Despite our faults He still wants us to come to Him, no matter how bad or good we have been. There is nothing that any of us can do to separate us from God's deepest love, even if we deny that the existence of God. He will always leave His hand outstretched in hopeful friendship and He always leaves us a way to come back into his presence. No one is barred.

God wants you to come to Him in prayer, to enjoy His presence, warmth and love. He will not judge you unworthy because Christ has made you worthy. God gave his life for you in Jesus so that you could approach with confidence and faith, that is how much His love is for you. So don't hold back and don't let your feelings get in the way. You may feel unworthy and you may feel guilt but if it holds you back you need to deal with it firmly.

If you find you can't let go of these feelings then pray. Ask God to show you the way forward. Actively seek God out and search for answers to your prayers. You will find the way forward. God has promised to answer all prayers. You will get the answer you need, especially when the answer you need will bring you closer to God.

Most of all don't worry. When you plant a seed you don't keep digging it up to see if it is still there because you will stop it from growing properly. Give your worries to God, tell Him all about them, all of them, and then forget them. He will deal with them far better than you can. Read this paragraph a few times please.

Remember, anything that stops or hinders you from going confidently into the presence of God is not from God. God wants you to come to Him with confidence and in faith.

His love for you means He will always be there for you and He is waiting with

open and welcoming arms. No one is denied access. You need never be afraid to approach Him.

God is forgiving, loving, kind and generous to all who truly seek His presence and would speak with Him. He is truly and absolutely accessible at all times in all ways.

Feelings are not as important as faith. You may feel bad but that doesn't mean you are bad. God sees in you what you cannot see in yourself and He counts you worthy.

Set aside your feelings and worries. Approach Him with total confidence.

The Curate's Cat.

I have loved this story since I heard it. It is about the bag and baggage we carry around with us for no real or apparent reason.

A long time ago a certain curate had a cat which was well loved and followed the curate everywhere. It wasn't a problem except it used to come into church and disturb people during the services. It was decided to tether the cat up at the church door and, as the cat didn't seem to mind, the problem seemed to have been solved.

The cat died after a long and happy life and the members of the church bought the curate a new cat. He was delighted. The practise of tethering the cat at the church door continued as the new cat was as friendly as the deceased cat and followed the curate everywhere.

After a very long time the curate died. The members of the church continued to tether the cat at the church door during the services.

Then , many years later, the cat died and the church members bought another cat because they missed the cat tethered at the church door.

After several centuries, theologians were writing huge tracts about the theological importance of tethering the cat at the church door during services and the spiritual significance of the colour of the tethering ribbon caused several rifts within the church. There were long arguments about the origin and colour of the cat, its hair length and what it was fed on.

This is what happens when you forget why you do things. Habits form and the mind closes to the subtle changes in our own personal faith circumstances and the ministries we are involved in.

Routine and 'tradition' are important links in our Christian lives but it is good to remind ourselves why we do things and occasionally look at the way we do them.

Being open to God and open to change is a good way to go forward in your faith. Doing things because we have always done them is not necessarily the best way forward. The story of the curate's cat is a good reminder of this fact

Accepting answers.

I was on retreat a number of years ago and one of the courses I attended was on charisms. There was some argument about answers to prayer amongst some of the members and it related directly to the appointment of a senior cleric who was not popular.

The argument went on for some time. To my shame I closed the argument by asking three questions. I cannot remember exactly how it went but it was something like this:-

'Did you pray about this?'

'Yes.'

'Does God answer all prayer?'

'Yes.'

'Then are you saying that God's answer is wrong?'

There was no answer, just an awkward silence.

I regret the way I answered because it put some people on the spot and I think I embarrassed them. If you were one of those people then please accept my apology.

The reason I tell this story is because it contains hard truth that is sometimes difficult to accept. Sometimes we don't want to hear the answers God gives us to our prayers.

If we ask in faith then we should accept answers in faith. We may not like it and we are allowed to disagree with God. Having said that, we should let God prove Himself and give Him our absolute trust. He will not let us down.

We can only see a little way along the path of faith we alone tread. God sees everything. He sees the beginning and the end of all paths. He not only sees my path of faith but yours as well. He sees how our paths join and interact with the paths of many others. He prompts us to pray through our continually growing

love for others. He acts on our prayers and binds them all in a perfect and balanced web of love and action.

Because we are so spiritually young, we often do not always see or understand why God answers our prayers in the way He does. We need to let our faith take over at this stage or at least keep an open mind and give God the benefit of doubt. He knows we will grow into a more trusting faith and in His great love I am sure He makes allowances for us.

Answers can be very hard to accept at times. I know. I have had to deal with some very hard answers to prayer in my own faith journey. All I can say is be patient and the wisdom of God will slowly be revealed to you.

Here is one painful episode in my life from many years ago that I will share with you. Since being a young Christian I always wanted the gift of healing. Out of all gifts, this was the one I was desperate for. I could imagine all the things that I would do with this gift that would glorify God.

I prayed hard that I would receive this gift but the gift of healing did not come. I was very disappointed and wondered what was wrong. I had asked 'in Jesus' name', where was this gift?

I was to find out. I was travelling on a bus one day and I saw a blind lady get on. I desperately wanted to go to her and lay my hands on her and say 'Be healed, in Jesus name...' I heard a voice deep inside say 'go on then, do it.'

I faltered. I knew I could not. I did not have the discernment skills I needed. I couldn't tell which was my voice and which was that of God. Now I knew why I had not been given the gift of healing.

I was devastated and deeply wounded but there it was. Without discernment, how could I serve the God? I thought of the damage I could have done, the lives I could have wrecked and the hopes I could have dashed.

God had protected me.

I had prayed, I had been given the answer and it was a bitter pill to swallow I can tell you.

I have moved on from that lesson.

It has been a very valuable lesson for me and it helped me grow considerably. I am glad it happened even though it was difficult at the time.

Sometimes growing up is painful.

Thankfully, not many answers to prayer are hard to accept. There will be the odd one or two though.

At times like this we need to accept them in patient faith and complete trust. God will reveal His reasons and purpose as we become ready to understand. His wisdom and love will prove itself completely.

As for the gift of healing I prayed for, well, it is not exactly how I imagined it but prayer is to do with healing.....

Prayers don't have to be answered in one go. We sometimes grow into the answers to our prayers.

The parable of the widow and the unjust judge.

You will find this in Luke, chapter 18, verses 1 - 8. (Please read this bible text before continuing this article.)

This has always been one of my favourite parables because of the implied humour in it and yet it carries an important message about not losing heart when praying. The prayer focus is on 'justice'.

It compares God's desire to answer our prayers with the actions of an unjust judge who buckles under the persistent harassment of a poor widow and delivers justice out of desperation. The whole point of the parable is that if an unjust judge will give in to the persistent petitions of an old widow then how much more will God give justice to those who pray for justice.

We have a God who is genuinely interested in each of us and who listens carefully to every word we speak, not only the words that come from out of our mouths but also those unspoken words that come from deep within our very being. God's love is so great and wonderful that He wants to respond to all of our prayers, whatever they are. He delights in being asked and in responding to our prayer petitions in the most appropriate ways. The parable seems to indicate this may be particularly so with matters of seeking justice.

That doesn't mean we will always have everything we ask for in prayer because we may not have proper discernment in all things. Don't misunderstand me here, our needs will always be well met by God. It is that just sometimes we find it difficult to distinguish between what we need and what we want.

In our prayers we will come to a point when we have to learn to trust God when He sometimes does not give us the things we ask for. We can look back, more often than not, and see why our requests were not been granted, but this has to be kept in perspective. For the most part God gives more than generously than we would ever expect. We will always have answers to our prayers and most of our prayers will have been granted in some way, maybe not always in the way we expected.

Matters of justice are no different.

We should be clear on two things though. We perhaps need to agree what is

encompassed by the word 'justice' and we may need to be reminded it is justice seen from God's point of view, not necessarily our own.

Justice can be defined as acting on or doing what is morally right or fair and bringing about deserved reward; it is to do with just conduct, fairness, the perfect exercise of authority in regard of doing what is right and good, judicial proceedings and preserving peace.

Sometimes when we ask in prayer for something concerning justice, we may not have a full and clear understanding of what we are asking for. We sometimes have to ask 'in trust'. It sometimes means giving God our prayer, resting in His great love and accepting the outcome as 'right'.

Whether or not we have a true discernment we can rely on one thing though. Jesus says quite clearly that God will give justice to those He has chosen as His own, those to whom He listens patiently when they cry out to Him. Jesus adds that this justice will 'come soon enough', that is at the perfect time. What is somewhat unexpected according to the parable is that Jesus ends with a question, 'When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?' I know the answer will be a loud 'YES'. How do I know this? It is because we continue to pray.

This takes us back to the beginning of the parable: 'Jesus told them this parable to show that they should keep on praying and never lose heart'. Simply, that is to never lose faith and never to give up trusting in the fairness and justice of God as well as in His wonderful love for us. Everything will fall into perfect place and we will see clearly why things have been the way they are.

I believe that seeking justice for others through prayer is a very special and wonderful ministry of dedication and love. It requires great patience, discernment and trust. However, we all stand in the grace of God and we can only pray as we know how. God will accept our prayer because they are gifts of our love for others and our trust in Him. We are also prompted by God in our prayers. We need not worry when we pray because we are in a 'win/win' situation. We need have no worries when we are at prayer, we can have total confidence in God.

Lastly, the parable clearly shows that we can repeatedly keep coming back to

God with our worries and concerns for others. The parable gives a clear message that it is all right to be as persistent in our prayers as we feel we need to be, particularly in seeking justice for others.

The Parable of two men at prayer.

This parable can be found in chapter 18 of Luke's gospel, verses 9 to 12. You may find it useful to re-read this passage if you are not very familiar with it.

We know the story in real life I suspect. Two men go to pray at the temple/church/fellowship meeting. One exalts himself publicly with loud confidence and the other, aware of his sins, quietly and privately humbles himself before God.

Jesus said it was the man who humbled himself who was acquitted of his sins. As for the other man, presumably he would be found wanting for his pride and judged accordingly.

'Quite right too,' we say, 'nothing like seeing some smug, arrogant bloke getting his come uppance. It is about time these cock-sure types were put in their rightful place. They are a real nuisance, put others off coming to church and give real Christians a bad name.'

Before we get carried away with our indignation at the behaviour of the man who exalted himself in the story we had better remind ourselves what the parable is about. Luke says that this particular parable was aimed at those who were sure of their own goodness and looked down on everyone else.

Did I just recognise a little of that person in me? Didn't I just judge the man who exalted himself in the story? Didn't I just make myself a better person than him, even though he only exists in a simple story?

The truth is I did. It is so easy and it can happen time and time again without our being aware of it.

There is a little of both men in each of us and we need to be aware of this but not unduly worried by it. As we grow as Christians it is useful to look at where we have come from, where we now are and how far we have still to go. We are constantly growing and changes are occurring in our lives all the time, changes brought about by God's Holy Spirit working quietly away deep within us.

The real truth of this parable is that we are not perfect and we need to recognise it. The man who humbled himself in prayer recognised where he was

in his spiritual journey and he was set free from the sins that were a burden and held him back. Sadly, the man who exalted himself could not discern his true state and he could not grow - I really think he cared about his spirituality, he was trying to do things right - he had missed something very important.

Being realistic I believe we swing between these two positions demonstrated in the parable. As we grow we hopefully grow towards the ideal. We should not judge ourselves, let alone anyone else, because our judgement is a lot less than perfect. It is positively flawed at times. We cannot see ourselves as God sees us. We have to rely on God to work appropriate and permanent changes within us. We are all different too, each having different needs and the way God leads us will be as individual as we are. We will not often recognise the changes He makes within us but other will. It is a case of having faith in God and trusting in His great love for us without making any judgements.

How does this relate to prayer?

Just by helping us to remember we still have a long journey ahead of us before we see as God sees.

Accepting like a child.

'Truly, I tell you; whoever does not accept the Kingdom of God like a child will never enter it.' (Luke 18, v17)

I deal with children every day as a teacher in a primary school and sometimes I wonder just why anyone in their right mind would have anything to do with children. They can be very difficult, time consuming, demanding and emotionally draining, and that is on a good day!

