

Lent Course 2009

Prayer for Lovers

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Version 1.1

January 2009

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Introduction - "How Do I Pray?"

"Pray to him daily" - Psalm 72.15

This Lent course was written in response to requests from church-going friends who made observations such as: "I don't know how to pray", "When it comes to praying, I feel as if I am not doing my duty," and "When it comes to private prayer, I feel completely bewildered; I can never get rid of distractions." So this course is written from the standpoint of a fellow struggler.

The initial title was *Prayer for Amateurs* which contained an intended double meaning: strictly speaking amateur means someone who loves something but it has also come to represent the opposite of professional, the person who does something for love and not as part of a vocation or commercial transaction, somebody who is supposed to be less accomplished. Because of this, many Christians are frightened by prayer, thinking that they are incapable of it and that it is an activity confined to those who are professional or particularly holy. But thinking about amateurs I decided to change the title to *Prayer for Lovers* for three reasons:

- Prayer is about relationship with God;
- With perseverance, love grows in depth even if it varies in intensity;
- Prayer resembles sex, a very specific aspect of love, because we expect more of it than it usually delivers but at its best it is life transforming; and we think that other people are invariably 'better' at it than we are.

Of course this analogy is only valid to a very limited extent in that it reflects perceptions from our 'side' of the relationship. It is the purpose of this course to help us to develop a deeper and more loving relationship with God - between lovers - by suggesting concrete ways in which we can 'improve our performance'.

The course is divided into five Units:

- One - The Nature of Christian Prayer;
- Two - Public Prayer: The Corporate and The Catachetic;
- Three - Adoration, Contrition and Thanksgiving;
- Four – Supplication;
- Five - Alone with God.

There is no ideal order for such a course as this and so I have chosen to arrange the Units so that the topics are presented in what I take to be an ascending order of difficulty in the hope that participants will steadily gain confidence as the material becomes more difficult.

Perhaps a note on the direction of prayer would be helpful. Strictly speaking, the Church follows the process laid down in the Gospel of John whereby we are enjoined to pray to The Father through The Son in the power of The Spirit. This makes sense to the extent that we are communicating with the ineffable through the medium of the recollection of the historical, concrete Jesus but it rather over-formalises a process set down before a full doctrine of the Trinity was crystallised in which all three 'persons' are equal. So although we might pray to The Father through The Son in the power of The Spirit, there may be times when we wish to pray to The Father in thanksgiving for creation, to The son for the strength to imitate him and the in The Spirit to give us strength for an impending crisis.

Naturally, this course is only a beginning; we must resolve to improve our tools and use them to improve our two-way communication with God, starting with this coming Holy Week.

One - The Nature of Christian Prayer

"Pray earnestly night and day" - 1 Thessalonians 3.10

Love is a set of characteristic behaviours which need to be kept in balance. A relationship where the lover is forever penitent or forever suppliant, is not going to work; we can also go overboard on adoration and thanksgiving. As situations change so does the balance of these elements - adoration, contrition, thanksgiving, supplication - summed up in the ACTS acronym.

1. From Supplication to ACTS

Prayer, generally speaking, is a mode of address to a deity. All kinds of people from all kinds of cultures pray to animate and inanimate, visible and invisible entities which they classify as in some way divine, or superior to themselves. In every culture the initial impetus to pray began with the felt need to appease or request, to mitigate a crisis or seek a favour but in the Second Century BC two inter-connected developments raised religion and prayer to a new dimension: first, the advancement of human control over what had hitherto seemed to be arbitrary phenomena raised human self consciousness and consequently called for a re-assessment of the concept of deity; secondly, the development of complex social organisation encompassed the religious impulse. During that millennium we should note the development of such significant phenomena as: irrigation and food storage and the reduction of the power of arbitrary natural forces; the associated generation of food surpluses which created social and occupational diversity in place of the universal tyranny of subsistence agriculture and the consequent development of an individual, social and political capacity to formulate abstract ideas and associated ritual; and the development of writing as a much more efficient method than sculpture for preserving and transmitting ideas.

