

# How to talk to God: Part 1

**Part 1 of a prayer course held at St Andrew's in June 2026, led by Rev. Alan Stewart**

*A candle burns – we light this candle as a sign of God's presence among us. A prayer.*

Tonight we're going to be thinking about what prayer is and what it does. Next week we will look at how God answers prayer and how we pray with all five of our senses. On our final week we will be thinking about the place of silence and meditation and the imagination and how we pray when God seems absent from our lives.

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

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

Whole libraries have been devoted to prayer, and we will only, of course, just scratch the surface over these three sessions. There are no experts - here we each have something uniquely insightful

to offer, whether we know that yet or not.

## **Why pray?**

Well, a simple answer is that it's good for us.

It can reduce stress and increase relaxation. It can quieten the mind and regulate our emotions. It can enhance our resilience and release the burden of worry. It can foster connection and a profound sense of hope. When we pray with others, it can combat loneliness and strengthen emotional health.

Now, if that's not an incentive to pray, I don't know what is!

But many of us struggle with prayer, for all kinds of reasons.

[Just turn to the person next to you and share (if you're happy to) any reasons why you or A N Other might struggle with prayer?]

These extremely honest words were written by the American priest and author Barbara Brown Taylor:

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

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

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

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

*'Pray (then) to what you can believe in... if you*

*believe in love, pray to Love, if you believe in truth, pray to Truth... because in time you may discover that Love is a person and Truth has a name.'*

Barbara Brown Taylor again writes:

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

## **Grandad's prayers of the earth**

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

It's called '*Grandad's Prayers of the Earth*' by

Douglas Wood:

<https://readwj.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/grandadc2b4s-prayers-of-the-earth-douglas-wood.pdf>

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

Another question...

## **How does prayer change us?**

Hold on to that question.

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

Thought for today contributor Brian Draper believes so:

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

*edges of bark on a tree.'*

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

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

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

Because, when we do, then life becomes a prayer.

Someone shared with me a quote many years ago and I can't remember who said it:

*'We are not here to make or say words of prayers*

*but to become prayer by living in and for God; ready to surrender to His call and His greater Glory’.*

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

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

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

## **Prayer as light**

You might have noticed that I didn't open with a 'prayer'; that is a spoken prayer. I lit a candle, as many people do in this church daily. We are symbolic beings, and the simple act of lighting a candle is an intentional prayer of holding in the light. Sometimes if I'm praying for someone, I simply imagine they are being bathed in a shaft of light.

## Prayer as oxygen

Prayer is the oxygen of our souls. It sustains us; in prayer we breathe in the breath of our God and our God breathes through us, bringing our imaginations, our compassion, our faith to life. Taking a breath can be a prayer for someone else. As we breathe in, we imagine we are holding what they are holding, and then as we breathe out, we release that to God.

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

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

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

Glorifying and enjoying God... prayer is learning

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

## **Prayer as trap**

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

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

## **Prayer is a two-way street;**

and it begins with our listening: 'What does God want me to pray for?', rather than, 'What should I be praying for?'

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

## **Prayer as mountain**

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

of what and how God sees.

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

## **Prayer as cooperation**

Prayer is a joint venture; a cooperation with God. In prayer, God works with us to bring about his shalom; his desire for the wholeness of all creation. That actually blows my mind.

God has limited himself to working with our prayers; that's how significant they are.

John Pritchard wrote:

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

Intercession, standing before God with the people on your heart, takes on, I think, another

dynamic; a new power when two or three gather in cooperation.

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

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

## **Prayer as protest**

The Psalms are among the most quoted, most loved of scripture; we go to them for solace and wisdom and an aid to worship. And yet we read them very selectively because, as I'm sure you've discovered, they also contain some of the most brutal passages in all of scripture. What do

we do then with what's called the Imprecatory Psalms - literally to pray evil against someone or invoke a curse upon? Here's, perhaps, the most famous and shocking example: Psalm 137. It's written in exile where the Jews have been carried off to Babylon: 'By the rivers of Babylon I sat down and wept....' This lament ends with these words, which, funnily enough, didn't make it into the Boney M classic: 'Happy is the one who seizes your infants and dashes them against the rocks'.

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

where can we be?

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

## **Prayer as gratitude**

Grace is everywhere; life is gift. Opening our eyes to the new born mercies of each morning will provoke an instinct within us to say 'Thank you'. When we give thanks, it is the completion of the grace. The gift is given, received, and the gratitude completes the circle. Cultivating gratitude transforms us – it releases an energy that blesses both giver and receiver. Gratitude changes our perspective into glass half full.

Gratitude is one of the great spiritual disciplines; even in the dullest or darkest of days, if we can only see the gift, the day is transformed. Some of you will be familiar with something called the Examen – there are many different variations, but one of the most helpful, I think, is at the end of our day to ask ourselves two questions: 'For what am I most grateful today?' and 'For what am I least grateful?'. These two questions uncover everything we need to take into prayer.

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

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

Prayer changes things, most profoundly it changes us... in prayer we can begin to stand in another's shoes; to feel what another feels. It is the beginning of true compassion and empathy

and sympathy and understanding. Prayer gives us bigger hearts - it increases love because, in prayer, we begin to feel what God feels. This tuning-in is what we were created for.

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

[Personal stories of prayer were then shared by Nicola (praying for the Middle East) and Claire (praying within crisis)]

## **Prayer of loving kindness**

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

Thank you for coming.