Am I teasing you? Well, yes and no. There is a lot of truth in what I say, but it is not the complete truth as you have probably guessed.

Whatever the truth of it is, my experiences with children do make me wonder why Jesus used the words 'like a child'. What was it he saw in children that was so important?

It may be something to do with children's ability to learn new things quickly, to look at new ideas with open minds, the 'awe and wonder' factor when they discover something new about the big, wide world they are coming to know. Was it this Jesus saw that was so important?

I think that it may be possibly be more to do with the way children respond to their parents.

I remember my own children when they were young and their total and absolute trust. There were no doubts in their minds that their mum and dad could fix it, make it, explain it, make a game around it, sing a song about it, plant it and make it grow, make them laugh, feel better, stop it hurting, console and entertain, cuddle them and give hugs when needed, catch them, pick them up, dust them down. There was even that unexplainably nice feeling of 'just being with' when you didn't need to say anything or be doing anything. These are just a few of the things I remember.

I think that it is this child/parent relationship that Jesus was talking about when he spoke of accepting the Kingdom of God 'like a child'. Re-read what I said about my own children but look at it in terms of yourself as the child and God as the parent. The passage becomes 'there is no doubt in your mind that God can fix it, make it, explain it..... plant it and make it grow in your life , make you

laugh, make you feel better, stop you hurting, console and entertain you, comfort you, catch you when falling, pick you up if you fall and dust you down'. It is intended to imply a simple, certain and uncomplicated trust, a childlike trust.

If you are not sure of this idea, ask yourself why Jesus taught the use of 'our Father' when praying? In the original translation, the word used is 'Abba' which I am assured translates more like 'daddy'. There is a big contextual difference when using the words 'father' and 'daddy'. Think about it - what is the difference between 'wait until your father gets home,' and 'wait until your daddy gets home'? Why would Jesus suggest this form of addressing God if it wasn't to re-inforce the idea of being child-like before God? Notice I said 'child-like', not 'childish'.

How does this affect our prayers?

If you think about the confidence children have when asking for or telling something to their parents you have a model. They don't hold back. They just go for it. Their trust is complete. It is as simple as that. This is a wonderful prayer model. This is the way to take the Kingdom of God by storm. It is unbelievable.

We pick up a lot of baggage in our lives. We become sophisticated, cynical, hard realists. We need reasons, science, facts and figures. We are tainted with a 'no pain, no gain' philosophy (the Protestant work ethic in a new form?), everything has to be earned or paid for because there is 'no such thing as a free lunch'.

How wrong can we be!

God's unconditional love for us is almost too hard for us to accept. It is there to be accepted. We just need to learn to how to break free of the things within us that hold us back. There are no hidden charges. It is absolutely free and completely without strings. All we have to is accept it as it is and not make it any more complicated than it actually is. This what I mean when I use the phrase 'let go and let God'. In doing so we are given back our real freedom.

Pray about it. If what I have been saying strikes a real chord within you and you really want to learn how to take this freeing up of not only your prayer life but

of your whole life then pray about it. Ask God to show you how to let go of the things that hold you back, and believe. It will happen. It probably won't happen immediately and completely. Most of us have to learn to let go in stages. Be sure of this though, if you have prayed for this, it will happen. Just believe and hold onto that belief. Don't let anybody take the trust you have put in God away from you. Just go for it. No conditions, just go for it.

You will not be disappointed.

Making things grow in the garden.

It is one of the things I like a lot, going into an empty church to pray. I like the quiet and the peace. I like the way sunlight catches the dust in the air. I like being amongst the quiet 'ghosts' of all those who have prayed before me. One day I hope someone will take my place and sit where I am sitting right now and think of people like me. I like to think of all the prayers that might have been said in this quiet place.

That is the romantic in me.

The truth is I don't just pray in church. At the end of the day a church is just a building and it isn't really a church until it fills with the family of God. I pray in all sorts of places, my car, at work, at home, anywhere, even on the loo (I'm sure God doesn't mind). I just pray as I feel the need, as thoughts and prompts come into my head.

Not everyone can do this though. Some people find prayer very difficult outside of a church.

I was talking about this with my son Graham. He hasn't decided about all this 'God stuff' yet but he came up with this brilliant idea to help people pray. He is at agricultural college and is learning all about plants and gardens.

'Why not make your own garden into a garden of prayer,' he said. What a cool idea.

Think about making a path around your garden that goes past many different areas and plants of different kinds. Let these act as reminders for you where you can stop and pray about the people they remind you of. Simple.

In my own garden, for example, I would go out of the dining room into the conservatory. This is a real hot house, just like school, so I would pray about the staff and children.

From there I walk straight out onto the lawn and there is a special spot where my wife and I sit, often with friends. It is a shady place in the heat. I could sit here a while I pray for Lesley (my wife) and my friends, giving thanks for the special fellowship we share.

This place is by the small pond we have inherited from the previous owners of the house. This could represent the watering place, the fellowship of all the Christians we know. Again I could stop a few moments here and remember these people and their needs.

And so on throughout the garden. You see how it could work. It is a bit like the stations of the cross in church but this is something designed by you to help you in your prayers.

It can even work informally, without a regular path, just wandering where you will, being reminded of different people as you come to different places. It would certainly make gardening different and probably less of a chore.

I can't help but be reminded of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, walking with God before the fall. It also reminds me of the Garden of Gethsemane and Jesus agonising about his imminent future. What wonderful and sometimes awesome places gardens can be.

This is just one of the many ways we can use a small part of our environment to help us in our prayer journey.

Being still.

We all need periods of 'stillness' in our busy lives, although perhaps 'parking off life's highway' is a more precise phrase to use. It refers to the time we take to stop and catch our physical, emotional or/and spiritual breath back. It is an important time and we can't do without it.

However, it is not the same as 'being still' and this is perhaps one of the most difficult aspects of prayer to come to terms with. We are surrounded by the noise of communication (perhaps it should be called 'communibabble') and it is difficult to ignore its pull.

Even when it is physically quiet our minds don't stop. Our head is full of things we need to do, things we want to avoid doing, things that we need to say, things that we don't need to say but will anyway, things that we need to think about and sometimes things we shouldn't be thinking about, people we need to see and people we want to avoid, and so on.

Even when we are supposed to be listening our minds are actively on other things.

Then God says 'Be still and know that I am God' (Psalm 46, verse 10).

If you look at this text you will see that it has two parts and they have a particular order.

(a) 'Be still'

(b) 'and know that I am God.'

According to the text, there has to be a point of stillness before God can be known and I will add that I think that this is probably not supposed to be a 'one off' event. I think it is more likely meant to be 'ongoing'.

So what is 'being still'?

Do you remember going into the woods and hearing, not just being aware of, the birds singing for the first time? Do you remember being able to distinguish all the different bird songs and noticing their variety? Do you remember being

surrounded by all of these wonderful sounds? Do you remember trying to see which bird it was singing which song? Were you then aware of other noises, the insects, the wind rustling the leaves and blowing through the ground foliage, even hearing the sound of your own clothes as you moved and the sound of your own breathing? Do you remember the sense of amazement and realisation'?

You were 'being still'.

In being still you became aware of so many ordinary, everyday things and saw that they were not ordinary and everyday. You were filled in some measure with 'awe and wonder', and it was pretty amazing, wasn't it!

Translate this experience into prayer. When we allow the ordinary and everyday to reveal itself to us in this way we become aware of God. 'Being still' leads to each one of us becoming much more aware of the power, creativity and love of God.

In our prayer time we could give God a little more room by being quiet for five or ten minutes, standing still and just 'looking around us', looking for where God has been, seeing where He is right now. We do not need to speak other than to ask that we may see more clearly and be less deaf to His words.

If our minds are filled with distractions then pray each one of them out of your mind. Give each thought to God as an offering of your love. Once prayed about then ask for them to be quietened. If the thought won't be quietened then pray about it again, it may be God prompting us to pray about something urgent or someone who has an urgent need.

When at a state of quietness then wait upon God. Give God time and don't rush or let your feelings cheat you out of this moment. Be still, be quiet. Just enjoy being in the presence of God. If nothing else you will be gently and quietly refreshed spiritually. God will speak to you in His own way.

I am not saying it will be easy. We have a life time of bad habits to overcome I suspect. For myself, I still find it very hard to 'be still' but it more than worth the effort. Be patient and your patience will be rewarded many times over.

Be a trouble-maker, start a prayer ministry.

The last thing I actually want you to be is a 'trouble-maker'. I used the title to get your attention and it obviously worked, so I hope you will forgive me.

The truth of it is that in starting a prayer ministry, people may see you as a trouble maker, a radical, a left-winger, an upsetter of apple carts, or one of a whole host of generally disreputable people. If you fit into any of these categories already then you probably have a head start and are involved in stirring up your church at this moment. I wish you well and I will pray for your success. However, I am going to offer you some advice that was given by Wayne Tow of St Mark Lutheran Church, Houston, Texas at a prayer seminar on 10th February, 1996. It may help you avoid some of the trouble you are going to get your self into or perhaps are already in.

Setting up a prayer ministry is another way of saying that you are getting serious about prayer and you want others to be involved. First step - pray about it. Prayer is the foundation of beginning anything. Be clear that you have a distinct calling from God. Once you have that, hang onto it because there will be times that you will wish you had never started and are riddled with doubt. It will seem that everyone and every thing is against you at times. If this happens then you will know that you are developing a successful prayer ministry.

Find others who think as you do and pray together and pray regularly. Gradually, through prayer and some probably very heated arguments the way forward will prayerfully emerge and so will a prayerfully agreed group leader. If it is not you then you may have to bite the bullet as they say. Do not take your bat and ball home in disgust otherwise your real motives will become apparent to other people. Remember that this is just the person or people who will lead the group meetings, they have not been elected as prayer ministry leaders. We all have to learn that we are serving God, not our egos, for this to be a success.

A church group will not survive long without the support of the pastor, clergy or elders. (This doesn't mean that they need to actually be involved in prayer ministry, you just need their agreement and public support). A prayer ministry group will not last long no matter how biblically or theologically sound its base is. You need this official support. Pray until you have it. If the need for a prayer ministry is not seen or acknowledged then you have a real problem with the

basic theological basis on which the church is built. The way forward - you've guessed - pray, pray, pray, otherwise known as the three 'P's.

Not everyone who has an official role or capacity in your church has opinions that count amongst the church family. This is not meant unkindly. Some are chosen because they can be relied upon to do a job properly, not because of what they think. It is a fact of life though that the opinions of often unelected members of the church family can carry a lot of clout within the church family and it is worth getting the support of these people. Pray diligently about who to approach and how it should be done. Help create a ground swell of support that cannot be ignored.

When you have got this far you need to seriously look for a prayer ministry leader if one has not already emerged. It has to be someone who is recognisably called by God and has the special talents and skills needed. This is a very important moment. The person who was prayerfully elected to lead the ministry group may not be suitable as a prayer ministry leader. Everyone in the church family needs to pray about this carefully. This is a key decision. Pray and ask God to reveal who He has chosen and then to confirm His choice if there is any doubt. It could even be that God elects someone from outside of your church family. There is a thought to ponder over.

Whatever the outcome of that, there will probably be lots of problems at this point. When prayer becomes a serious issue then there will be spiritual opposition. It is through effective prayer that the church will grow forward. If the pray-ers (the people who pray) can be divided and beaten at this point then prayer can be stopped. The recommended action is - you've guessed - prayer and lots of it. Keep focused on God and the way ahead will be clear.

By now a prayer ministry group will probably have evolved and it will have someone to lead it who has the necessary and special gifts. The group will be meeting regularly and enjoying some success. What happens now?

Prayer skills need developing by all the group. There is a lot of spiritual feeding to be done. This is where teaching about prayer is important, but what to teach, when and by whom is important. Too many new things in too short a time will put lots of pressure on the group and it may collapse. Too little development and it may die of boredom. Be certain through prayer.