The Jewish response to these developments was not unique but it was uniquely documented and rich. The initial supplicatory impulse was complemented by adoration, contrition and thanksgiving to form the basic elements of prayers summed up in the familiar ACTS acronym; but the unique contribution of Judaism to the development of religious thought and, therefore, to the concept of prayer, was its insistence on the personal nature of God: the Old Testament is the surviving library of the struggle by the Jews, who saw themselves as God's "Chosen People", to come to terms with their personal God. Having personalised God it was not a great conceptual step to monotheism (although its development is frequently over-simplified). The Deuteronomists of the 6th Century BC were keen to establish a link between Jewish faithfulness and earthly well being where unfaithfulness accounted for exile; to ask God not to inflict misfortune on his people was now no longer enough; God required adoration, contrition and thanksgiving as necessary preconditions for any form of supplication; and the Deuteronomists also felt that transactions with God should be essentially corporate. There was a tradition of solitary prayer exemplified by the prophets but they were always in potential conflict with the religious establishment which not infrequently

persecuted and murdered them.

2. Christian Prayer

Christianity inherited both the individual and corporate dimensions of the Jewish prayer tradition and, with the exception of some establishment suspicion of the mystical tradition, the two elements have not been regarded as incompatible; all Christians are supposed to participate both in corporate and private prayer.

The Trinitarian economy, or choreography of prayer, largely developed in the Gospel of John, is uniquely complex and interlocking: we always pray to The Father (Creator), through The Son (Redeemer) in the power of The Spirit (Sanctifier). Uniquely in Jesus Christ we have a tangible, divine intermediary equal to the Creator which profoundly affects the dynamics of Christian prayer compared with other forms of prayer.

3. The Dynamics of Christian Prayer

All prayer is an attempt to establish communication between entities which are, necessarily, in different categories, such different categories that it is impossible fully to express the difference which is why we use the word "mystery" not in the sense of hidden or undiscovered but unfathomable. It is the very nature of the relationship which makes it so problematic. The human being, praying to a deity is, by an admission of the concept of deity, condemning herself to an impossibly difficult relationship, to bridge the unbridgeable gap. Yet from the time of the Deuteronomists there was a theological superstructure which made sense of the gap, which proposed that God's will for his creatures could be understood and that he should be accorded what was due to him as the result of the act of creation.

The Christian, Trinitarian formulation added two critical dimensions: first, Jesus, as the incarnational bridge between the human and the divine, brings the Godhead from the abstract and the timeless into concrete history; secondly, we recognise the reality of Jesus through the incarnational perception generated from within us by the Holy Spirit. Consequently, our prayer life is mysterious and rich but it is not purely speculative, the participation in a struggle doomed to fail.

Critical to our understanding of prayer is the centrality, inherited from Judaism, of the concept of the personal relationship with God who is not with us as an abstract idea, a form of causality or a way of explaining consciousness but is, essentially, not only our creator but the purpose for which we were created. We were made to give God pleasure, to choose to love him freely, to choose to worship, thank and adore him as well as to ask for help and support while we exercise our human powers to create The Kingdom on earth before we are enfolded back into his perfect love. In other words, to pray is not an option, it is the very essence of being human.

The essence of relationship is that it is two-way; we try to communicate with God through human language which is necessarily the simpler part of the relationship because it is in the nature of God to 'know' what we are trying to say but prayer also involves 'listening' to God to ascertain his will for us. This is the aspect of the relationship which is most problematic for us because it is so open to self delusion and the abuse of power: delusion because we can persuade ourselves that what we want for ourselves is what God wants for us; and an abuse of power because those who exercise influence or authority can all too easily invoke the will of God to further their own ends. This latter tendency is not, we should note, necessarily, exercised selfishly or cynically as many people believe that the communication of the will of God to them should be extended to others for the general benefit. Yet we need to be particularly careful here because no two relationships are ever identical and so no two relationships between humans and the Creator can be identical.

This is not to say that we cannot talk about the will of God and talk about ways of understanding it; but what we are doing for each other is presenting experience, suggesting options, developing tools and finding a common language for mutual support.

