

## 1. Exploring Prayer: 'Knowing God's Love'



I have titled these sessions *exploring prayer*, because it's an exploration – a discovery, perhaps a re-discovery, of what prayer might be for us. I'm inviting you to join me on this journey. I don't claim to be an expert on prayer. What I am, as you are, is a beloved child of God – a son, a daughter of God – who wants to grow in that love, to be shaped and transformed by it, and be able to share it with others.

But before we go anywhere take a moment to be still, because God has something to say to you. It comes through the words of Isaiah:

You are precious in my eyes... and honoured, and I love you.

Take those words in.... Hear them again for they are addressed to you.

You are precious in my eyes... and honoured, and I love you.<sup>1</sup>

How do those words touch you? Do they touch you at all? Perhaps they're just words. Do they trigger some experience? Take a moment to simply acknowledge what they mean to you. As you do so avoid judging yourself or being self-critical.

Those words take us to the heart of what it means to be a Christian. Our baptismal liturgy starts with this statement:

God is love. God gives us life.

We love because God first loves us.

In baptism God declares that love;

in Christ God calls us to respond.<sup>2</sup>

'Prayer is', as the Catechism says, 'our response to God's love.'<sup>3</sup> Indeed, our whole life is a response. It's about being an agent of God's love, of making that love real wherever we are. But if we want to love others, we must first know that we are loved. If we want to value others then we must first know that we are valued. If we want to care for others then we must first know that we are cared for.

We can put that another way. Prayer is the way God has given us so that we can be in relationship with God, and so that we can be in relationship with our neighbours:

A lawyer asked Jesus

Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?' He said to him, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: "You shall love your neighbour as yourself."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Isaiah 43:4

<sup>2</sup> ANZPB, p. 383

<sup>3</sup> ANZPB, p. 934, Q. 53

<sup>4</sup> Matthew 22:35-40

We pray because we love God, and because we want to be more and more Christ-like. Mother Mary Clare describes prayer as ‘essentially a love affair with God, not schemes or techniques or ways of prayer, but the most direct open approach of each of one us as a person to God our Creator, Redeemer and Sanctifier – beyond all methods or ideas.’<sup>5</sup> Because prayer is a love affair, that means prayer is a two-way thing. When we love someone, anyone, we want to speak with them, but also listen to them. And because we love them, we listen deeply and carefully. Prayer is no different, and no less challenging, because God, to whom we are seeking to listen, is not physically present in front of us.

Paul said that it’s more blessed to give than to receive. But I wonder if you’re like me, and find it easier to give than to receive? And yet, knowing God’s love and being able to receive it is the starting point for prayer – the starting point for Christian life. The First Letter of John describes God very simply, yet profoundly: ‘God is love!’<sup>6</sup> Not, God has love, but God *is* love. This is the very nature of God. God is love and God can only love. And because this is God’s nature, this is all God can do... to love.

Some times we find that hard to take in, but a comparison may help. The sun gives off warmth and light. The sun always shines and always radiates its warmth and light. We can stand under the sun and allow its warmth to make us warm. We can allow its light to fill our senses and surroundings with light. However, we can also separate ourselves from the sun. We can put up a sun umbrella, cover our head, or even lock ourselves in a dark room where the sun can’t possibly reach us. Whatever we do, whether we stand in the sun or separate ourselves from it, we know that the sun itself doesn’t change. The sun doesn’t ‘go out’ if we lock ourselves in the dark room. So it is with God. We can be separated from God’s love; we can leave God, just as we can leave the warmth and the light of the sun; but God, like the sun, doesn’t change because we go away. The warmth of God’s love is always there for us. Just as the sun always invites us to return to its warming and enlightening rays, so God is forever inviting us to return, even when we have distanced ourselves from the reaches of God’s love. We can *refuse* the love of God but we can never *lose* the love of God.

One day Jesus was praying and after he’d finished, one of his disciples said to him,  
Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples.

He said to them, “When you pray, say: Father...”<sup>7</sup>

The Hebrew name for God was YHWH – a name so deeply revered that it was never pronounced. So the Jews substituted the word *Adonai* - *my Lord*. But Jesus dared to

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<sup>5</sup> Mother Mary Clare SLG, *Learning to Pray* (SLG PRESS, Convent of the Incarnation, Fairacres, 1970)

p.10

<sup>6</sup> 1 John 4:8

<sup>7</sup> Luke 11:1-2

use the Aramaic *Abba* meaning *Daddy*. It's a word that points to God's approachability and to the conviction that our relationship with God rests on God's care, concern and continual support. It expresses things like confidence, belonging, trust, safety, and most of all, intimacy. Joyce Huggett recounts an experience while travelling on a bus from the Sea of Galilee to a town in the hills.

On the seat near where I stood, a little Jewish boy was sitting on his father's knee. I watched him look into his father's face, stroke his cheek and whisper, 'Abba' before snuggling into his father's arms where he fell asleep. There, on the bus, I sensed I understood that one reason Jesus invited us to call God, 'Abba', 'Daddy', was the he wanted us to enjoy the kind of intimacy with God this small boy was enjoying with his father - the kind of closeness Jesus enjoyed with God.