Delegation of roles, the building of strong and effective leaders and support structures now becomes an issue. Burn out is a real problem, especially when the person concerned feels they have become trapped in their leadership roles and ministries. Leaders need to be clear about what their responsibilities are and have a strong sense of ownership, about not taking on anything else or being put upon, and about learning how to kindly but firmly say 'no' without being made to feel guilty. Pray about each issue as it comes up. Good leaders are hard to come by and are not easy to find replacements for. Have in mind some ideas for that time when leaders move on.

The group needs to be flexible if they are going to survive. Not everything is right for everyone. Leaders don't need to be at every meeting, all of the time, neither do group members. Each member has to sort out what is right for them in God. If the system becomes rigid in any way it will break down. Also, people need to be able to come into the group and go freely. How will your group enable people to do this? Will it appear to be an exclusive or very selective group? If it does appear exclusive then you are possibly already on the road to collapse. You might also consider how it treats its members, some will have lots of prayer experience and others very little; how do you make all feel welcome and comfortable in the group? More matter for prayer.

Lastly, keep the main body of the church family informed as to what you are doing in prayer ministry. If they don't know what is going on they won't support it or show interest. Information needs to flow two ways so you can keep on top of prayer needs. Pray that the communications procedures work freely and effectively for all.

Be careful that you don't create or allow the creation of an 'us and them' situation with two classes of Christian in the church family, the 'those that pray and those that don't' scenario. This one is really contentious so be very watchful. Once the damage is done it can be very hard to resolve.

Why do it when it is going to be so hard? Simply because it is worth all the aggravation, heartache, effort, hard work, commitment, dedication and tears. The fruits far outweigh the effort. You will grow, the prayer ministry team and members of the team will grow and the church will grow. All for the want of a 'trouble-maker'. I take it you like the idea..... so pray about it.

Centring Prayer; a very simple explanation.

Centring prayer is a form of silent, contemplative prayer. In this form of prayer we accept God's presence and action within us. It quietens our busy minds and helps us co-operate with God in our time of prayer and helps us not work against Him. It is receptive prayer, resting in God. It emphasises prayer as a personal relationship with God and is at the same time a discipline.

That is the theory. Now for an example of centring prayer.

Sit comfortably and close your eyes. Rest easy and let all the thoughts of the day go. Give these all to God along with any feelings of tension or stress. Just rest in the presence and the love of God.

Think of a word that symbolises this moment of surrender to God's love. Allow this word to be there in the background. It should just exist as a gentle, quiet presence.

Relax and enjoy just being still and quiet. Your mind should be empty of everything except the word you have chosen.

If other thoughts or distractions start to come into mind then calmly and quietly focus on the word. Let these thoughts go and gently rest in the presence of God.

As you become more relaxed you can let go of the word you chose as a symbol of surrender to God's loving presence. Just be with God, relaxed, quiet, still.

If thoughts or distractions begin to fill your mind then let them go. If it helps, go back and gently focus on the word you chose. Let all other thoughts go. When you are still again, let go of your word again.

At the end of your prayer centring time, take a few minutes to come out of the silence. Quietly give thanks to God and pray for the needs of others that come to mind.

That is a simple explanation and example of using centring prayer. I hope you find this useful.

Praying in tongues.

I have been putting off writing about this for some while. I know I have to write it and I know whatever I write will be contentious and upset someone. Please let me apologise now and say that I speak in love and I speak as one who has very limited wisdom. My faith journey is not complete and I do not know everything there is to know, particularly about prayer. I hope that you will pray for me.

A long time ago I was given the gift of speaking in tongues. For me it is simply another language to pray in. When I pray in using this gift I often do not know what I am saying, but it allows my mind to be free of words and just think about God. The words just come out. Sometimes I am aware of the contents of the prayer, something deep inside of me allows me to understand.

Sometimes I can understand the words of others who use the gift and I can explain what it is they are saying. I do not understand how it 'works'.

This gift is not for everyone, just as the gift of healing or teaching or evangelism isn't for everyone, but it does not mean, I repeat again, does not mean that the person without the gift of tongues is in any way lacking or is not a Christian.

I know there are churches who insist that you must speak in tongues (often to be publicly demonstrated) to be a Christian - I do not believe this in any way. I have been to churches where there are two classes of Christians, those who think they are spiritually superior and those who have been told that they are spiritually inferior. You cannot imagine the pain, division and hurt this has caused.

I do not believe it is a gift to be flaunted 'in public' either. Some Christians use the gift indiscriminately, without discernment. The use of the gift can easily become the focus of attention instead of focusing attention on God. It takes away instead of adding.

It is a gift that is sadly also open to abuse and can be faked without too much difficulty. If there is no one to discern the gift then some very serious, long term and deeply rooted spiritual damage can set in. It will cause very destructive division in the church family.

I am not against people using this gift. Unfortunately I have lots of experiences that make me very wary of it. I have seen what happens when it is used without discernment.

All gifts have a purpose. They are manifested to show the love, grace and power of God. They are not given to glorify the person to whom the gift has been given in trust. This applies to all the gifts of the spirit. This should apply to the gift of tongues.

When the gift of tongues is used, who does it edify? Does it bring glory to God? Does it bring about a deeper understanding of the nature of God? Does it draw people closer into the presence of God? Does it bring about a deeper knowledge? If the answer is 'no' to any of these questions then I doubt whether the gift has been used with true discernment.

In the question of the interpretation of prayers spoken in tongues then again true discernment should prevail. Any interpretation can be accepted 'in love' but needs to be accepted 'in truth'. Discernment is a key issue. This only comes through prayer.

Paul gives the following advice in 1 Corinthians, chapter 13 -

'If I speak in tongues of men or angels but I am without love then I am nothing more than a sounding gong or a clanging cymbal.....'

Then in chapter 14 -

'Make love your aim, then be eager for gifts of the Spirit, especially for prophecy. If anyone speaks in tongues, he is talking with God, not with men and women for no one understands him Speaking in tongues may build up the speaker himself but it is prophecy that builds up the church community...'

'If I do not know a speaker's language, his words will be completely meaningless..'

'If I speak in tongues , my spirit prays but my mind is does not bear fruit.....'

'.... within the church family I would rather speak five wise words for the benefit of others (and myself) rather than speak thousands of words in tongues.'

The whole section from the beginning of chapter 12 to the end of chapter 14 needs reading prayerfully. I have just selected out some key points but they need to be taken in context. I did paraphrase the bible texts above but I would like you to check them against which ever bible translation you use.

Do not worry or feel that you are missing out if you do not pray in tongues. Each of us already has all the spiritual gifts we need for the ministry God has chosen for us. If we think we lack any gifts then we can pray for them but we must accept the answer to our prayers in trust, no matter how hard it may seem.

To my thinking, the gift of discernment or wisdom is worth seeking above other gifts for our present times. Discernment seeks to find the way forward and to find the truth. I would rather seek ways of bringing Christians together in the service of God than see division over matters like speaking in tongues or doctrine. But who am I speak of such things? What do I know? It is now up to you to discern the truth of this through prayer.

Blocked prayers.

When I was a very young Christian a long time ago, I was with friends and we were talking about someone we all knew from another fellowship. This person was having some real problems and we decided we would pray for her.

We talked at length about her problems. We shared what we knew. We were very concerned. We wanted to help.

We knew what we were going to ask for in our prayer time because we had talked about it. When we settled to prayer something amazing happened, or didn't happen to be more truthful. Every time we started to pray for this person we could not say the words, nothing would come out of our mouths. We could pray about others things but not about our friend.

We tried a for a while but it was obvious that something wasn't quite right. We closed our prayers but were mystified. All three of us had experienced exactly the same thing.

We later found out that we were being blocked from praying for this person. The hand of God had physically closed our mouths. The fellowship that the person belonged to were praying for her at the time we were praying for her. They had a true and proper discernment of her needs. We did not despite our best intentions. We though we understood her needs but we didn't. Our prayers were going to be in direct conflict with those of her own fellowship.

God just closed our mouths so we couldn't unknowingly interfere. It was a lesson to us. All was made plain to us later in the day. Amazingly, someone from our own fellowship was given revelation and was able to explain to us what had happened.

I offer this experience to you in case you find that your prayers are blocked. If you do find your prayers are blocked at any time then you should perhaps seek guidance or look for an explanation. I have talked with a number of Christian friends about prayer blocking and they have had similar experiences. It seems, from our experience, that this does not happen very often and only in special circumstances.

A 'Prayer' acrostic:

P: Put yourself at God's disposal. Be at peace. Set aside some time for God in your own special and private place.

R: Relax, rest and be re-assured. God is with you.

A: Appraise your day. Think of what has been good and bad about it. Think about how you have responded to situations and to people. What has each thing taught you about yourself, others and God?

Y: You, your friends and your family have needs. Bring them before God prayerfully.

E: Enjoy this time and express your thanks for the love God shares with you.

R: Respond to that love and listen to what God is saying to you in your prayer time. Rest in His presence for a while and then return to the things you have to do. There is no rush.

Let down by your church? Pray before reading!

Do you feel as if you have been let down by your church in a whole host of ways? Let me guess at some of the things you might be feeling right now.

The worship is shallow, the teaching is poor and doesn't touch where it is meant to, the fellowship isn't really fellowship, the leaders don't listen, there are no really good training and support programs, the music is awful, the priest/minister/vicar/pastor isn't doing his/her job properly, the place is falling apart and is cold, it needs decorating, it isn't welcoming, most of the church members don't care about the falling numbers in the church family, there are no new families, declining interest by the young folk, the sermon is regularly terrible and has no point.....

You have real two choices: leave or get stuck in to the fight of your life. There is no point in just complaining as it achieves nothing worthwhile and just makes the situation even worse. So roll up your sleeves or start packing.

Leaving is easy. All you do is walk away without saying 'goodbye'. Anyone can do it. However, you are not in the 'anybody' category. The fact is you want something to happen, that is why you are looking at your computer screen right now.

Don't get me wrong about leaving. Sometimes God will call you to another place, in which case you should go, but the sad truth is that the people who are often leaving need to stay. They are often called to stay and work miracles for God but they don't want to. These people have the wonderful ability to read what they want to into 'the signs' and find every excuse to leave.

But why stay?

'I am getting absolutely nothing out of this. I need to grow.'

True, you do need to grow. It is also true that sometimes you get out of life what you put in. If you don't put anything into the church you belong to then it is unlikely will get anything out of it. Before you point your bible at me and give me several hundred texts that prove your point I'd like you to re-think your situation carefully. Trust me, I am a doctor!

'Why am I here then?'

Answer: God put you here. Nothing is 'accidental' if you are a Christian. 'All things work to the good for those who love God,' and you love God don't you.

'Why did God put me here?'

Answer: because you are the person God chose for the job. Don't argue about this one because you know I am right. Whether you like it or not, it has nothing to do with it. You are part of His plan and He sees in you what you cannot see for yourself.

'What am I here to do?'

Answer: I don't know, but I will bet that you do, deep within yourself. If you really don't know then you need to pray very carefully and try to discern what God is saying to you. Unless God has told you to go to another church or fellowship then you need to stay and change the place under His direction.

'How am I to do this job in such a spiritual wasteland?'

Answer: I don't know, but it is less of a spiritual wasteland than you think. What I do know about the job God has called you to do is that God has already given you all the tools and skills you need to get started. Anything you will need that is extra on the way then He will give you in sufficient measure.

Now, about getting started.....

You are going to take on the whole world and have the most difficult but enjoyable (yes, I did say enjoyable) time of your life. It might not seem like it at the time but when you look back you will be simply amazed. You are going to find friends and co-workers of the most unexpected kinds in the most unexpected places. You will be let down and stabbed in the back by the people you think you can trust. You are going to turn into a spiritual warrior and have more wounds than Hollywood knows what to do with. You are going to pray your way to changing this miserable situation that you (and the silent majority who feel the same way that you do) are in. You are the key person. God chose you despite all your faults and worries.

Panicking yet? You should be, but doesn't it kind of excite you and fill you with a tingle that you can't explain? Try this one - would God ask you to do something that you could not do? Think about that very carefully. Now, trust in God, you have been telling other people to do that long enough, now start putting it into practice yourself. By the time you have finished you will be able to move mountains. That will be considerably easier than moving your church I suspect.