At this point it is important to recognise a deep division within Christianity about the relationship between God and humanity. In a perspective which we might loosely call "Protestant" which owes much to St. Augustine and, in turn, to Plato, humanity is fundamentally imperfect, corrupt or fallen whereas there is a contrary tradition which sees a continuity rather than a discontinuity between God and humanity. That difference of perspective cannot but deeply affect the way in which we approach prayer: in the former case the primary purpose of prayer is to acknowledge the inevitable failure of our enterprise whereas in the latter case the approach is to see how close we can get to God. Many Christians do not hold firmly to either view of humanity but oscillate subconsciously between the two which is one major reason why many of us have problems with prayer; we are not really sure of our fundamental purpose.

4. The Practice of Prayer

In considering how we pray it might be helpful to use three images:

- First, we are all familiar with the concept of transmission and reception. If we are successfully to receive a radio or television signal we need to be on the appropriate wavelength. Likewise, if we wish to transmit material we need to select an appropriate wavelength. The success of the communication depends upon the transmitter and the receiver both using the same wavelength. In our communication with God our transmissions are not problematic because God, so to speak, receives every possible wavelength, but we have problems in tuning ourselves to God's wavelength. Because of the 'category difference' already discussed - that God is the Creator and we are creatures - there are bound to be problems which we might think of either as simply being tuned to the wrong wavelength or being tuned to the correct

wavelength but experiencing interference. Regular prayer will help us to develop a capacity for finding the correct wavelength and it will also enable us to cut out interference.

- Secondly, although Jesus urged us to pray when we are in need, the essence of a rich prayer life is that it should be developed in much the same way as we develop physical strength through regular exercise. Just as we cannot expect to become super fit athletes at the precise moment when we are being chased hard by an assailant, so we cannot expect to be adequately equipped for a prayerful response to a crisis if we have not taken the trouble to train in the good times. Such training involves exerting ourselves on days when we would rather not, when we are tired or dispirited, when there are alternative attractions and distractions, when we can see no narrative in what we are doing. In this context we might think of our encounters with God in prayer as being those moments when the athlete risks breaking down to break a record. Prayer is a risk and in a sense which it is not easy to articulate, it ought to be; but we know that every time we break down the Grace of God will restore us.
- Thirdly, we can combine these two ideas to create an aesthetic of prayer; in other words, we can develop the capacity to recognise when we are on the correct 'wavelength' by discerning a 'shape' to what is happening when we try to pray and we can also develop the capacity to intensify the shape. What will start as foggy and fragmentary can be enhanced by our efforts to become more coherent and clear. We might think of some of the language we use about prayer as a description of structure or colour but any aesthetic exercise, no matter what degree of common language it can call upon, is fundamentally individualistic. If we can accept something like this idea we will be much less prone to making comparisons which put us at a disadvantage. Self development may improve our competitive capacity but that is incidental.

5. Kinds of Prayer

In subsequent Units we will be examining these and other questions but we will conclude this Unit by reminding ourselves of the different styles of prayer within the Christian tradition:

- Corporate - Prayer which celebrates the promise of Jesus that "Where two or more are gathered together in my name" (Matthew 18.20) Our relationship with God is so challenging that we need mutual support through our collective prayer. Such prayer is usually formal, structured and written down but it can be extempore and reactive.

- Private - Prayer which, like corporate prayer, might be structured or extempore but which might also involve silent transmission to and leaving ourselves open to transmission from God through contemplation. Then there is the silent prayer which involves emptying ourselves out so that God can 'come in'. Contemplation and this more ascetic, mystical approach are often confused.

6. Questions and Exercises

- a) Define prayer and its purposes
- b) Discuss the development of the concept of prayer in the Old Testament through reading Exodus 3, Isaiah 44.9-20
- c) Discuss the implications for our prayer life of the perceptions of humanity as being in discontinuity or continuity with the divine
- d) Discuss your 'prayer history' from the time you were first taught to pray. What does this say about our contemporary ideas about prayer?
- e) Suggest some images, on the lines of broadcasting and the gym, to explain prayer.

Two - Public Prayer: The Corporate and The Catachetic

"When two or three are gathered together in my name, I am in the midst of them" - Matthew 18.20

The Church of England is often described as a "Prayer Book Church" because over the centuries since its foundation it has centred its spiritual focus on the *Book of Common prayer* rather than on a credal confession; it has seen its central activity as relating to God in public prayer rather than arguing over zealously about doctrine.