To speak of God as Father reminds us that there exists a unique, unbreakable relationship that God has called us into. Prayer is all about relationship. The Psalmist says:

I have held my soul in peace and in silence as a child in its mother's arms.<sup>8</sup>

Jesus is saying that God is inviting us to enjoy an intimate relationship, a relationship in which we, the loved one, can look to God the initiator of all love, at any time and in any place, and rest assured that we are totally loved and accepted and treasured and cared for. As Saint Augustine remarked, "God loves each of us as if there was only one of us to love."

Returning to the disciples' request, note what they actually asked of Jesus. They didn't ask for 'a prayer', rather, 'teach us to pray.' And Jesus replied, 'When you pray, say...' Jesus is teaching us what it means to be God's children, and also giving us a pattern for all prayer. It's not a 'how-to' on prayer, but a pattern for a prayerful life. It shows us the essence of prayer, and of all Christian life, because prayer is how we allow ourselves to be drawn into this loving relationship with God.

Finally, prayer comes from God. It's God acting in us. God gives us both the desire the pray, and the means to pray. Paul, writing to the Romans explains:

Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words.<sup>9</sup>

When we pray we're sharing in the life of the Holy Trinity – we pray because the Holy Spirit prays within us. Our job is to be in touch with the movings of the Spirit within us, to make space, time and give value to God's call to us to pray. But also, the very fact we want to pray (even though we may feel we aren't very good at it) is a sign that the Spirit is working in our lives. So be encouraged!

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<sup>8</sup> Ps 131:2 (NJB)

<sup>9</sup> Romans 8:26

### **Experiencing:**

Be still, get comfortable, with nothing on your lap – hands on thighs, palms open (indicating your availability to receive).

Notice your breathing

Breathing is often used as the base of prayer.

The word *spirit* and the word *breathing* come from the same root.

Our breath goes deep down inside us.

It affects every cell in the body, and reflects and alters our feelings.

So notice your breathing, and gradually make it deeper and deeper, slower and slower.

As you breathe in, say to yourself

“Abba, (or God, or Father, or Mother) I receive your love” ... again and again...

Receive God’s love.

Breathe it in with each breath.

Receive this love that is totally non-judgemental and totally accepting.

As you breathe out let go of any tension, hurt or worry.

Let go of anything that is preventing you from receiving God’s love.

Let those things go with a gentle sigh, and simply be still with what God is giving you.

But now thus says the LORD, the one who created you ..., who formed you...

Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;

I have called you by name, you are mine.

When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;

and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;

when you walk through fire you shall not be burned,

and the flame shall not consume you.

For I am the LORD your God,

the Holy One of Israel, your Saviour....

You are precious in my sight, and honoured, and I love you ...

Do not fear, for I am with you... (Isaiah 43:1-5)

God says:

Can a woman forget her nursing child,

or show no compassion for the child of her womb?

Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you.

See, I have inscribed you on the palms of my hands. (Isaiah 49:15-16)

## ***For Further Exploration***



### ***Abbé de Tourville***

Accustom yourself to the wonderful thought that God loves you with tenderness, a generosity, and an intimacy which surpasses all your dreams. Give yourself up with joy to a loving confidence in God and have courage to believe firmly that's God's action towards you is a masterpiece of partiality and love... Rejoice that you are what you are; for our Lord loves you very dearly. He loves the whole of you, just as you are.

### ***Julian of Norwich***

And he showed me more, a little thing, the size of a hazelnut, on the palm of my hand, round like a ball. I looked at it thoughtfully and wondered, 'What is this?' And the answer came, 'It is all that is made.' I marvelled that it continued to exist and did not suddenly disintegrate; it was so small. And again my mind supplied the answer, 'It exists, both now and for ever, because God loves it.' In short, everything owes its existence to the love of God.

In this 'little thing' I saw three truths. The first is that God made it; the second that God loves it; the third that God sustains it.

### ***Dame Janet Baker***

What is emerging and is so marvellous is the feeling of being wholly loved. I suppose when I lost my mother I lost that feeling. I have marvellous other loves – my husband, my father, very special friends – so I'm not short of love by any means. My mother's love was always very important to me and it was removed, so I suppose I was searching for a substitute. Now I'm beginning to realise there is no love in the outside world which can provide you with the sense of being totally loved except the Christ love. There is no other base on which you can walk forward into the dark. But it's a relatively new thing to discover this divine love within, love which sees you at every moment, every second of the day, and which accepts you as you are. I now have so much more confidence in myself as a person and as a performer because I feel totally loved within. And because I am beginning to learn to love myself as I am, I hope very much I am beginning to love my neighbour. I think, for me, it has to work in that direction.

**Hosea 11:1-4** (as you read and pray this passage, insert your name)

When ... was a child, I loved him/her  
And I called my son/daughter  
I myself, taught ... to walk  
I myself took him/her up in my arms  
but he/she did not know that I was the one caring for him/her  
that I was leading him/her with cords of human kindness  
with leading bands of love  
that with him/her I was like someone lifting an infant to his cheek  
and that I bent down to feed him/her.

**Carlo Corretto**

If God is my father [or mother], I can be calm and live in peace;  
I am secure for life, for death, for time and for eternity...  
If God is my father [or mother],  
I count for something and in God find my own true dignity...  
God is the God of the universe,  
even when the earth quakes and the rivers overflow,  
and God is my father [or mother],  
even if my hands get frost-bite and an accident makes me cripple for life.

*Alister Hendery*

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