Shut your eyes and imagine what your church could be like. Ask God to show you what He wants from your church and how He wants it changing. You want this too. I can feel it. Grasp God's vision and hold it tight because you are going to need it.

Stuck as to where to begin? You could always make two lists: what your church is like now (down to the last nit picking fault) and what it is going to become. Now start using your imagination and see how you can get from one to the other, one problem at a time. When you get stuck, pray. When you have an answer, pray. Pray in all things and search out God's will for this church, for its leaders, for its members, for its building, for its worship, for you, for everything.

Pray that God will reveal others to you who will support this change. Pray He will show you how to bring about lasting change.

Pray that you will not lose many of the church members on the way.

Sad to say, you will lose some and they will leave as changes take place. This is a sad fact of life but God will continue to look after them wherever they are. You need not worry too much about them but you should continue to pray for them, stay in contact with them, and always leave the door open for their welcomed return (with lots of opportunities in the church that need their involvement - people need to be needed).

What can frequently happen when people leave is that

- (1) those people who leave will slowly drift back as things improve,
- (2) they will find another church and become part of their pastoral support, or
- (3) they will stop going to church. Stopping going to church does not mean that someone has stopped being a Christian so be careful how you deal with this

issue, particularly in public.

Remember that we are all creatures of habit and generally speaking we 'like' what we know even if we don't know what we like. Even when we say we want change, change can be very traumatic and we can still be afraid of change. However, this is no reason to avoid making changes.

If you want to make your church a better place (and I think that you do because you have read this far!) it will involve a lot of time, work and effort. It will not be easy and you will frequently feel like giving up. This will test your faith as well as your patience. Just keep God's vision for your church firmly fixed in your mind.

There will be lots of reasons given to you for not changing things and some people will regard you with deep suspicion or even outright hatred for what you are doing to their beloved church. Some will even work against you in a counter-movement. Take this as a sign you are making inroads and that people see that you mean business. What they need convincing is that you mean God's business and that the church is God's and doesn't 'belong' to them.

It will help you enormously to work on gaining support as you go along. As things improve you will find that support for change grows. Remember that you are ultimately changing your church into God's vision of your church rather than your own vision. Your vision may be a great one but God sees deep into the future. Sometimes it is easy to forget why you started making changes and change becomes an end in itself.

Don't forget the healing power of tact and diplomacy. There is no point in making enemies for the sake of a little forethought and compassion. A word softly spoken can open many a locked door whereas words spoken unkindly will make paper doors impassable. Try to keep the church leaders on your side (not always who you think they are!) as they can make change easier. I know how difficult they can make things if approached in the wrong way. Pray always for discernment.

It will take huge amounts time and commitment, it will cause you much heartache but look to the end goal. What ever it cost you it hurt, energy and disappointment, you will be involved in gaining far more back for the whole of

your church family. Keep that in mind.

A doctor once said, 'if you treat the patient before he dies then there is a good chance he will live.'

Start praying and start sorting out your church before it truly dies. God needs people to make changes against all the odds. It really is up to you, or are you the sort who will be packing their bags and making excuses?

I hope you make the right decision.

A candle prayer.

Candles have great symbolic presence in prayer and worship. The flame represents spiritual light in a dark world, it can represent God's love shining out when all is at its darkest, it can represent the warmth of God's love and it can also represent the giving and sacrificial nature of God.

I think they are wonderful things to look at whilst at prayer. Somehow the flame draws you into and focuses your mind on prayer. It is with this in mind that this form of prayer/meditation came about.

As a slight warning, as with all aids to prayer, they should not become an end in themselves. Also remember that there is a fire hazard with naked flame so take sensible precautions.

This is a meditation and prayer channel on the love of God as seen in a flame.

Sit at a table with a candle in the centre. The top of the candle should be at about your shoulder height when you are seated and be about an arm's length away if possible. The room should be quiet and free from unnecessary distractions. Close the curtains or blinds so that the room is darkened.

Sit quietly for a few minutes and quieten your mind. Relax and try to put aside any worries or concerns that you have. When you are ready, light the candle. Be quiet for a few moments and watch the flame.

The flame is alive, it moves. Let this remind you that God is alive in you.

Look at the light that the flame gives out. Let this remind you that you are God's light and that you shine out God's love and presence to other people.

Look at the flame moving this way and that, reacting to each subtle draught. Let this remind you that you should respond to the slightest movement of God's Holy Spirit and respond accordingly.

Look at the molten wax beneath the candle flame. Let this remind you that just as a candle needs wax to feed its flame that you need feeding spiritually so that you may continue in God's work.

Look at the flame waxing and waning. Let this remind you that you will not always give out a constant light. There will be times when you are spiritually low and times when you are spiritually high.

Look at the smoke that comes from the candle flame. Let it remind you that as the light burns in you that the darkness in your spirit is being gradually and quietly expelled by God's light.

Look at the flame and see there are three parts just as there are three persons the God.

Look at the flame resting on the wick. Let it remind you that God's Holy Spirit rests upon us as well as residing in us, and that we all have gifts from God to help us in our individual ministries.

Look at the light the flame gives out. Let it remind you that without the light we would not know what darkness was.

Look at the light lighting up objects in the room. Let it remind you that the light God has put within you reaches out and reflects off others.

Lastly, blow out the candle and see how the room is darkened. Let this remind you to look after your own light and the light of others through study, encouragement, fellowship and prayer.

Be still for a few more minutes and then go quietly.

At the end of each little section of this meditation, your own prayers, prompted by God, can be added. There is no sense of rush or urgency in this form of prayer so take your time. It is also quite good to use in a smaller group, with each person leading a little section.

Angels and forgotten prayers.

Angels have always been a bit of a problem for me. I read about them in the bible and I didn't disbelieve that there were angels, it's just that well, they are hard to accept.

I want to explain what changed my mind and changed my whole concept of 'angels', but more importantly what taught me a lesson in relation to prayer.

Many years ago I was staying with some much loved friends as their guest in Tours, France. They were at college for much of the day and I had plenty of time on my hands so I decided to take on the book of Revelation. I was going through a serious 'last days' stage and I had serious problems with this book.

I read Revelation. I was mystified.

I read it again. I was mystified again.

I prayed for understanding. I waited. Nothing. The lines were down in prayer terms so it seemed. I struggled on for a few days and finally said in prayer that this book was beyond me and the only way I would understand it would be if someone explained it to me.

Then I forgot about it. I had plenty to do. Tours is a very beautiful place and so is the Loire valley. We cycled and enjoyed just being there. It was one of the most wonderful times I have ever spent anywhere and I still treasure the memories of the delightful days we spent exploring and particularly of my friends.

Sadly all visits must come to an end. The time came to go home and I boarded the fast train to Paris. It was a depressing moment. I sat in an empty compartment and waved my friends and Tours goodbye. I was miserable to tell the truth. I think I was heartbroken to be leaving.

A little while later, two young men joined me. Their French was as good as mine so I guessed that we could safely speak in English. (They were Americans rather than Canadians I think, but here my memory is not clear.) We started chatting to pass the time, as strangers do.

Suddenly the conversation changed when one of the two fell asleep. Without any warning I was taken through the whole of the book of Revelation step by step, in a way that actually made sense to me. I was surprised to say the least. I hadn't said anything about any problems I had had with the book of Revelation, or even about being a Christian so far as I can remember. It just happened. I was really caught off-guard and totally unprepared for what happened.

Not only was the book of Revelation explained in detail but also this person told me lots about myself and about my relationship with God. He told me things about myself that I had not even told my friends. He targeted my prejudices and took me apart, making me question assumption after assumption.

He took my faith apart and then re-built it. He put me straight on a lot of things. By the time we got to Paris I was exhausted and in a complete state of wonder. He hadn't left a stone unturned in my life. It had seemed as if he had known everything about me right from the start and he hit all the weak spots, one after the other. What was strange thinking back on this was my total confidence in this complete stranger.

The other person woke up and we returned to safe conversation. I parted company in a bit of a daze to tell the truth. The person who spoke so much to me gave me a slip of paper with his name and address on before we separated. His name was Nelson Dimas. Beyond this simple fact, I could tell you very little else about him.

I knew if I wrote to him my letter would not be delivered. I cannot explain this. I just knew.

I think I had been in the company of at least one 'angel' and whether it was one of the heavenly sort I don't know. All I know is that 'angel' means 'messenger' and I had received one of the most important messages in my faith journey. It changed the whole way I looked at the bible, the way I thought about faith. It changed my attitudes towards current issues. It changed the way I thought of myself as a Christian and the way I looked at what God was doing in my life. It was one of those real 'smack in the faith' moments which don't happen too often, thankfully. Having your faith taken apart and rebuilt is not a comfortable experience.

Now I am a bit more open minded to the idea of angels although there is much I am unsure about. It takes a bit of accepting.

However, I am in danger of helping you miss the point of this event, for the existence of angels really is not the main issue. It is a simple issue that can easily be overlooked.

Quite simply, I had forgotten about my prayer but God had not. I had prayed for someone to come and explain the book of Revelation to me and that is what had happened. Not only that but God also used the opportunity to sort out some other things that needed dealing with in my life too.

It taught me one heck of a lesson about prayer in a way I will not forget. All prayers are answered, even when forgotten.

Imaging prayer:

Imaging prayers should probably begin as part of your daily prayers when , if you don't mind me using the expression, the 'in and out trays' have been dealt with and you are at a point of being still.

Let your mind be open and receptive and ask God to prompt you to think of one person.

Think of that person and imagine that they are in front of you, facing you. Ask God to lead your thoughts from now on.

Begin by looking at the person God has brought to your mind and take in the whole of their being. Recall as much as you can about this person. Look at them in detail, look at their hands, the way they are standing, their general expression of body language, and so on. Imagine them breathing, living, thinking, feeling. They are alive in your mind.

When you are ready, look into their face and explore every detail that you can remember, their mouth, their cheeks, their nose, their ears, their hair, etc., and lastly their eyes. What are your feelings towards this person right now? If there are things that are not right then share them with God and seek His guidance.

Look deep into their eyes and let God begin to help you become one with that person, to see as that person, to feel as that person, to hear as that person, to think and understand as that person.

At this moment reach out to them and begin to feel what they are feeling, it might be a little sad or happy, at peace or disturbed, let God direct you. Let these feelings become more awake in you.

Let God lead you on to think about this person's life and the way they live their life.

Think about their circumstances, their happiness and their sorrows, the problems they face.

Think about how their situation might be improved, made better. What is it that they need right now?

Is it something only God can give, is it something that the church family can give, or is it something that only you can give? Let God open your mind and listen to the prompting He gives.

How will the person you are thinking of respond to each of the thoughts you have had? How will they react? Will they cope with these changes that you are thinking about?

How will getting their needs met improve or worsen their lives and what will the knock on effects be to them, their families, their friends and so on?

Let God keep leading and prompting you.

How would you react as that person you are thinking of? Let God enable you to become more one with this person. Let your thoughts become much more like their thoughts. Ask your self what would I want, what are my hopes, what are my expectations, what are my fears, how can I go forward? Let God prompt you with lines of thought and follow them.

When you are ready then let this person gently go. You can give God thanks for this person's life and you can pray about the specific things God has brought to your mind. When you have finished, be still for a few moments.

There are now a number of things to think quietly about in the presence of God:-

How has this experience influenced your prayers - does it change anything? Has your relationship with this person changed? Do you think any differently towards this person? What did I discern God was saying to me about this person? What did I discern that God was saying about me? What do I need to learn or do so I can move on to help the person I was thinking about? What must I seek to change in my own life from this experience?

As each question is answered as best as it can be, move on to the next until all are completed (including the others that God will bring to mind).

Your prayers can be closed at some suitable point in what ever way is appropriate now.

Remember that this is emotionally a very draining experience. It is not for everyone and should not be attempted casually. Pray about using this sort of prayer and see what God is asking of you.

As a practical point, keep in mind that you have complete control over this form of prayer and if you feel that you are losing control then you should stop immediately. It is a very powerful form of praying and can be overpowering and quite distressing.

Discern before using. This is very important.

Using a prayer photograph album.

This is one of the easiest ways of developing a consistent and effective prayer routine.

Start a prayer photograph album.