1. Purposes

The chief purposes of public prayer are to:

- Honour the command of Jesus that we should pray corporately (Matthew 18.20);
- Build up solidarity in our Christian faith;
- Invoke a sense of wonder.

The first two points are reasonably obvious but we should not overlook - or be suspicious of - the third. There is a scale to public activity which makes it theatrical, a secular word for sacramental. We use human skill to generate an atmosphere which elevates what we are saying and singing which, in turn, opens us to the prospect of wonder.

Public prayer need neither be simply spoken nor dull. Our prayer tradition originates in the Psalms which are full of emotion and which were written to be accompanied by music or chanted musically. They still form the backbone of daily prayer for our clergy and for many lay people. Western Christianity also has a noble tradition of church music.

2. Characteristics

Just as private prayer is illumined and obscured by our individual, private experience, so public prayer expresses a collective, religious/cultural consciousness. Thus, public prayer is characterised by contemporary understandings of:

- Scripture;
- Doctrine;
- The state of humanity and its relationship to God.

(Note that the word "contemporary" does not mean that the prayers we say have to be contemporary; we may change our Collects over time to reflect a different understanding of the Creed and we may change our Prayers of the Faithful to reflect a changing world but the Creed we say is very ancient but still contemporary in that we understand it to be the best formulation we have at present (always remembering that words change their meaning both through time and according to place).

Public prayer, because it is collective, is more concerned with doctrine than it is with theology. Let me explain. As discussed in Unit One, theology is the substance of our individual relationship with God that takes place at our personal breaking point; it relies on our willingness to take risks to get one 'step' closer to God. Doctrine, on the other hand - whether we are thinking about our understanding of a piece of Scripture or of an organic understanding of a concept - is a statement of the language we are collectively prepared to accept to describe the God with whom we individually relate: theology is to doctrine what philosophy is to legislation. It therefore follows that a great deal of public prayer is, on the surface at least, much less personal and much more concerned with Christian solidarity.

There is no conflict between theology and doctrine, it is simply that one is a necessary precondition for the other. It is only because we wrestle at the cutting edge of possibility that we are able to formulate fresh insights into the nature of the God of Love. Just to give one example from the last century: it was people like Bonhoeffer who developed the idea that God was not 'impassive', not 'indifferent' to human suffering but could be understood to be standing among the suffering.

3. Practical Steps

Public prayer follows set formulae and this creates advantages and disadvantages: the advantage of routine is that it establishes a solid foundation on which we can build a variety of perceptions whereas the disadvantage is that we become so accustomed to what we are saying that we 'switch off'. The Church has tried to overcome this problem by combining a familiar framework with different content so that the principal act of worship, for example the Eucharist, has a variety of prayers both depending on the season (propers) and on the preference of the President (Preface, Eucharistic Prayer): too much change erodes the base and too little change invites indifference.

For us the main problem lies in the indifference, so here are some practical steps which we can take:

a) Those Responsible for Worship:

- i. Prepare carefully by choosing appropriate content which balances:
 - a. The regular and the seasonal;
 - b. Delivery (Presidential prayer, reading, choral) and response (congregational);
 - c. Words and silence.
- ii. Consider the nature of the congregation;
- iii. Match elements of worship to available resources;
- iv. Act as good hosts by making comfort, audibility and visibility as good as they can be.

b) Individuals:

- Prepare for worship with a period of silent reflection and study; consider what is going to be said and whether we have grasped the order and the outlines of the content; just as we would not attend an opera without reading the synopsis, so we should not attend an act of worship without this kind of preparation;
- Say the prayer aloud taking proper note of the punctuation;
- Identify key words and antitheses;
- Consider whether we have understood the meaning of what we have said;
- Resolve how what we have said will change our Christian lives.

To take those four steps with examples:

- The prayer we probably say most often in our lives is *The Lord's Prayer* but how often do we put the emphasis, based on the punctuation, in the correct place?
- Here is the prayer at the end of the Eucharist with its key words and antitheses in italics:

Almighty God, *we thank you* for feeding *us* with the *body and blood* of your son Jesus Christ. Through *him* we offer *you* our *souls and bodies* to be a *living sacrifice*. Send *us* out in the power of *your* spirit to *live and work* to your *praise and glory*.

