

How to talk to God: Part 3

Part 3 of a prayer course held at St Andrew's in June 2026, led by Rev. Alan Stewart

A candle burns, a visible sign of the Invisible Presence; Father, Son and Spirit, we welcome you.

I wanted to begin by sharing with you another image of prayer to add to those we spoke about on our first session. It's from Nadia Bolz-Weber in response to a question someone asked about how to pray for a friend in a terrible situation.

She writes:

'These prayers we send up for our beloveds are like gossamer threads connecting us to them through God, and we become connected to God through that person. And I believe that it is in these connections God gets stuff done. Maybe these gossamer threads of prayer, woven through the space and time of our lives, are one of the networks through which God sends out God's own love for the world.

'I'm sorry your friend is in a terrible situation, but holy

shit is it a powerful thing that she has you praying for her. Don't worry about doing it right. It is the doing it that counts.'

I love that.

Here's another quote which I think, sums up much of what we'll be thinking about tonight.

**'God speaks in the silence of the heart.
Listening is the beginning of prayer.'**

For the keen-eyed among you, you'll see that whoever posted this, attributes this profound statement to none other than pop star Justin Bieber.

I can, however confirm that, although I'm sure Justin has a wisdom beyond his years, it was first said by Mother Theresa.

God speaks in the silence of the heart.

In silence God speaks.

Before we talk about silence, I'd first like to explore a little about the rhythm of prayer. I'm the first to put my

hand up and say that I am a chaotic pray-er. I prefer the word 'organic' myself, but really my prayer life is often very hit and miss.

Finding a pattern to our prayers, a regular rhythm, can sustain us.

Some use what we call a daily office. Don't tell the bishop, but I prefer the Northumbria Community's daily prayer to the C of E's! The poetry and earthiness of the words resonate very deeply with me.

It begins with some words of approach, offering up ourselves, placing Christ at the centre, then moves on to some short readings from the Bible and a set reflection for the day, then leads us through a pattern of prayer for others and ends with a blessing.

I know that when I make space in my day for that regular rhythm, even though sometimes it feels like a chore, like I'm going through motions, it embeds words of scripture within me; it fuels me. And in those moments of intentional openness, I find people popping into my mind's eye to pray for. And occasionally, I'll drop them a little message to say so. And it shouldn't of course be a surprise but it's often uncanny just how much that means to that person at

that particular time.

When we soak ourselves in regular prayer, sometimes it's not until later that we begin to understand its cumulative impact on ourselves and others.

Finding your own rhythm is really important – where are the moments when it is possible to stop in your day? Even if it is just for a moment, can you set your phone to help you remember to simply to stop and be present and give thanks?

When are you most awake? Are you a morning person or a night owl? Where will you most be able to focus? The shower, the car, a certain place in the house, walking the dog?

We live in such distracted times; everywhere we are surrounded by noise and images that fight for our attention; we prefer to be busy or entertained than to look at the shape of our souls.

Most of us live our lives in our heads; in what was and what will be, and we miss the great 'what is'. After all, when God revealed his name to Moses he said, 'Tell them 'I am' sent you'.

That name tells us everything – God is the eternally Present... not ‘I was’, or ‘I will be’, but ‘I am’.

God is only ever to be found in this moment and this; the grace of now, the sacrament of the present moment.

The secret of all spirituality is waking up, becoming fully aware of what is. Mindfulness teaches us to be present to our bodies. Meditation allows us to enter the soul. Some of you might have seen a programme a good few years ago called The Big Silence, where a group of men, some religious, some not, spent time immersed in the rhythms of a Benedictine monastery. Abbot Christopher Jamieson said to the men, ‘Silence is the doorway to the soul; the soul is the doorway to God’.

Not all of us, however, find silence easy.

A question:

‘How do you feel about silence?’

Silences between two people can be excruciating or awkward, or golden; where simply being in one another’s presence is enough. Silence with God can

also be both. We will encounter boredom, or frustration; equally we can encounter a presence that transforms us.

Someone once said that, 'We are what we do with our silence'.

In other words, silence will make us, will deepen us, will reveal to us more than we know.

Silence is the great teacher; it uncovers our depths; often those things we have long buried.

That's why we sometimes fear silence; even sometimes in our public worship we feel the need to fill up all the silences.

We need to recapture silence, because our life's work is to be awake to who we are and to who God is.

When teaching about prayer Jesus said, 'Go into your private room and shut the door'. Now most people in that time of communal living didn't have a private space; Jesus here, I believe, is talking about retreating into the soul.

There's a famous story of the Desert Fathers, that group of men and women who, in the 3rd C AD, went

into the Egyptian Desert to pray.