Find a book and add a photograph of each person you want to pray for. Under each photograph add a few notes to remind you of the things you need to pray about or have been asked to pray about this person.

Find a quiet place and relax. Be at peace and calm. Start to relax and be open to God. Be aware of His presence.

Open the prayer photograph album. Sit quietly and peacefully. Empty your mind of the day's turmoil.

Do not rush into prayer. Take your time. Hint: make sure you turned your mobile phone off.

Empty your mind and ask God to lead your thoughts. Wait on God. Pray as your mind wanders and relax, be open. There is no such thing as a wasted prayer.

Follow as God leads your thoughts. Listen, relax, speak.

Listen to the words you say and consider them.

What are you learning?

What is God saying to you about this person?

What is God saying to you about the way you pray?

Take your time. There is no rush.

If you need to, write down the things that seem very real and important.

Discard other things for the moment.

If God wants you to come back to them then He will remind you.

If you have been challenged to pray for something unexpected, make a note of it.

If you have been challenged in something you have said then write that down too.

When you have finished your prayers then review all you have written. Ask God to lead you through your notes and help you understand what it is He is saying to you.

Give thanks after a period of quiet and close your prayer photograph album until you feel you need to come back to it.

Easy.....

The Judge and the builder.

A judge frequently appointed a builder to do work for him and although the judge was a fair and honest person, he drove a hard bargain and the builder made little profit.

The judge, now old, asked the builder to do one final job for him.

'Build me the finest house you can using the best materials. Cost is no object.'

The builder saw his chance to make a great profit and agreed.

He used second hand and discarded materials, anything to cut costs. He used less cement in the mortar, covered all of his bad work with the smoothest of plaster. He used all the tricks in the book. It would fall down within a year or two, but so what. It would serve the judge right and he, the builder, would be retired in Spain so it wouldn't matter.

When the house was finished, it looked really beautiful. The judge was sent for.

'It is beautiful,' he said, 'It is fit for a prince. I am very pleased. Well done. How much do I owe?'

The builder gave his inflated bill and the judge looked at it casually and took out his cheque book. The bill was settled without discussion or even a comment.

The judge smiled and began to walk away.

'Do you want the keys to your new house?' the builder asked.

'No,' replied the judge, 'The house is my present to you. I drove a hard bargain with you over the years and you always did me a good job without cheating me. This is my way of rewarding you for your integrity. You have got what you deserve.'

The builder took the keys and reflected on his misfortune.

Prayer can be hard work over long periods of time with little obvious reward sometimes. It would be easy to give in and do a half hearted job. If we give in

we cheat the person we are praying for, we cheat God and we cheat ourselves.
No one wins.

I included this story as encouragement not to give in, should you ever feel discouraged.

Standing still and looking upwards.

I was walking through the Horsefair Shopping Centre in Wetherby (West Yorkshire, UK, for those who know it) when I was given a reminder about something I had forgotten. It was a bitterly cold day before Christmas and everyone was busying themselves with Christmas shopping. We were all preoccupied with the different errands we were out on and were largely indifferent to the company around us. The young man selling copies of 'The Big Issue' was trying his best to put us in a Christmas mood by singing carols. Anyone listening would soon realise that he was changing the words to bump up his sales but it was too cold for anyone to stand and listen.

I was standing outside a shop that my wife had gone into when I heard a wonderful sound. It turned out to be a starling which was perched on a hanging basket and it was singing so beautifully. No one else noticed. The starling was just above head height and could have been touched had anyone wanted to. Then I noticed that all eyes were on the ground. No one was making eye contact with anyone else. The atmosphere was cold and desolate. It was very sad in a way. We were approaching Christmas but there was no sense of joy or expectation. Yet, in the midst of all this, a starling was singing its heart out.

I felt more than a little ashamed.

It is all too easy for us to be too busy and preoccupied with our own thoughts and feelings. We close our minds to others and especially to God. Instead of taking time to stand still and look 'upwards' we finish up by looking at the ground; we see the shadows that fill our minds instead of the light that liberates our spirits.

So what is this telling me?

It is telling me to take time to sit or stand and empty my mind, to 'rest in God'. Then, in the quietness, to look around and see the things that I have forgotten are there, to open my ears to hear what I have made silent, to take stock of where I am, what I am doing and even of who I am. This is now the time to look upwards, towards God and remember there is much to be thankful for. We have a God who loves us deeply and treasures the time we spend with Him. We have a God who would fill us with joy and expectation and would cast out the

shadows that secretly disturb us.

I am sure in my own mind that we do not grow as much as we might because we have not learned to interpret what is before us. The saints of old knew how to look at the world around them and to see God in action. They knew how to learn the lessons that nature had to teach about God and His ways. They knew how to look at the world God created and say 'what is this teaching me about God?'. I believe that this is still part of developing and living an effective and prayerful life.

If you like poetry, here is a short poem which may help if read as a meditation. The last line is the key line. The poem is allegoric: it speaks of us as being the children, the nature table representing all of God's creation and refers to God as being the caretaker.

The Nature Table

A dusty feather and a single butterfly's wing

Lie side by side

On the nature table.

It holds the once treasured finds of children.

That were quickly forgotten for maths and literacy.

Now the classroom is empty.

Silence sits uncomfortably in the desolate chairs,

In detention until Monday.

The caretaker is about his work and stops for a moment

To pay his quiet respects to the nature table:

A book that was opened but is as yet u read.

Why won't God fix marriages.....?

I recently had an e-mail from someone who is going through the tragedy of a marriage break up. In the e-mail was a question - 'why can't God fix Christian marriages?'. This relates to a serious point regarding prayer. Here is part of my reply which covers this point.

"As a priest I will try and answer your comment about why God can't fix Christian marriages. It isn't a comforting answer but it may help direct you in your prayers.

God gave us free will to choose our own paths in life and even He won't override that - it is up to us as individuals to choose our own paths in life. When we pray for God to fix things like marriages we can only pray for Him to create the opportunities for healing to take place and that the people involved might listen to the prompting of His Spirit.

Prayer is not about asking God to 'make people do things' but is about asking God to guide people and show them the right way forward.

Whether they take it or not is up to them - they choose. That is what free will (and love) is about. It is a wonderful gift but it can hurt like hell when people go down the wrong paths. God won't force two people to live together if their relationship breaks down. What God can do is create the opportunities for the people involved to have a second chance at getting it right. It usually means leaving doors open and taking a chance on either being hurt again or being able to put things right. You may not want to take that risk as it can mean getting hurt several times before you start getting taken seriously."

I hope that this is of help in your understanding of prayer. You may need to spend some time considering the implications of this in your prayer life but it will be worth the effort in making your prayer ministry more effective.

Praying for release.

Praying for the death of someone is not easy, even when it seems to be the only way forward. There can be huge problems in dealing with the burden of guilt which can accompany a prayer of release, even in the early stages. This can be very hard to deal with and can be long lasting, even if the prayer is not granted. The very fact of having asked can be a difficult burden to carry in itself. Also, a prayer of release is not easy thing for others to accept. However, sometimes it is the way forward and it becomes a real test of love and faith.

There are some things that are worth remembering if you feel called to pray for a release.

However much we pray or desire an outcome for another person, we have no power in ourselves to bring it about. In particular, we cannot sustain or end a life, no matter how much we love a person or however much we pray. It is not our call. It is absolutely and totally in the hands of God. All we can do is ask in prayer as we feel led.

If we feel led to pray for the release of a person into the next life, we can only ask. That is all. Whatever happens after that is for God to decide.

In praying, as with all forms of prayer and intercession, we should ask for those things that are within the love and nature of God. Sometimes we may not be sure whether we are praying within these boundaries. If this is the case, as it probably will be with prayers of release, then we can still ask God because He knows we do not always know how or what to pray for. We can ask in trust because we know we don't always get things right..

In asking we can be certain our prayer will be answered as with all prayers, but we also know that the answer to our prayer could be a 'yes' or a 'no'. It is God's decision and whatever the decision is, it will be the right one. We cannot see the future as God sees it, and we can safely trust Him, even if we do not understand.

Whatever the outcome to our prayer is, we should remember that we will not be rejected by God and neither will the person we have prayed for. The love God has for us is not diminished in any way, even when we ask for things that

we should not ask for. And if we are open, we can learn a lot about ourselves and about God through our mistakes. Our God is a great and loving teacher who truly desires us to draw closer to Him and we can truly rest in God.

If I have any problem about praying for something or someone, I usually begin by telling God that I have a problem and I tell Him what the problem is as best as I can. He knows exactly what the problem is but explaining it to Him will help me clarify my own thoughts and help me understand more clearly. I may even ask Him to help me find the words and then to show me the way forward. I know I can ask for whatsoever I feel led to ask for and I know that He will sort the good from the bad. I know also that the Holy Spirit prompts me in my prayers although I know that I don't always discern correctly. I can tell God if I am not sure that what I ask for is right.

In the context of a prayer of release, I can tell God how much I love the person I am praying for and ask God to call them home when the time is right, that I am concerned how much pain they may be in or that they are suffering greatly. I can also ask for a right understanding of what is happening and ask that God will show or tell me how I should pray at this difficult time. I can also tell God how I have felt prompted to pray and how difficult it has been to bring this before Him.

When I have shared all of these things with God, I may feel more certain in asking Him to release the person I am praying for. If this is so then I may be able to say with some confidence:-

'God, I feel you are calling to me to ask for the release of this person from their pain and suffering. I feel that you are asking me to intercede on their behalf. I ask you to release them from this life and ask that you will welcome them into the next, enfolding them in your loving and gracious arms. I ask Lord that you will hold no sin against them and they will be forgiven of all that might hold them back from your great love.'

If I think the person I am praying for has not yet met God, I will ask God to reveal Himself to that person in a way they can understand and accept. I will ask that they may recognise God and welcome Him with great joy and open arms, like a long lost friend. I often imagine them saying to God 'So that is who you are, I did not recognise you until now!' I ask God that it may be so.

And when it is over, I give thanks to God, and this can be hard and difficult moment, but God knows and accepts.

We can only pray as we feel led. Praying that someone might be released from the suffering and pain of this world is a lot harder to do than you might expect. The big problem is handling the guilt and the notion you may have been responsible in some way for the death of a person you might love very much. I know first hand how painful this can be. Sometimes our faith and service of God places us in uncomfortable positions. It goes with the territory as they say.

If this is what you are being led to do then you cannot ignore it, it has to be faced. We do not face it alone though. God is with us. He is gracious if we get things wrong and will treat an inappropriate prayer appropriately, as a loving Father, so we need not worry unduly. We can be assured of His continued and undivided and unbroken love, no matter how much of a mess we make of things.

But, if we have asked rightly then how great is the blessing. We continue to respond to and act out of a responsible and caring love that originated in God. That is the nature of growing in prayer. Sometimes it can be a very hard and difficult way, but we follow as God leads. It makes us more effective in serving God as our love grow stronger, but in doing so it can bring about a sharpening awareness of the pain and hurt that goes with it.

It tells us we are growing.

Praying for the departed.

There are some Christian traditions that are not universally accepted. One is saying prayers for the dead. It is an area of ministry that is not a comfortable place to explore. I am going to offer a few thoughts in the hope of 'giving you a few pegs you can hang your hat on' and see how you feel about all of this.

I am going to start by offering a concept. It begins with the nature of God and time. We tend to think of prayer as being a linear activity where time is concerned, but this may not be the whole truth.

I think of God as existing beyond the constraints of time, both inside and outside of time. God is the past, present and future, all of time, rolled into one infinite and eternal being. It means that God has a simultaneous involvement with the wholeness of time and of each individual moment, whether past, present or future.

It does not alter or contradict the fact we have been given free will/the ability to make decisions that affect us and other people. It does not affect our ability to pray for change through God. The future is not fixed. It just simply means (as far as I can understand) that God simultaneously exists or co-exists in the past, present and future and is present in and beyond each moment as if it were one.

What it suggests is that we may be able to pray about the past, present or future, because God is already there at all moments in time, and that that each moment is still changeable through prayer.

It may therefore be possible for us to pray and make changes to the things that have already happened. We may also be able to pray for things that are outside of time too.