We can see that there is hardly a wasted word and that there are numerous intricate balances. Although the tendency in public worship is for all of us to establish the same rhythm and tone, it does no harm to bring out some of the words more emphatically to sustain concentration, such as "we" and "you" or to concentrate on one word such as "living". Even if we are observing the general rhythm with other worshippers, we can make the words live more dramatically in our mind;

- Because many prayers are doctrinal (cataphetical) they are difficult; of these the prayer we say most often is The Creed and while we cannot be expected to consider the whole text each week with equal weight, it helps to take one phrase or proposition before the service begins and to think about it before saying it in the context of the whole prayer;
- Perhaps the most striking prayer in regular use is *The Magnificat* which has the sad distinction of being the best loved and least acted upon. Public prayer made in solidarity should build resolve that will allow us to go out into our world and proclaim the Gospel in word and deed.

4. Points for Consideration

There are three points which we might consider as the result of this discussion:

- First, we need to consider whether corporate prayer is purely collective or whether there is room within it for individual communication with God. Even where the arrangement of public worship does not properly allow for silent reflection, we should always ensure that we remain in personal contact with God: solidarity is the deliberate commitment of different individuals to a common cause.
- Secondly, we need to consider whether public worship is entirely a one-way process in which we address God or should there be room for God to address us. A well balanced act of public worship should give us the opportunity to 'listen out' for God not only in silence but in the words we hear, said or sung. There is an important balance between different participants which is why no act should be wholly congregational nor wholly ministerial.
- Thirdly, what is the proper relationship between public and private worship? There are some Christians who regularly attend church but do not pray regularly at home; and there are others who claim that they are Christians but that this does not necessitate going to church. Neither approach does justice to our Christian tradition and practice.

5. Contemporary Issues

Because it is the subject of such controversy, we should consider briefly the matter of contemporary worship in general and its 'relevance' to young people in particular:

- If we are a Church of Word and Sacrament, how justified are we in eliminating either of these elements in worship because they might be too 'difficult' for people unfamiliar with public worship?
- As different generations are moved by different aesthetics, how justified is the insistence on a particular genre of music? How well do different genres work together?
- Given the almost universal presence in churches of stained glass and/or paintings, why is our worship so verbal with so little visual material?
- How far should worshippers be consulted on forms of worship? How far is it true that all beer drinkers are good brewers?
- Is there a fundamental contradiction between attracting new worshippers and alienating existing worshippers?

In considering these questions we might want to remind ourselves that one of the purposes of public worship is to establish solidarity.

6. Questions & Exercises

- a) Choose a Psalm and identify its different emotional elements and its different forms of address to God;
- b) Take a familiar prayer and analyse its delivery, meaning and application;
- c) Consider the points in Sections 3, 4 or 5;
- d) Take the Readings for the coming Sunday and write a Collect to fit with them;
- e) Compare the Leonard Cohen, Geoff Buckley and Alexandra Burke versions (choice of words and arrangement) of Cohen's song Hallelujah!

Three - Adoration, Contrition & Thanksgiving

"Let us give thanks, by which we offer to God an acceptable worship with reverence and awe." - Hebrews 12.18

"Repent and be baptised" - Acts 2.38

"Come before him with thanks" - Psalm 95.2

As we noted in the Introduction, a healthy, growing and deepening relationship requires a balance of expression: it would not last if we never apologised to, praised or thanked the beloved, just as it would not thrive if we spent all our time asking for favours.

1. Prayer and The Trinity

The central mystery of Christianity is that God has three attributes or 'persons' but is indivisible. What we 'say' to one 'person' we say to all but it might be helpful for the purposes of organising our thoughts to respectively associate adoration with The Father, contrition with The Son and thanksgiving with The Holy Spirit.

2. Adoration

Remembering that we pray to God through Jesus, our fundamental purpose for being is to choose as creatures to adore our Creator. Naturally caught up in the concrete presence of Jesus, we sometimes forget that aspect of the Godhead which we call "Father" or "Creator" but without that loving impetus there would be nothing else.