It concerns a young man who wants to become a monk.

So, he approaches the Abbot, who sent him off to his cell, a small room with only one bed a Bible and a chair.

And all the Abbott says is, 'Your cell will teach you everything'.

Well, at first, he's delighted.

Peace and quiet – no distractions.

And he settles down to pray. A few minutes pass and he starts to daydream.

He starts thinking about what he's left behind, what his friends would be doing now, about that girl in the village he has a bit of a thing for.

So, he goes to the Abbot and says, 'I can't pray, I keep getting distracted'. 'Go to your cell, my son, your cell will teach you everything.'

So back he goes.

This time he starts getting hungry, he starts thinking about when dinner will be. He can't stop thinking about food.

So off he goes again to the Abbot. 'Something's wrong, I can't pray, I can't stop thinking about food'.

'Go back to your cell, my son, your cell will teach you everything.'

Back he goes for a third time.

This time, all these buried painful memories begin to surface, his inner ghosts or monsters really begin to haunt him.

And again, he goes to the very patient Abbot.

'Go back to your cell, my son, your cell will teach you everything.'

Eventually, the young man persevered, pushed through the distractions, the 'monsters', the silence and he found a place, a quiet place in his soul, in which to pray.

Some of you know that I went on a five-day silent

retreat last year, by mistake! Silent meals, limited phone use, the only times I spoke was with the retreat conductor for an hour in the morning and to join in with the four daily services of prayer.

I can fully relate to the young man in the story. At first, it felt like a spacious luxury. I could feel my whole body relax and just 'be'. Sitting in the chapel or on a bench overlooking a field, or in the little hut called a Poustinia (Russian for 'desert'), I relaxed into a time of no responsibility. And it's in those moments that we begin to realise what we have been carrying around in our bodies.

And then I started to get bored and twitchy. I realised how I've become so reliant to distraction. I wanted to reach for my phone and disappear into a few hours of mindless doom-scrolling. I felt lonely. So, I took walks and one day, drove to Holy Island. And around day three, I began to go deep into my past. One or two monsters visited. I began to feel convicted, particularly about four different relationships that needed attention or repair. In the silence, in God's time, God was surfacing some of the stuff that together we could now look at honestly. In the silence, God was gently opening my heart, tenderising it, enabling me to be vulnerable. And on the last day we all shared communion together, and

afterwards, one of the leaders sought me out and spoke the most incredible prophetic words of affirmation and encouragement I have ever received. It was hugely healing, particularly of the internalised homophobia I've carried all my life. And after that I had to get in the car and drive back from Northumbria. And for about an hour I wept as I drove as my body released all this stuff that had clung to me for so long.

In the book of Hosea chapter 2 verse 14, God says, '*I will bring her into the desert and speak to her heart.*'

Silence speaks to the heart

When we try to still our minds and be silent, we will be distracted; that's what minds do. And so, one of the fundamental principles, I think, of silence and meditation is to be kind to ourselves; not to beat ourselves up that we're rubbish at this. It's called *a practise* after all!

3-minute mindfulness

Mindfulness is about being fully awake or mindful to the present moment. I'd like to lead us in a short exercise.

So, let's find a position that is both comfortable and alert. Good to let our shoulder drop and our faces relax. Good to have both feet anchored to the ground and to close our eyes.

Take a few deeper cleansing breaths, in through the nose and out through that mouth.

Let your breath find its natural rhythm and try to bring all your attention to the breath. Notice all the sensations around your nose as the air enters and leaves.

In those moments when our minds wander, which is what minds do, we just escort our attention back to the breath, the anchor to this present moment.

As we sit with the breath, I'd like to speak a little about contemplative prayer, often called "silent gazing on God". It is a Christian spiritual discipline of deep silence and intimate union. Instead of reciting requests, we sit quietly to behold God and allow ourselves to be held by Him. It moves beyond words, focusing simply on being in God's presence. It's relational rather than transactional, not about asking for favours or reciting lists, it's simply about spending time with God.

The practice requires letting go of everyday mental chatter to create an active, receptive silence.

By dwelling in this stillness, we open ourselves to experiencing God's profound love, shifting our mindset, and fostering a deep compassion.

Find a Sacred Space. Sit comfortably in a quiet, secluded place where you won't be interrupted.
Centre Yourself: Relax your muscles and become aware of your breathing.

Set Your Intention: Express your desire to love God for His own sake. You may choose a simple prayer word (like "Jesus" or "Peace") to gently anchor your mind and guide your focus.

In a moment the bells will ring...

[Bells ring.]