So, let's put this thought in some kind of practical perspective and see how it looks.

It opens up some new possibilities, particularly in respect of praying for the departed of this world, those beyond our understanding of nature and time. It could suggest that our prayers for the departed are still relevant and have value. We may still be able to pray for that person and for changes to occur. I am not thinking about changes in the fabric of history as we perceive it, but

about creating opportunities for individuals to be drawn into the complete love of God even in death.

Is there an argument for this in the bible?

Possibly. Jesus is a historical fact. He died 2000 years ago. The truth of the matter is that we believe as Christians that He is still alive and still touches us in the present moment of time, even though his death is a recorded historical fact. His love for us has transcended time and is not bound by the past, present and future. It is recorded that, after the crucifixion, Jesus preached to those already dead that they may have life, an example of His love transcending time, in this case, the past. We also know from our own experience that Jesus will continue to reach out and touch those who are living now and those yet to be born.

What interests me in the context of this argument is that Jesus was able to preach to those departed of this life and they were able to respond.

It begs the question, are we then, born of Christ and growing in His likeness, able to intercede with God on behalf of those who are beyond life? If we are, then it would seem possible that this might be as part of a prayer ministry, which brings us back to the initial concept of praying for the departed.

Well, I have to admit that I am still open minded about this issue, these are just thoughts. Like you perhaps , I am still considering the arguments.

So what about the practicalities? Can prayers be said on behalf of the dead?

I think that if a person feels led to pray for the departed then they should not be deterred by a lack of wisdom in this matter. If it is not part of God's will then all we have done is wasted a few moments in time out of our love and concern for someone we knew and is the merciful hands of God. If it is part of God's will then we have tried to be faithful in the exercise of the ministry God has called us to fulfil.

If a person does not feel called to pray for the departed, then they should not offer prayers, nor allow themselves to be pressured into doing so. We should all be led by the Holy Spirit in such matters, even though there may not be a consensus of rightness or wrongness.

Pray for guidance and you will be given wisdom if you are concerned.

However, I would point out that as a general principle, we should be open to all forms of prayer ministry and give them careful consideration. We should be led by the Spirit and not by our narrow-mindedness.

Opposition to prayer.

For those of you who are of the charismatic or more evangelical tradition, you will have probably noticed that I have not used the words 'the devil' in any of my short articles on prayer. It's not that I don't believe in the devil or his (or her) power, it is just that I would rather talk about the things of God and discuss the positive aspects of spirituality rather than the negative.

There comes a point though when the forces of darkness, the devil, evil, or whatever name you want to give this, opposes the prayer of God's people those like you and me who amazingly are called to be part of 'a royal priesthood'. The effects can be manifested in a number of ways ranging from the very subtle to what can only be described as outright spiritual terrorism of the worst kind.

For most of us, the effects of this activity will be limited to distraction of various kinds and it is these I wish to dwell a short while on.

This may manifest itself in the slow erosion of time spent in prayer, a disinclination to pray, feelings of guilt that distract us from spending time with God, being too busy, being tired, not being in the right mood for prayer, thoughts that distract us as we pray, inappropriate sexual images or bad news, having forgotten or just remembered something, irritation with someone as we pray, a feeling of 'can't be bothered', needing to do something else urgently, feeling poorly, having had a row or harsh words with someone prior to prayer, feelings of guilt and so on. The list is endless and the tactics used are limitless.

We end up being distracted from effective prayer.

If these things are happening then it probably means that you have a successful prayer ministry.

I have two possible solutions:-

1. read 'the Screwtape Letters' by C.S. Lewis. It's fun and it gives wonderful advice,
2. be aware and pray about each distraction as it happens - make it a point of prayer - turn it to your own advantage.

Just being aware of what is happening is half the battle.

The other half of the battle is learning that the less you feel like praying, the greater is the need to pray. Just relax, don't get hung up about it, hand it all over to God and ask Him to guide you through it all. Just don't give up; that is what someone or something out there wants you to do to delay the coming of God's kingdom.

Key thought to hold on to:- prayer is an effective force and it brings the kingdom of heaven to rest on earth. Not to pray is more than just a personal loss, it can be considered global in its implications.

I won't labour the point here but we are involved in a spiritual battle at many different levels. We know that through Christ and the cross the war is won already, but we also know that the war is not over until the last battle has been fought and there is no more resistance. We need to be resilient in our praying and not be tricked out of our prayer time because this is the time when we renew our relationship with God at a very personal level and the time we receive spiritual refreshment.

Bearing this in mind, we also need to pray for our own protection whilst at prayer.

I do remember an incident some many years ago when I was preaching on the importance of prayer in relation to church growth. In summing up I said that if we did not pray together as a church then we would die as a church. The reaction to this call to serious prayer was both surprisingly swift and ferocious. I remember a petition having been started by the end of the service to have me removed. It was very sad for all of us.

I learned a couple of important lesson though. 'Encouraging people to pray effectively will get you into serious trouble' was one of the lessons. It was at this point that I really began to understand and see that spiritual warfare was a very serious reality and aimed specifically at undermining effective prayer. I also learned that we can often be totally unaware of how our prayer lives have gone into regression and how our feelings can be easily manipulated.

My advice is be diligent in prayer and resilient. Do not be fooled into thinking it

is unimportant because it is important. If you cannot find the words to pray then try writing your own prayers, use a prayer book or the prayer that Jesus taught his disciples, the Lord's prayer. It will help you through your own prayer time difficulties. Also, don't forget about the importance of the prayer group. I know many people who have found solitary prayer difficult but who have blossomed in a supportive prayer group. If you can't find one in your own church then think about starting a prayer group, going to a prayer group in a different church or ask someone to start one.

Letting go of the clutter....

Moving to a new house can be a traumatic experience. One of the benefits though is it forces us into having a good clear out of all the rubbish and unnecessary clutter we manage to collect but never got round to throwing out.

Getting rid of some rubbish is easy. The hard bit is dealing with those little bits that have a memory attached to them, and there are those inappropriate but well meant gifts

And on it goes, just getting worse.

I admit to having packing cases from my last house that have never been unpacked. They are full of the bits and pieces I couldn't make my mind up about. They still remain unattended to, cluttering the place up.

I don't really want to deal with it because some of the things in those boxes awaken unpleasant memories and feelings that I would rather forget.

We all know what I should do, don't we. Just throw them all away. That is all there is to it. Problem solved.

So what about all the other clutter that is harder to see, the stuff that is a real burden to us? You know, the emotional and spiritual clutter and rubbish that our lives are littered with.

We carry a lot of it around and it is often well hidden in the darker recesses of our lives, places we would rather not visit. These are the really destructive burdens we carry.

There are all the hurts we have suffered at the hands of others that lie deep within us, affecting every decision we make and will make. They continue to influence our thoughts until, eventually, they imprison and defeat us.

There are the hurts we caused others that we don't want to be reminded of, and we will carry the guilt around with us, hoping no one will notice.

These can leave us unable to face up to events and circumstances, particularly those that remind us of what terrible hurt we caused others, or could cause if

they were ever found out. (Don't we all live in fear of those words, '.....call your self a Christian?'). What terrible and awful people we are. We find ways of avoiding dealing with these, side-stepping the issues and averting our eyes, afraid to look at ourselves squarely in the mirror and too afraid to mention them in prayer.

The result of all this is that we are not able to live life freely and effectively - we are tired, worn out and unable to move on more than a few steps at a time. The burdens, guilt and secrets we hold onto drag us back. We can't let them go in case someone finds out. Sometimes we hide them so deeply in the recesses that we nearly, but not completely, forget that they ever happened.

It is a case of getting rid of the emotional and spiritual clutter and taking the advice we would give anyone else other than ourselves. If you don't want the burden, let it go, dump it where it belongs.

The first big step is realising that it needs doing. The second step is pray it out. If you really want to do it then ask God to reveal to you the excess emotional and spiritual baggage you are lumping around or have hidden away.

Some of this is going to be pretty scary and painful as it comes to the surface but God will only reveal what you can handle. He will help you face up to it and deal with it.

It will probably involve seeking forgiveness or forgiving the hurt others have caused. This will then probably lead onto the healing the wounds. Like most wounds, they will be painful while they heal, but the pain will disappear after a while.

What is great though is the feeling of freedom as each burden is lifted. To experience it is wonderful and it often has a direct physical effect on the body. Frequently, the shoulders droop less and people begin to stand up straight, they have more energy and seem to be much more relaxed. They sleep better too and are able to focus on tasks more easily.

This isn't something that is 'a one off'. It needs doing regularly. Like our homes, we still keep on acquiring clutter all the time. We need to keep chucking it out.

Prayer:-

Dear Father,

I sense a lot of un-necessary clutter in my life and many things that hold me back. I pray that you will reveal these things to me and help me to deal with them. I ask that you will guide me through each moment of this process and help me face up to those things I find difficult and painful.

I pray you will heal the wounds that I have kept hidden from others and help me to truly forgive those who caused them. I ask that you will help me find forgiveness for the hurt I have caused others. I ask that they too may be healed.

I pray that I will be aware of your continued love and not seek to hide myself from you in shame at the things I have done or caused.

I pray that you will give me the courage to face what I am, the patience, love and faith to accept change and the joy of knowing I am deeply loved by you.

Amen

Letting go of what we know.

One of the hardest things we have to do is to let go of the things we care about or the ones we have invested much time and effort in.

I think back to how hard it was to let my children go as they became adults. That was difficult because they were becoming more independent and they didn't need me in the same way.

It will be hard for me to let go of the wonderful musical instruments I have when I can no longer play them. An instrument needs both loving and playing. They are dead without being played. Each has its own character and every person who plays it will produce their own distinctive melodic sound. All of the instruments I own will be passed on to homes where they will be played and enjoyed as much as I have enjoyed them, but it will be hard to let them go. They have many wonderful memories associated with each of them.

We get attached to so many things and as they become more a part of our lives, we find them even harder to let go.

Jesus often talked about letting things go and giving things up. There are examples in the parables, the father letting the prodigal son go even though he could see the consequences. There are the paradoxical sayings, 'in giving up your life you will find it', etc. There are the sayings, 'if you would follow me you should hate your mother, father, sister and brother', and so on.

It isn't easy to give up these things, or to let go of them so they don't hold you back, especially if we have worked hard for them. But, there is a problem - the more we hold onto, the more it becomes a burden and the less distance we are able to walk. Some of the things we cherish are the things that hold us back the most.

It isn't just the relationships or the belongings. It is often our thoughts and experiences, the things that are often central to our own lives and our personal faith. It is these things that I want to focus on.

Our developing thoughts and life experiences (including the way we understand and interpret them) help us form a good deal of our understanding and expression of faith, including our religious opinions. Sometimes, because we are

imperfect, we interpret these things incorrectly. We make assumptions which sometimes are not correct. We mis-hear, mis-understand and mis-judge. These often become the foundations on which we build our faith, and the bigger we build, the harder it is to change our position. Not only that, but we grow to love and cherish what we have created.

We say things like 'you are wrong to believe that because,', 'you mis-interpret scripture because,', etc., etc. Nothing wrong with the words maybe, but what about the motive? We may have to be right because we can't face the implications of being wrong. We fight hard because we don't want to change our theological or faith position.

But hold on a minute, just who are we to criticise what the Holy Spirit may be doing in someone else's life, or who are we to say that the way God leads us is right and the way God leads another is wrong?

Sometimes we need to let go of the things that have become so important to us (like our perception of what a Christian is, what they should believe, how they should respond to God) because they are flawed. Not only that but they stop us enjoying real fellowship because they encourage prejudices and this can often run very deeply.

This may seem very hurtful, radical and hard to accept.

If you find this so then you may need to go away and think about what I have said and pray it over. Follow God's leading in this and do not rely on my words. However, these things are said that you might enjoy real spiritual freedom.

So, if these words have the ring of truth to them, you should carefully and prayerfully decide what you want to do next. Do you want to find out the truth? Are some of the things you hold onto as fundamental truths holding you back from being an effective Christian?

If you can't face this thought right now, click this link icon and it will take you back to the home page. You can always come back to this page when you are ready.