Christianity has not had a great deal of difficulty with understanding creation as a mystery (not a contradiction) but it has wrestled to very little effect with the mechanics which is why we sometimes find the ideas associated with creation so difficult. In the first place, we find it difficult to grapple with ideas about time and timelessness: that God is outside time but that the aspect of God which is Jesus is both out of time and in it. Secondly, we have problems with the idea of intention, with why God did it. Thirdly, there is a long tradition of friction between Christianity's account of creation and that of science. Finally, and in a sense summing up all these points, we naturally ask our questions from our point of view - why did God do this or that? - rather than from God's point of view.

In spite of these complexities, adoration should be simple; that is, it should not be clouded by issues of motive and outcome, by how we feel about where we are and what we are doing.

We should start with the simple difference between the Creator and ourselves as created. Regardless of our relative position to other human beings, our initial impulse should be to acknowledge the difference and what that involves. Some Christians have tended towards adoration out of fear, understanding

that God has power to affect their earthly and salvific prospects (note how many prayers begin with the expression: "Almighty God") but to consider God in these terms is, again, to make him behave as we would behave. Of course, a priori, God could act in any way he pleases, whether there was a physical world over which to exercise power or not, but the important element of creation is our freedom to act. Our acknowledgment in adoring God, then, is to recognise the comparative status which engenders our obligation to adore. Unlike human power relationships, this act is not demeaning but is, rather exalting; in adoring God we raise our own spiritual 'status'.

It then follows that we see all of humanity in the same exalted position as ourselves, having been created out of love to love. Often we are so involved in the other three elements of ACTS - thanking God for what we have, asking God for things we want, apologising for falling short - that we forget the sheer magnitude of the enterprise in which we are involved whose basis is adoration. If we lose sight of the relative positions of Creator and created we leave ourselves open to all kinds of misapprehensions about ourselves, our freedom and power, our purposes and our merits. If our besetting fault is pride then this results from a lack of adoration. Conversely, true humility does not involve under-estimating ourselves as created but in under-estimating the 'distance' between God and ourselves or failing to recognise that what we have is gift not right.

3. Contrition

There is a profound paradox in the precept that we should imitate Jesus because at one level, knowing him through the Gospels, we have a much clearer picture of our obligations to God than we would have had Jesus not come to live among us, but at another level we know we are bound to fail because we are not Jesus.

In considering contrition it is vital that we understand what we are being sorry for. We cannot be sorry for our createdness, no matter how we understand it and so it makes no sense to be sorry, for example, if we think that we are in some way 'fallen' or are afflicted by 'original sin'. Neither can we be sorry for 'falling short' if we think that such falls are inevitable; because we are corrupt or 'fallen' such lapses are inevitable. Neither can we be sorry because we are not Jesus. Such forms of being sorry are all, in essence, misunderstandings of who and why we are.

If we were created to give God pleasure through exercising our choice to love God both in our relationship with him and through the love of all that he has created, then the sorrow which we can and must properly express is for making wrong choices which take us further away from rather than nearer to God. Because we were created in God's image and because Jesus was created in our image, it cannot be that our fundamental nature is corrupt. If we are fundamentally corrupt and Jesus was perfect when he was on earth it makes very little sense to say that he had a human nature. A better way of understanding ourselves is to say that it is our purpose to realise God's Kingdom on earth by striving to grow ever close in our relationship with God

through exercising the choice given to us so that we can be as near perfect as it is possible for us to be, given that choice necessitates imperfection.

In this light, our sorrow is not because we are imperfect but because we have not achieved the degree of perfection which is possible. In this light, the passion and death of Jesus tell us that no matter how badly we exercise choice - and killing Jesus is the ultimate manifestation of our imperfection - we will not impair God's love for us. Our contrition, then, is because of the misuse of the means we have been given, exemplified above all in the death of Jesus. In a mysterious sense, Jesus had to die both in order to articulate our imperfection and to demonstrate that we would not be punished for it.

The fundamental of contrition, then, is to understand ourselves and the way we live our lives in three related but distinct senses:

- First, what we have individually done and failed to do in the exercise of choice to strengthen our personal relationship with God;
- Secondly, what we have collectively done and failed to do in the same respect;
- Thirdly, how acutely we recognise responsibility for our choices.

Even if we do not submit ourselves to individual oracular confession (The Sacrament of reconciliation), we are not released from the obligation of rigorous self criticism; to participate in an uncritical collective act of penitence is not enough; we do not have to be sorry in a general way for 'sin' or the state of the world' but, critically, for "what we have done and failed to do" as individuals.

