

How to talk to God: Part 2

Part 2 of a prayer course held at St Andrew's in June 2026, led by Rev. Alan Stewart

A candle burns – a symbol of God's presence

Last time, we were exploring images or different ways of looking at what prayer might be.

We were thinking about how God uses prayer first to change us, and then, through us, the world.

We explored how prayer can be life... how every action, every thought, every tear, every sigh can be prayer.

We looked at prayer as oxygen; without it our souls and churches starve; prayer as glorifying and enjoying God; prayer as trapping the thoughts of God; prayer as a two-way conversation between ourselves and God; prayer as the mountain from which we glimpse a different perspective; prayer as cooperating with the divine will; prayer as protest; and, finally, prayer as gratitude.

Tonight, we begin with the question:

‘Does God answer prayer and, if he does, how?’

Most prayers, of course, don’t need an answer, but many do. We will all have, at some time, called out to God for help - even atheists do that.

The singer Nick Cave, and one of the best theologians I know, begins one of his most beautiful songs with the words, ‘I don’t believe in an interventionist God...’.

And, I have to say, I understand why. In many ways, I would rather believe in a God who just doesn’t or can’t intervene, than in a God who arbitrarily, only sometimes does.

And yet, our scriptures tell the story of a God who becomes intimately involved in his creation.

So, a question:

‘Do you believe that God has ever answered your prayer?’

[Discussion]

Personally, I believe God always answers or perhaps to use a better word, responds. And I think there are at least four possible responses.

Yes, I can help with this.

No, I can't help (my hands are tied) or, no, I won't help – this is not my will.

Wait, the time is not yet right.

And depends... it depends on other factors, other people, perhaps it depends on you.

You see, God did not create robots, he created free beings capable of loving.

And God has chosen not to interfere with human free will.

His tactics are much more about wooing, and convicting and convincing. God is the Original Influencer!

He cannot make someone do something against their will, even in response to prayer.

So, often his answer must be ‘it depends’ – it depends on how open you or others are to this wooing... Are you willing to be part of the answer? Are you willing to change or forgive or help?

In speaking about answered prayer, Barbara Brown Taylor says:

‘The meaning we give to what happens in our lives is our final inviolable freedom. Only you can say whether God answered you.’

She goes on to say:

‘Are you still waiting for God to answer you, or is your life the answer you have been seeking; hiding in plain view?’

A rule of thumb – If you’re in a position to do something for someone else, that might just be the answer to their prayer.

There are times in all our lives when we do not know how to pray.

Those are the moments when I simply imagine that person, that situation, myself being held in light. Or I light a candle.

Or, sometimes, I pray in tongues. More about that later.

Often there are no words, but sometimes it helps if we can find a framework for the unspoken, or find some words that help us make sense of the senseless.

Sam Wells, the vicar of St Martin in the Fields, asks us to imagine a moment after church over coffee when we begin chatting to someone and just as we are about to break off the conversation, that person touches our arm and says, 'Say a prayer for my dad will you, he's not himself, the dementia's getting worse, he's disappearing before my eyes'. And, at that moment, you realise you are standing on holy ground, looking into the fear and heartbreak of your friend's soul.

And, instinctively, you say, 'Of course, of course I'll pray.'

But where do you start? How do we pray about such a slow burning tragedy?

Sam suggests that usually we pray in one of two ways:

The prayer of resurrection

The first, he calls the prayer of resurrection; 'God fix this, override the rules of this world, step in and make possible the impossible. Reverse this disease'. After all, resurrection - isn't this what our faith is built on? Should we not expect the miraculous? Isn't it a question of just having enough faith?

And a big part of us wants to pray like this, but we're afraid; afraid that we don't have enough faith; afraid of our hopes getting trashed.

The prayer of Incarnation

The second prayer he calls the prayer of Incarnation; 'God, in Jesus you shared our pain and sorrow and sheer bad luck. Jesus, you were broken and desolate and alone with no guarantees. Visit my friend now and sit with them, hold their hand and give them patience and hope to get them through the day and send companions to show you care'.

It's a prayer I find myself praying often. It's usually as far as my faith can stretch. I cannot bring myself to offer hope that may prove to be false. I trust that the simple knowledge that my friend is not alone might be enough. And in

praying, of course, for companions, I must be prepared myself to be a companion.

There is a third prayer, however, one Sam calls...

The prayer of transfiguration

The transfiguration, you might remember, is when the deeper truth about Jesus' nature is revealed to his friends on the mountain when his appearance changes. The prayer of transfiguration sounds like this:

'God, in your son's transfiguration we see a whole new reality within, beneath and beyond what we thought we understood. In their times of bewilderment and confusion, show my friend and her father that they may find a deeper truth to their life than they ever knew, make firmer friends than they ever had, find reasons for living beyond what they ever imagined and be folded into your grace like never before. Peel back the beauty and strength of their true humanity, transform and transfigure from this chaos and pain something new, something good, something of life.'