OK, so how do we know if there is something holding us back, something perhaps that we are unwilling to let go because it is so important to us?

One way is to prayerfully examine our emotional and spiritual lives, especially those areas that are problematic and bring us into regular conflict. I have to warn you that this will take more than a little courage; no one finds it easy to face up to the fact they may have got some things wrong.

Ask God to guide you through examining each area of your life. Be systematic but try to be very aware of the leading of God's Spirit. Consider very carefully what God is saying about your own beliefs, about your own life as a Christian. Our foundations need to be planted firmly in the rock so what we build with God is solid and unshakeable. For some of us, we may need to allow some demolition and substantial rebuilding of our faith.....

(A word of comfort - it has happened to me and it is an amazing experience. I wouldn't change it for the world but it isn't for everyone!)

Ask that your mind may be opened and receptive to change where it is necessary. I suggest keeping a pen and notebook by your side and that you make notes as you progress. Ask God for confirmation of anything that bothers you.

You might consider that this process takes place within the context of a prayerfully supportive fellowship of trustworthy and faithful Christians. You don't want to let go of the things that hold you back as a Christian only to replace them with someone else's problems. If you can't find a good quality fellowship then ask in prayer that you will be led to one.

Hold onto the fact that whatever is revealed to you, it is not to be feared in any way, even though it might disturb or cause you some pain. God is loving and caring and will not allow you to be tested more than you can bare.

You will do well to remind yourself that this is an enabling process and is being done within the sacred confines of a loving and mutual trust between God and yourself.

Be patient. It will all happen in God's time and in God's way and the end result is well worth it.

Ready for the leap of faith?

PRAYER:-

Dear Father, I sense that there may be things about being a Christian that I may have misunderstood and hold me back. I ask you to reveal the things I need to learn and that you will help me to accept them as gifts. I know that I may find some of this very painful but I pray that you will lead me through each step of this special journey, encourage me when I am down and be my strength when I want to give up. Help me to keep my heart set towards a pure faith built on love and trust, and to hold fast onto those things that make for true fellowship.

Letting go of the past.

Luke 9 verse 62 ...To him Jesus said, "No one who sets his hand to the plough and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God."

Many years ago I was involved in a prayer group praying for church renewal. Apart from a few young people, the meeting was mostly made up of middle aged and retired members of the church. The meetings were generally informal and tended to be of a quiet and reflective nature, but it was what happened after the prayers that fascinated me. The atmosphere change and became really animated.

It was not talk of coming renewal that filled the air. It was talk of a renewal that had taken place many years ago. It took me some time to work out what exactly was happening.

To cut a long story short, these people were re-living the past instead of living for the present.

Renewal did come through the prayers and work of these lovely people but it did not come easily. I felt that renewal had been hindered by them holding onto the past memories and experiences rather than dealing with the issues of the present moment.

That led me to wonder what areas of the past I was holding on to that were holding me back.

I had already prayed about this in part as I had been writing about release and letting go. Things were coming to mind that needed releasing. They were mostly things that I had deliberately repressed and found hard to deal with.

Many of these were brought to mind in dreams. At other times, often early in the morning, I awoke with incidents and events already planted in my mind. Then a word, or a sound, or a smell, would trigger off other memories....

I was able to pray about each of these things and then let them go.

One incident was very strange in some respects. I dreamed of a person who hurt me quite deeply as a young Christian growing into church ministry. I

dreamed that this person came to me and handed me his clerical collar. He said, 'It is time you wore this.'

Even though I knew I was dreaming, I sensed that something special had taken place. A lot of healing was taking place and we were both being released from something that happened a long time ago. A burden had been lifted and reconciliation had taken place.

So what does this all say?

1. learn from the past but don't live in it,
2. don't let things from the past hold you back (whether good or bad experiences),
3. pray for release as these things are revealed,
4. deal with things that need forgiveness straight away, don't bury them away.

As I was writing the draft for this page, I kept getting the picture of a child, desperate to learn to swim, clinging on to the railings at the side of the swimming pool. We shouldn't cling on to the things that hold us back, even if it means letting go of the things that give us security. If only we can make that leap of faith, let go and swim freely....

Returning to the words of Jesus in Luke 9, verse 62: they were said to a young man who wanted to go with Jesus but he asked if he could say goodbye to his people first.

The words that Jesus spoke may seem so very harsh and unkind but they presented a clear and stark choice. I don't know what the young man decided as the gospel of Luke does not record this, but I hope the young man seized the moment and did not let himself be held back.

I sense that we are in a continual state of testing, just as this young man was tested.

There is so much that holds us back. Every day we are being called to let something go or to let go of something (note the subtle difference). They are

things of the past that should not be allowed to interfere with or hinder the way we live today!

PRAYER:-

Dear Father, if there are things that hold me back as a Christian, I ask that you will reveal them to me and help me to deal with them. Help me to let go of the things I do not need and show me how I may be free.

Amen.

Letting go of the sins that have been forgiven.

Forgiveness is a wonderful release.

The sad thing is, we often keep carrying our burdens around when they have been forgiven and we have been released from them.

The problem is that we know that God has forgiven us, but we seem unable to forgive ourselves. Whatever we did or what we are preys on our mind and the sense and feeling of guilt remains. We are unable to break free despite the chains having been broken.

It wouldn't be so bad if that was all that happened, but the sense of guilt begins to grow into other areas of our lives and we begin to behave as if we are defeated Christians. This is not an ideal situation.

The first thing is to hold fast onto scripture. So here are a few texts that come to mind:-

'But you are a forgiving God, gracious and compassionate, long suffering and ever constant, and you did not abandon them. Even when they made for themselves a metal image and were guilty of gross blasphemies, you in your great compassion did not abandon them in their wickedness.' Nehemiah 9v17-19

'Lord you are kind and forgiving, full of love to all who cry to you. Lord listen to my prayer and hear my pleadings. In the days of my distress I call to you for you will answer me.' Psalm 86v5-7

'He (God) pardons all my wrong doing and heals all my ills.' Psalm 103v3

'It is to him that the prophets testify, declaring that everyone who trusts him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.' Acts 10v43

'It is through him that everyone who has faith is acquitted of everything' Acts 13v39

'In Christ our release is secured and our sins forgiven through the shedding of his blood.' Ephesians 1v7

'... through whom (Jesus) our release is secured and our sins are forgiven.'
Colossians 1v14

We know through faith in Christ that we are forgiven our sins/wrong doings. We know that as we bring each sin/wrongdoing to God that we can ask for and receive forgiveness and be released from its consequences. We know this.

'Forgive us our sins as we forgive others' Matthew 6v12 (The Lord's prayer)

The words 'as we forgive others' are interesting. I believe it includes the concept of 'myself'. That short extract could be interpreted as 'forgive me my sins as I forgive others', and even 'forgive me my sins as I forgive myself'. I believe very strongly that we can only learn to love others in as much as we learn to love ourselves ('love' as defined in 1 Corinthians 13), and it would follow that we can only learn to forgive others in as much as we learn to forgive ourselves. The Holy Spirit is our teacher.

'Then he (Jesus) breathed on them, saying "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone's sins, they are forgiven: if you pronounce them unforgiven, then they remain unforgiven."' John 20v22-23

We are constantly learning what forgiveness is and our concept of forgiveness is being widened as we interact with God. The Holy Spirit leads us and teaches us about forgiveness. The danger is that we do not put into practice what we have been taught and consequently we experience problems in our Christian lives and ministries.

We know we are unworthy, but Christ makes us worthy. Nothing we can do will change that fact, we come as we are through Christ. The simple truth we need to accept and hold onto is that if we are forgiven and accepted by God then we are truly forgiven and accepted by God. (Not only that, but we are called to be a 'royal priesthood'.) Nothing we think about ourselves changes that fact.

Scripture tells us that we have a forgiving and gracious God who wants us to call Him 'Father' ('Daddy' is a much closer translation.)

Christ died for us that we may be set free from the burden of sin and enjoy a full and fruitful relationship with God. (John 3v16)

Although we are unworthy, we are counted as worthy through Christ. 'If God is for us, then who shall be against us.... who will bring a charge against those whom God has chosen? Not God, who acquits? Not Christ who pleads our cause? nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.' Romans 8v31-39

We can approach God with confidence and need have no fear of standing before Him because of Jesus Christ:-'....in Christ Jesus, our Lord, in whom we have freedom of access to God, with the confidence born of trust in him.'
Ephesians 3v12

We are truly God's children and already released from the burden we carry. All we have to do is claim it.

PRAYER:-

Father, show me if I am still holding onto things that I have already been set free from. Help me to grasp and take to heart the great truths of scripture that I may be truly love and serve. Thank you.

Amen

Prayer beads.

I am one of those people who can't sit still for very long, I have to be doing something. If I am at a meeting, I doodle on my notes. If I am in my class teaching, I move around the classroom when I should be standing in front of the class. If I am driving, I have to tap in time to the music I am listening to. When in prayer....

It has taken a long time to be able to sit quietly and still in prayer.

It is a difficult time for me. I get distracted with my own thoughts, my mind wanders, I read my bible, I make notes. I guess I must be infuriate other people at times.

My best time for prayer is when I am driving. I seem able to keep on track with my prayers as well as drive. I think there is just the right amount of activity going on for me. The thing is, I don't drive every day.

So, with this in mind, I am always looking for new prayer strategies to help me. I am currently trying a well worn idea which might suit lots of people who, like me, need to have their hands occupied when they pray.

It is based on an idea familiar to many world faiths, prayer beads (also known as a rosary in the form used by Christians in the Roman Catholic tradition). Put simply, it is a piece of cord with knots or beads along its length and these act as prayer markers or prompts. You just work your way down the chain of knots or markers, praying for the people that the marker represents, then when you have finished you go onto the next knot or marker.

You can even make them yourself to suit your own prayer needs.

This is how I thought about mine. I listed on paper all the people/things I pray for in order. I came up with this list:

1. preparation for prayer - quiet reflection
2. confession
3. my day ahead including my own personal needs and concerns

4. my family
5. my friends and the people I work with
6. prayer requests I received through the course of the day
7. local concerns that need prayer
8. world concerns that need prayer
9. particular prayer needs not covered
10. recall of answers to prayers and the giving of thanks
11. the prayerful consideration of a short bible text
12. the offering of myself, my work, my gifts for the coming hours/day.

I got a length of chord and tied twelve knots in it and then tied the two ends together so that there was an unbroken circle. I now had something I could have in my hands which was a physical reminder to me of the things I needed to pray about. My fingers could move from knot to knot as I finished praying for one group of people and moved onto the next. The unbroken circle reminds me that God's love for me is continual and that my prayers are an ongoing circle of love. There are lots of symbolic connections. You could even have a knot for each problem you are praying through and the knot can be undone when the problem is prayerfully resolved.

Prayer can be quite free and open using this method and it can still be led by the Holy Spirit even though it is more structured than free prayer.

A small cross could be added in your prayer beads to act as a reminder - it becomes the starting point of all our prayers, and as we complete the cycle of our prayers, it becomes the finishing point, reminding us that our Lord is risen and victorious, even through death.

The point to remember is that this is intended as an aid to prayer and it is not for everyone. It should not become an end in itself or become a distraction. If you like the idea and use it, you might want to consider whether it would be a

distraction to others people if it were used in a prayer group, for example, or whether it is something to use in private and personal prayer.

If you find the idea a bit strange but are interested, you might want to consider rather than have prayer beads that you have a prayer cross. It works in just the same way. Each arm of the cross can represent, for example, FRIENDS, FAMILY, FELLOWSHIP, and the WIDER WORLD, all brought together at the centre by Christ. It is just a question of developing it in the way that best suits your own needs.

The lovely thing about both prayer beads and the prayer cross is that they can be kept in a pocket and they act as a reminder to call for constant prayer every time you touch them. Prayer beads can even be worn as a bracelet as a constant reminder to you.

Having a vision and making it a reality.

'As a teacher in a primary school I often get asked to do some things I am not always well qualified to do. Recently, one of those things was to teach swimming.

I was the one who taught swimming from the pool side and always began by helping children to gain confidence in the water.

We went through all the different components of swimming. Splashing the teachers. Kicking the legs. Moving the arms, gaining confidence in the water and learning not to panic when getting splashed or going under water to retrieve some easily picked up object.