4. Thanksgiving

Our understanding of our purposes and our obligations is generated from within us by The Holy Spirit who gives us the capacity to adore, repent and thank our God as Creator and Redeemer; by The Spirit we recognise our relationship to God as Creator and the relationship of Jesus to God as Redeemer; from the Spirit we receive the gifts of creaturely and incarnational perception.

Our thanks can be understood in three ways:

- As absolute not comparative;
- As corporate not individual;
- As essential not chronological.

First, then, The Spirit is our engine of thanksgiving because through The Spirit we recognise for what we should be thankful. Again, reflecting the thoughts on adoration, our thanks is not comparative, it does not relate to how well we think we are doing compared with other people, it relates simply to our relationship with God. In that light we can then see that the structure of our existence, in time and space, in physicality and human solidarity, is God's framework in which we exercise choice. Further, we can then see that

exercising choice involves human hardship, physical imperfection and suffering. It is for that reason that our thankfulness is not related to our individual position in the world but arises because each of us has a position in the world. We should therefore not simply be thankful for who we are but for who others are. None of us could exercise our obligations to God without the existence of others.

Secondly, too often we personalise thanks to our own situation when it should always be a reflection of our inter dependence; we cannot thank God for our personal situation without understanding that, in reality, it is not a personal but a corporate position.

Thirdly, we tend to thank God episodically for events in the past but the thanks we offer should arise from the essence of who we are and not from individual events. Like adoration and the acknowledgment of imperfection, thanksgiving should be part of our condition independent of what happens to us individually.

5. The Meaning of Balance

Now that we have considered all the elements of prayer other than Supplication - the aspect, I will come to argue, to which we give excessive emphasis - this is an opportune moment to think about the balance of elements in prayer.

If we are thinking about a long standing relationship we might want to say that the different elements will come into play at different intensities over time and we might represent that difference in snapshots, or poems, with the different elements featuring strongly: we might want to praise the beloved's beauty on a particularly sunny day, beg forgiveness for a harsh word, or tell other people how lovely the beloved is; but we might equally want to try to encapsulate the essence of the relationship by structuring the different elements into a single work. Some Christians have been extremely suspicious of love poetry because they are quite wrongly suspicious of or even frightened of God's creation of the physical, but we can learn a huge amount from love poetry about the elements of a relationship which we need to hold in balance over time or which we need to bring out individually or synthesise.

The Church's year is designed so that we can concentrate on different elements in a fitting sequence so that, for example, we have a period of preparation before Christmas and an even longer one before Easter. We should take the opportunity to consider and involve ourselves in the Church's year as an aid to reflection and enrichment.

Having said all that, it would be a denial of relationship to eliminate our own personal feelings towards God the beloved. We should not be afraid of laying ourselves bare before the beloved because love is impossible without vulnerability and also because, in reality, we are not telling God anything that he does not already 'know'; being vulnerable is, essentially, telling ourselves what we need to know; and in that truthfulness we leave ourselves open to God's love.

6. Questions & Exercises

- a) Are there elements other than ACTS that ought to be essential to prayer?
- b) Choose a love poem and identify its elements;
- c) Consider the issues in Sections 1,2 or 3;
- d) Discuss prayers which focus on adoration or thanksgiving;
- e) Write a love poem to God concentrating on one or more elements.

Four - Supplication

"Whatever you ask in prayer, believing, you will receive" - Matthew 21.22

Supplication is so much by far the most practised form of prayer that for many people - religious and non religious - the two terms are indistinguishable. We might think of it as the most simple and unsophisticated form of prayer because it is, on the surface, a one-way communication from us to a deity. Having said that, supplication is a proper part of prayer enjoined by Jesus (Matthew 21.22) but it must be balanced with the other elements we have already discussed.

I have chosen to give this topic a Unit to itself because of its widespread usage and the serious issues which it raises.