There are, I think, few prayers as powerful as the prayer of transfiguration.

It's not the prayer of 'Fix this and take it off my desk', nor 'Be with me and share this struggle'. It's a prayer which asks God to take us up the mountain, even if just for a moment, so that we can see beyond and know a deeper reality.

About ten years ago, the BBC aired a documentary called 'A time to Live', where 12 people shared their experience of living with a terminal diagnosis.

In these brief cameos we witnessed these remarkable, yet unremarkable, people discovering that they had more courage than they had ever thought; each finding a new wisdom for, and appreciation of, life. Each, despite the pain and heartache, found their world transfigured.

So, I want to pause there, because I am sure that we each know someone who needs the prayer of transfiguration; maybe that someone is you. So, I'd like to use a prayer written by Sam Wells, which we can, if we want, make our own.

'Make this trial and tragedy, this problem and pain, a glimpse of your glory, a window into your world, where I can see your face, sense the mystery in all things, and walk with angels and

saints. Bring me closer to you in this crisis than I have ever been in calmer times. Make this a moment of truth and, when I cower in fear and feel alone, touch me and raise me and make me alive like never before.'

Praying with the senses

In the beginning, God spoke and the world was:
Light and shadow, form and shape, colour and
smell, sound and movement;

Life in all its richness and complexity.

He breathed and from the dust, created
humanity.

And God's imprint was upon all he made.

In humanity, scripture suggests that his truest
image to be found;

Imago Dei, every one of us - images of God;
Literally icons of God.

And when the time was right

The Creator himself became the created

The Word took flesh

The invisible became visible

The intangible, tangible

God with hands and feet, eyes and ears, his own
unique fingerprints and voice patterns and smell

The truest human, the truest icon

Truly in fellowship with the Father.

If we think about our encounters, our relationships, only a few small percent of our communication, as we said last week, is verbal. Our body language, our gestures, our eyes, our touch, even our smell speak louder than words. With our whole selves, with all our working senses we communicate but...

Imagine a relationship conducted only via the internet, with only written words or photographs - loving only with our sight.

Imagine a relationship conducted only via telephone; loving only with our hearing.

Imagine loving but never touching or smelling— as if through prison glass.

Imagine loving, but never tasting the meals someone lovingly prepares.

So, imagine loving God with all that we are, through words, through touch, through sound, through image, smell, even through taste.

That's the territory I'd like to explore in what remains of our time.

Now, usually we close our eyes to ‘pray’, but my invitation to begin with tonight is for us to open them, both our physical eyes and the eyes of our soul.

Sight

One of my favourite films is *American Beauty*.

Two of the central characters are teenage misfits living in dysfunctional families in a comfortable American suburb, where nothing is as it first appears.

The young man, Ricky, has a troubled past, and currently deals in drugs to fund his passion for making films; and he films almost everything he sees, including his next-door neighbour, Jane. At first, she’s uncomfortable about this stalker, but, over time, she learns to trust him.

In one of their first conversations, Ricky asks Jane, ‘Do you want to see the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen?’.

The camera switches to them both watching a TV screen.

And, there on the screen, is a plastic bag dancing in the wind.

‘It was one of those days when it was minutes away from snowing,’ says Ricky, ‘And there’s this electricity in the air. You can about hear it, right? And this bag was just... dancing with me. Like a little kid begging me to play with it. For 15 minutes. That’s the day I realised that there’s this entire life behind things and this incredible benevolent force that wanted me to know that there was no reason to be afraid... ever.’

He goes on to say ‘when you see something like that. It’s like God looking right at you, just for second. And if you’re careful, you can look right back.’

‘And what did you see?’, asks Jane.

‘Beauty.’

Some of you will be familiar with the work of Dennis Potter, the playwright of *Singing Detective* fame.

I don’t know if you saw his last interview with Melvyn Bragg before he died.

He has terminal cancer and was speaking very near the end. Occasionally, he would have to stop filming to take liquid morphine.

In one of his most lucid moments, he says this: *'Below my window where I'm working, at this season the blossom is out in full now... it's a plum tree. It looks like apple blossom but it's white, and, looking at it, instead of saying 'Oh that's nice blossom'... last week looking at it through the window when I'm writing, I see it is the whitest, frothiest, blossomest blossom that ever there could be, and I see it. Things are both more trivial than they ever were, and more important than they ever were, and the difference between the trivial and the important doesn't seem to matter. But the nowness of everything is absolutely wondrous, and if people could see that, you know. There's no way of telling you, you have to experience it, but the glory of it, if you like, the comfort of it, the reassurance... the fact is, if you see the present tense, boy, do you see it. And boy, can you celebrate it.'*

God speaking through a plastic bag, through the blossom of a tree.