Then we slowly moved towards swimming unaided. The floats come off, the buoyancy aids were left at the pool side and children made their first attempts at real swimming.

The hardest thing they found to do was let go of the handrail that goes round the edge of the pool. There is always a hesitancy at this moment. Despite all the teaching and learning that has gone before, there is a fear of both failing in front of ones classmates and of disappearing under the water. The swimming pool becomes an ocean of growing self doubt as children hesitate and find their fingers unable to let go of the handrail.

Some children seem to cope with the uncertainty and just go for it, finding themselves swimming within their first few strokes. Their joy and relief is almost impossible to describe it is so great. It is also a great thrill for me as their teacher to see everything come together.

Other children find themselves slowly sinking under the water as they try to swim. Their lack of confidence seems to drag them slowly under the water. Some manage to face and overcome their fears and keep trying. Eventually they succeed. But there are also those who never try again having once failed. Doubt and fear overcome them and they never recover their confidence.

These are the children who are gather with those who were simply unable to let go of the side. For these, the pool side is as far as they ever will go. They will not experience the excitement and freedom of swimming freely. They will be

forever at the pool side pretending they don't care about swimming, regretfully nursing a hope that was never realised.

I wonder how many of you are saying to yourselves, 'If only they had let go and tried' or 'If only they had persevered'. If you were just thinking that then keep those thoughts in mind. This story has a wonderfully allegorical foundation and I will keep coming back to it.

We are in the first days of advent, preparing ourselves for the coming of the Christ child and beginning a new Christian year that is full of hope, optimism, new opportunities and wonder. During Advent we have a chance to take careful stock of where we are, what we have achieved and time to think of where we might be going in the coming year.

The possibilities and opportunities that lie before us are amazing, perhaps a little scary too, but they are still nevertheless wonderful possibilities.

It could be an exciting year of change for the better if we wanted, a time of real vision and discovery for each of us as individuals and for all of us as a church. I wonder what your vision or hopes for the church would be?

My ideal of tomorrow's church (and I am not criticising the church in its present position for we are where we are by the grace of God) is of

a church where the presence of God is so real you could almost touch it, a church that is full to the pew ends of new families,

a church with a full program of spirit led worship and teaching and a real commitment and involvement in the local community,

a church with really effective and supportive prayer groups with healing and reconciliation ministries the national health would die for (so to speak),

a church with a sense of purpose and mission that involved everyone in some way with real growth in membership and stewardship of gifts ,

a church that is dynamic in its service and love of God, a church where things happen,

a church that people want to come to, not out of a sense of habit or duty but because they really want to be there, because they feel appreciated, needed and nurtured and where each is allowed to exercise their own God given ministry in an appreciative, supportive and encouraging environment.

a church full of peace and renewal, a place where all can experience the presence of God and know they belong.

a church where everyone is welcomed and no one is turned away.

I may have missed out some things that you would regard as being very important and you may disagree with me on some of my thoughts.

However, what is important though is that we do have our own vision for the church and its future, and some idea of our own personal place in amongst it all.

It doesn't matter that our visions are different or that we disagree about them at times because we are all aware of different needs in the church. In fact it is a good thing. We don't always see things the way they really are and need to share our thoughts with each other to help move us in the right direction.

During the days of Advent we can begin to think about our visions and ideas for the church for the coming year. We can begin to distil out and nurture some of those ideas as we look with some hope, optimism and excitement to the future. Advent is a time when we can begin to think about how we can make those visions become a reality, how we can make them happen.

I hope that you feel at least a little excited by Advent?

Your vision of the church for the next year is important. You might not think you have a vision of the church but I am almost certain that you do. You will at least know what you don't want to happen next year even if you don't know what you do want.

Let's see if you do have a vision or ideas about what you want for the church next year. Close your eyes for a moments.

Let God lead your thoughts. Let go of those things that are holding you back.

What do you see happening in the church next year? If you can, open your mind to all the possibilities, even if they seem impossible right now. What do you want for this church? What does God want for this church? What do you see yourself doing? Just imagine what might be. Reach out and grasp hold of these things firmly in your mind. Don't let these ideas go.

While you hold this vision in your mind and let it unfold, let me tell you a story.

A man in a small village in a distant country went to his neighbours and said to them, 'I have had a really brilliant idea. We don't have a place where we can meet and have dances, a place the children can play safely, somewhere we can have parties, have visiting speakers come to help us improve us culturally, a place where' and on he spoke about the many needs the village had. Everyone became excited and could see the sense in what he said. There was a tremendous feeling that this was the way forward. The village needed a village hall. Everyone in the village, young and old, would benefit. Not one person disagreed. Everyone thought it was a marvellous idea.

'What are we going to do about it then?' the man said.

'We need an architect, builders and surveyors, labourers, land, bricks and money, material for curtains for the windows, a toilet and a kitchen, decorators, painters, dusters'

All of these materials, resources and skills lay within the grasp of every person who was there listening.

'Let's do it then.....'

'Right, good idea.....'

Then, slowly a change began to come over everyone.

Looking at all the work and effort involved, uncertainty and indecision began to settle in. The initial confidence was slipping away. The 'Yes, we can do it' was slowly changing into a 'well, yes, we could do it..... but.....'

They had everything they needed, the skills, resources, people.....

'but..... erm.....'

Some began to say things like, 'I can't do this,' 'It's not really my job.' 'I don't know how to do that,' 'I'm too old to learn new skills,' 'but I've always done this job....,' 'I don't really have the time,' 'I'm not very good with responsibility.' 'I couldn't organise that.' and they began to look around to tell others it was their job.

There was even talk of working parties and committees.

The villagers began to drift away. They had been so sure for a few brief and glorious moments that they could make this wonderful idea become a reality. Now they were not so sure that they could let go of everything that held them back and step into the future with confidence and faith. It was just like the children who couldn't let go of the handrail in the swimming pool. The village hall was never built despite the fact everything they needed was there.

It was all a question of letting go of the doubt and uncertainty that held them back and letting their vision of a village hall with all the benefits it become a reality.

Let me go back to your vision of the church: how much are you prepared to give of yourselves and what risks are you prepared to take to make your vision a reality?

Just like the children learning to swim, there comes a point where we all just have to let go of the handrail at the side of the pool and have faith however small that we will not get swallowed up by our doubts and fears but be successful.

And if we know we can't do this by ourselves, are we prepared to let God transform us?

For me this taking stock of the present and looking forward to the future is the essence of Advent, it is a time of preparation for change, taking a step towards a newer order that is full of hope, uncertainty and expectation, and yet so full of a sense of wholeness and completeness, one inevitably that is more faith centred.

Over this time of Advent I hope that you take the time to think about your vision for the church as it moves into the new year and to think of the questions of where we are and where we are going as a church. You will probably find the some answers by spending time with God in prayer, in meditation, through the study and reading of your bibles, and by sharing your vision of the future with faithful and discerning people.

Let me give you a warning though: there is no place here for closed minds, prejudice and partisan politics. It needs a wholly open mind, a mind that is willing to be challenged and changed, even by God.

If you feel that you want to let go of the things that hold you back but are afraid of moving out of your depth and even going under, remember that God is never far away. He is by our side every moment of every day. He knows how fragile our faith is.

You can be confident that He will not let you sink because His love is eternally certain and absolutely trustworthy.'

Prayer, the gift of loving.

I was told that I must have loved God very much as a child, and my return to the fold was just the return of the prodigal having wandered and got into all sorts of trouble. It was in 1973 that I met God again in a Methodist Church in my home town. I was kneeling at the communion rail and felt so very empty and lonely, almost as if I was dying away. God spoke to me, a still and quiet voice that came from a long way away. He asked me if I wanted it to be like that for the rest of my life. I didn't need to answer. Through the emptiness and loneliness I felt His love and friendship and I knew where I wanted to be.

Since that time I have been helped so very much by the prayers of so many Christian friends. It is time to return that loving support and take it back to where it is needed. I have seen so many people who need prayer support at work and this is what the Order of St James is about.

I am not a 'good' Christian. I am hard put to keep a sure faith under some circumstances. I struggle with God at times even though I love Him in my own poor way. I have to trust Him because I do not understand so much about His nature, the world, faith, spirituality, love and suffering. There is a lot I find difficult.

However, I do know that God loves us all without condition and I know that prayer brings us closer to God and to each other. It is without question an act of love to pray for someone and it is such a simple thing to do.

John, chapter 4, verses 7 and 8,

'Beloved, let us love one another, for love is of God, and they that loveth, loveth God.....'.

We can show our love by praying for those God brings to us.

Little flowers and Sharp Thorns.

(Some things to ponder on.)

A man read and studied his bible for hours each day. One day, his very perceptive wife asked him which he loved more, God or the bible. The man had to think hard because he saw for the first time that there was a difference.

Prayer without love is like a having car without having the ignition keys.

Life without faith is like a marriage without love.

Faith without laughter is like a party where there are no guests.

True fellowship is wholly accepting of difference, asks for nothing but being present, and gives everything without being asked.

Draw close to God and He will draw close to you. (James 4:8) It is nice to snuggle in.

Two Christians were arguing whether a jug of water they had was half full or half empty. After a while, the discussion getting nowhere, they prayed for an answer. The answer to their prayers soon came. God told them to give the jug of water to someone who was thirsty and that way everyone would be happy.

Real wisdom is using what you know with love. It has nothing to do with intelligence.

A person without sight may see with their heart, but a sighted person without love can only see darkness.

Real mission is the art of just being yourself.

Offer your love to God that He may offer your love to others.

In discovering God's love you will find how to love yourself. When you find how to love yourself you will see where God has already been.

Prayer is sharing your life with God. There is nothing too small or insignificant enough to share with Him.

Each prayer, however small, is the perfect gift of your trust and love.

'Don't just listen to what I am saying, listen to what I am trying to say,' translates as 'Listen with your heart and not just your ears.'

Sometimes a hug, a touch, a smile, or a tear, can say much more than a whole library.

Being at peace is not being quiet, it is living life with the unshakeable certainty that God loves you whatever happens.

A confusion of words can make sense when spoken with love.

Nails for Easter

A meditation on the crucifixion.

The carpenter considered the task in hand
And chose three nails
Two pieces of rough hewn wood
And a good Traveller
Who spoke with loving honesty
With heavy stroke the nails were driven in
With sure purpose
They were not meant to be removed
But to forever stay
And fix mankind to God and God to mankind
It hurt
And innocent blood was spilled on innocent ground
By those with guilt
And the earth shuddered at such apparent savagery
In this act
Mankind was intent on pinning God down with nails
And wielding the hammer
Hammered them in
With uncompromising blows of jealous theological intent
Political necessity
And intellectual reasoning
And an unquenchable thirst for power and control
Then mankind held God up

To dark scorn and derision
For when God is dead there is no sin

The good traveller looked from his cross
Half way between earth and heaven
And knew the victors had lost
The defeated had won
The first had come last and the last had come first
Such irony
To give up ones life
Only to find it again in many
And see
The dead wood of the cross turn into the tree of life
Calvary become Eden
The road to hell become the path to Heaven
And the dark become light
Such irony
The carpenters work was true and good
The nails are still there
Holding mankind and God together
In a simple act
Binding me to you
You to me
And us to God

This book is made up of a collection of articles written over the last 20 years on prayer which are based on personal experience.

It is not intended to be a definition of what prayer is or how it is practiced.

Neither is it intended to be a theological treatise on prayer. I am no expert.

It is intended to be of some help and support to those who are concerned about aspects of prayer, those who perhaps may be uncertain or confused.

Everyone is different and expresses their love of God in their own unique way, and that means that forms of prayer may be quite individual.

That in itself can be quite unsettling, but just because these forms of prayers don't fit within our own personal experiences or 'church tradition' doesn't mean they are wrong.

It just means that they are different.

The important thing is that prayer works effectively.

Prayer is a great form of ministry that every Christian can be involved in and there is no mystery to its practice.

I hope that you will find some consolation, encouragement, support and clarification within these pages, and you come away feeling more secure in your prayer life.

Fr. Ian Walton, OSJ.

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