Lectio Divina

Last week we touched upon something called Visio divina... literally 'holy looking'; taking an image and sitting with it until it speaks. You might also have heard of Lectio Divina... literally 'holy reading'; taking

a chunk of scripture and sitting with it, chewing over it, allowing the Spirit to speak.

You would first read a passage and just let it flow over you.

Then you'd read it again, this time more slowly, asking yourself 'What word or phrase sings or jumps or speaks to me?'

If nothing comes, read the passage again.

And if again nothing comes, that's OK

If you do sense something, then take it into a few moments of silence, asking yourself 'What does this mean for me?' Chew over that word or words for as long as you need to. And then, finally, read the passage again... and silently ask that whatever the revelation was for you might take up residency within your heart and imagination.

Which brings us to what some people call our sixth sense – praying with the imagination.

I'd like to lead us in what is sometimes called an Ignatian Exercise.

It's a deeply personal two-way conversation with God grounded in scripture.

It's an approach to prayer and Bible study which engages all the senses and emotions.

Meditation – Bartimaeus

You are walking along a busy city street, when suddenly you are caught up in a great crowd of people heading towards the city gates. Someone important is about to arrive.

You join the crowd.

As you pass through the gates of the city, you see an entourage approaching and, there in the thick of things, is Jesus.... What do you notice about him?

The crowds are excited, this might just be a once in a lifetime opportunity to meet the long awaited Messiah.

Above the noise of the crowd, you begin to hear a single voice yelling from behind you, 'Jesus, Son of David, have mercy'.

You look for the source of the voice and, there, sat by the gates, is a beggar. What do you notice about him?

The people near him tell him to shut up, someone even spits in his direction, but he shouts even louder, 'Jesus, Son of David, have mercy'.

'Who is he?', you ask a person near you. 'That's Bartimaeus, Son of Filth', they jeer.

Everything suddenly goes quiet. Jesus has stopped and has asked for an audience with the beggar. The crowds can't believe it, they feel insulted. In fact, Jesus now asks them to escort the beggar to him.

'Get up', someone says 'It's your lucky day; he actually wants to meet you.'

They manhandle Bartimaeus towards Jesus, and when they come face-to-face there's a moment of silence, until Jesus asks,

'What do you want me to do for you?'

That's a stupid question, you think to yourself.

'I want to see again', replies the beggar.

‘Are you sure?’ asks Jesus.

Bartimaeus thinks for a few seconds and says, ‘Yes, I’m sure.’ ‘Your faith has healed you,’ says Jesus. And at that exact moment, Bartimaeus’s eyes are opened to the brightest, newest, strangest of worlds, from darkness to light, like being born. Blinking, he raises his hands to his eyes until, slowly, they become accustomed.

And now that Bartimaeus can see, he can, of course, no longer beg. And, yet, he has no skills, served no apprenticeship, his livelihood has gone. Now you understand Jesus’s question - ‘Are you sure?’.

You watch as Jesus moves on, Bartimaeus following afterwards, eyes wide with wonder and raised in praise to God.

As Jesus passes by, he suddenly stops and, turning, looks back at you, and using your name, he asks, ‘And what do you want me to do for you?’.

Think for a moment... What do you want Jesus to do for you?

Are you sure?

Share your thoughts with him now.

Jesus speaks again, 'And what will you do for me?'
Stay with that question.

It will soon be time to leave that place.

Take whatever time you need.

Will you allow prayer to breathe through you?

We have, in these past few weeks, only scratched the surface of prayer. Prayer is this extraordinary adventure with God. I hope you have found something to help you in your adventures.

I hope that your and my desire for prayer is increasing; if not, that's the place to start... with the prayer 'Lord, excite me'.

Brother Roger of Taizé once said 'When the church becomes a house of prayer, the people will come, running'.

If we want the church to grow, more importantly the Kingdom to come, will we invest in this life giving, life

changing lifeline we call prayer?

Will you allow prayer to breathe through you?

If so, consider how you will develop your own rhythm of praying.

I would challenge folk from St Mary's and St Andrew's to come along once a month to Breathe, our prayer gathering, in person and online. You won't be asked to pray aloud. Your presence is enough.

We're going to end in a moment with a short compline or night prayer.

But, before we do, some stories of prayer...

[Personal stories of prayer were then shared by Adrian and Stephane.]

'God is counting on you'

I once spent a weekend with a Christian group called Cursillo.

On the last evening, each of us received a blessing with these words:

'God is counting on you.'

And our response, **'And I on him.'**

God is counting on you cooperating with him in prayer so that the whole world might know his shalom, his saving presence.

Thank you for coming. Travel well. Amen.