Epiphanies, moments when the eyes of our souls open and we see. We see the present tense.

This beauty, this 'nowness', this comfort and reassurance, this life behind things, this benevolent force.

God is always communicating if only we slow down to look.

Although neither the writer of American Beauty or Dennis Potter might have known it, they were both talking about what Christians sometimes call the sacrament of the present moment.

A sacrament, you'll know, is an outward and visible sign of God's presence and grace.

We live in a sacramental universe where God communicates his grace through the tangible and the visible as much as through the intangible and invisible.

Everything is alive with God, if only we have eyes to see.

Beauty, grace is everywhere.

But we have to learn to stop, to look, to see.

In Christian worship, particularly in the Orthodox Church, Icons are usually images of saints or holy people, or events from the gospels, used as windows onto eternity. You'll find two in the chapel here in church, one of which a copy of this very famous one by Rublev. In itself an icon is as visible and real as anything in everyday life, but it also reveals another invisible dimension. These traditional icons are not intended to be works of art, but channels for prayer.

They're not worshipped; they're venerated. That is, they're treated with reverence because they point us to God.

Rowan Williams tells us that icons point the way, invite us to follow a journey, to engage in a pilgrimage. They help us cross borders to enter a new and transfigured world.

They're like a threshold in other words, where we can glimpse, or even enter, that greater reality of the Spirit world.

This is a contemporary icon. Has anyone seen it before?

It's a variation on the pieta – you might know the Michelangelo statue of the pieta, Mary holding the limp dead body of her son, after he has been taken down from the cross.

I'm not going to say any more about this one except to give you its title. It's called 'The AIDS pieta'.

I'm going to leave you with this image for a few minutes, during which time I invite you again to just sit and wait with it, and ask, 'What is God saying to me through this?'. 'What can I glimpse through this window into God?'

[Silence and then thoughts shared]

This icon was painted by Frances Meigh.

The young man with AIDS, a modern-day Untouchable, rests in the arms of Jesus.

In the background is the cross, upon which Jesus stretched out his arms to all those who are expelled.

In scripture, we are reminded that we are the

body of Christ. Here, where traditionally Christ's body lies, is someone with AIDS.

The Body of Christ has AIDS.

Touch

One of the most powerful ways in which we touch God, and God touches us, is through the touch of others; a held hand, an embrace, sometimes, perhaps, through what we call the laying on of hands.

This is where one person lays their hands upon another's head or shoulder, and asks that God would channel his love and healing for that person through the prayer of touch. It's often associated with healing and with blessing and with commissioning, and often comes with an anointing with oil.

An anonymous quote:

'People throughout the ages have known what many of us are reclaiming – the things we touch and see can bring the unseen near.'

Over the centuries, Christians have used touch to bring the unseen near; from touching their

forehead to an icon, to praying the bead or rosary.

Brendan O'Malley says:

'The repetitive prayer used when praying with rosaries acts as an anchor with which we focus the thoughts and still the mind, helping the person praying to remain at the still point where true prayer is to be found in the cell of the heart.'

The word 'rosary' is thought to be derived from 'garland of roses'; the string of prayers. A Rosarium is a rose garden; a place for contemplation. Sometimes beads are actually made from crushed roses, which give off an aroma.

The word 'bead' or 'bede' means prayer, and each bead represents a prayer.

A powerful and simple prayer of touch is to cross ourselves. We touch the centre of our forehead: 'God be in my head'. We then touch the centre of our chest: 'God be in my heart'. And then we touch to our right and then left: 'God be on my right and my left'.

Some of you have one of these - a holding cross.

It's made of wood and is designed to be held in the palm of the hand. Simply to hold something like this is in itself a prayer.

A lady I knew in my last parish, who had a history of mental illness following the death of her son, used to take one everywhere, sleep with it under her pillow, hold on to it when the pain and anguish felt too much. As she held, it held her.

Each of you will, I hope, be in possession of a stone. Can I ask you to take it in your hand.

We're going to use these stones to help us to pray.

So can I now ask you to close your eyes.

Take a moment to feel its contours and shape, its weight and temperature.

*What I hold in my hand is as old as me and older
As old as my name, my language, my culture
And older
As old as the soil
As old as the sea*

*And older
As old as the earth
As old as the sun, moon and stars
But younger than God
For God made this stone
Made and meant its colour
Its contours, its journey from below to above
And had earth never revealed it
And had I never admired it
It would still bear witness
To God's deep intention to make the world
Mean the world
Want the world
And one day, walk the world
And hold in his hand, what I now hold in mine*

Imagine now that the stone you are holding is whatever is heavy in your life at this time.

Maybe you feel the weight of loss or loneliness; the weight of concern or conscience.

[Silence]

Now imagine that God is asking: Will you let me hold this for you? Will you for a moment let me share its weight? If relevant, will you let me take it away?

Consider this invitation – are you willing, are you ready to let God hold this with you, for you, take it from you? If you are, in your own time hand it to him by placing it in front of you on the ledge of the pew.

How does that feel, to share this with God?

In the silence, listen; does God want to say anything to you? Maybe in picture language, maybe in a thought that stirs within you?

In a moment it will be time to decide if you want to take back the stone.

You can leave it where it is or you can choose to take it away, knowing that God is helping you carry it. And there might come a time when you can fully let go.

In a moment, when the bell rings, it will be time to open our eyes.

Hearing

We've just heard a bell. In some traditions, a bell is rung to make us pause (a little like the bell in communion here). It's a moment to stop and

simply be, be mindful, awake to the presence of God, the sacrament of the present.

God speaks, but how?

Have a chat with your neighbour... [Discussion]

Often, it's through the voice of another, or within our conscience, through scripture perhaps, or through an image in our mind's eye, through one of those 'god-incidences'.

What about our physical hearing; how might that help us to pray?

I'd like us to listen to a chant. Many of you will have heard of the Taizé community who have created simple chants designed to be sung over and over, so that with time they might find their way from our heads to our hearts. We're going to listen to one of those chants. If you understand Latin, you have a head start.

Just let the chant wash over you

[Taizé chant '*in manus tuas pater commendo spiritum meum*' played]

'Into your hands, Father, I commend my spirit'

Did we need to know what the words mean? Probably not. There was something about the melody, the chords, the harmonies that were enough of a prayer.

Music, with or without words, can transport us, can draw us into prayer. And it doesn't have to be 'religious'. I find all kinds of songs and music are like prayers. One in particular is a Bulgarian Folk song about the harvest but the harmonies transport me to another place.

For some, singing is as St Augustine once said, 'praying twice'.

Another powerful form of prayer is speaking in tongues; a heavenly language, gifted not learned, where the Spirit prays through us often when there are no words. It's a spiritual gift which we are free to ask for. It's something we have power over, and helps me enormously.

If you want to know more about that have a word with me sometime.

There is great value to learning words by heart. When we used to have our service for those living with dementia, often there was little or no

response until I begin the words, 'Our father, who art in heaven', and suddenly they are here, praying along or singing along to a hymn that unlocks something deeply buried.

Words memorised become a treasure mine from which to draw in more difficult times.

Taste and smell

What's your favourite taste or smell, and can you say why?

Taste and smell are intimately related, as you know.

One of the most obvious prayers of taste comes when we remember with wine and bread, the body and blood.

This, for many, is the most intimate moment of communion with God. Many sense something of the real presence of Christ in these ordinary things.

In the incarnation, God took human skin and still he continues to reveal himself through elements – bread, wine, water, fire, earth, incense...

Just as we watch the smoke rise, so we are reminded of prayer rising to God.

Just as the incense has a sweet smell, so we are reminded that to God our prayers are sweet.

The Psalms are full of images of taste.

Taste and see that the Lord is good.

And that goodness is often associated with honey – the sweetness of God and banquets of wonderful food – the extravagant generosity of God.

But they also speaks of the opposite. Hunger and thirst for a sense of God's presence.

The bitterness of tears.

The bitter herbs used in the Passover meal to symbolise the pain of a people's history.

We can use these senses in our prayers.

By slowing down to really taste our food, give it our full attention, savouring each mouthful, we learn a new gratitude.

When we taste something bitter, we can use that moment to call to mind the bitterness of life; something salty, we can remember our tears or the tears of others. When we taste something sweet, we can remember the sweetness of life.

[Personal stories of prayer were then shared by Petra ('How do I pray when I'm in pain?') and Maria ('How do I pray?']

Taste and smell Let's end with a spoken prayer by John Philip Newell

Whichever way we turn,
O God, there is your face
In the light of moon and patterns of stars
In scarred mountain rifts and ancient groves
In mighty seas and creatures of the deep.
Whichever way we turn,
O God, there is your face
In the light of eyes we love
In the salt of tears we have tasted
In weathered countenances east and west
In the soft skin glow of the child everywhere.
Whichever way we turn, O Lord, there is your face,
There is your face among us.

Thank you for coming.