1. The Essence of Supplication

In essence, supplication is a form of self examination which should result from a clear process, something like the following:

- i. When we pray that something in our condition should change or stay the same when threatened by change (let us call this an "end"), the necessary precondition is that we should examine the current state of things. We cannot seriously consider an end until we have ascertained what is 'wrong' with the current or 'threatened' situation. For example, we might think it proper to pray for peace in a conflict zone but if that means that the aggressor is rewarded for aggression, is that a proper thing to pray for? This illustrates vividly the necessity for self examination, to understand what we are asking for.
- ii. Then we must define clearly what end we want to effect. Taking the previous example, do we really want peace at any price or is what we want conditional in some way? Do we simply want a ceasefire as a precondition to reversing the aggression? This is not a call for all of us to be experts in every field but simply to be conscientious as part of our self examination; God does not need us to be clear in stating our end but we do, for our own self respect.
- iii. We must then carefully work out why we want an end. Is it for our own benefit or for someone else? There is nothing wrong with wanting something for oneself but we must not delude ourselves into thinking that something is altruistic when it is actually for our own benefit. For example, we might say we want somebody to get better or, conversely, be "put out of their misery" not for their own sake but because their illness is causing us inconvenience. Again, there is no harm in recognising the inconvenience and wishing it were not there but, still, we have an obligation to care willingly for those who need us and supplicatory prayer is not an escape route from the obligation.

- iv. In order to limit ourselves so that we do not produce a long, untidy shopping list, we should then rank the different things we want. There are so many ills in the world and God 'knows' about all of them. Our job is to work out what we think is important, to raise it in our consciousness. For example, if we consider a large number of worldly ills in a muddled and unfocused way, we are not taking any personal responsibility for anything.
- v. As this is a self examination the next step is to ask ourselves what we are prepared to do about the situation we are considering. If we are, for example, praying for the starving, we need to ask how much we contribute to their relief. This shows why it is important to extricate ourselves from generalised, pious muddle.
- vi. Having ordered our 'list' we may then lay it out before God as our clear, conscientious estimate of how we relate to the world we live in, what we are prepared to do in God's name, and where we need, subject to his will, God's help.

2. Efficacy

There is hardly a more difficult subject of concern to the everyday life of Christians than the efficacy of supplicatory prayer.

We must start by reminding ourselves of the process we have just considered; supplicatory prayer is a process by which we bring ourselves and our world to God through our own conscious and conscientious self examination. We might say, to use a trivial example, that we were desperate to find a parking space, said a quick prayer and, lo and behold, we immediately found one; this may be the 'answer to prayer' in a light-hearted, colloquial sort of way but the parking spot was not vouchsafed in exchange for the prayer.

The problem becomes more acute, however, when we move from the parking example to instances of prayer for those who are ill. Again, we must remember the distinction between what we do and the exchange model which we must reject. If we pray for the recovery of a person from illness and we encourage others to do the same, the fact that we are laying our concern before God as a conscious act of solidarity with the sick person may well give her strength to improve; but, again, any improvement is not granted in exchange for our prayers. This is why it is so important that people know when they are being prayed for.

Next in the scale of supplication we need to think about specific services of healing (which might be better thought of as 'services for making whole') or special prayers recited in respect of a particular end. All such acts begin by our acknowledgment that we are subject to the will of God and that how that will 'operates' is beyond our understanding. As creatures acknowledging our Creator we are consciously describing our world and its hardships so that we personally and collectively become more aware of them. Services of healing

and the like are consciousness raising acts of worship which bring us closer to those who suffer and bring them closer to God.

We need to distinguish the efficacy of supplication for our spiritual well being from God's exercise of divine power in what we might call miracles. When we misunderstand supplication as a transactional activity where we seek to exchange prayers for a cure, we are, in effect, praying for a miracle. There is nothing wrong with this as long as we know what we are doing and do not allow ourselves to make the same mistake as lottery players: it could be you but the odds against it are massive.

3. Supplication and Christianity

Nothing gives Christianity a worse name than our misrepresentation of supplicatory prayer. Whether we intend to or not, most of us give the impression that the chief object of prayer is to persuade God to change something in his creation; and, conversely, we therefore imply that when we pray for such change and it does not happen then either God does not 'care' or is unable to effect the change we request.

A further problem with this approach is that it gives a completely unbalanced account of why we are Christians. Are we, asks the outside world, Christians because that will give us some kind of divine leverage over the misfortunes that afflict us? Even when we are meeting together, we often make this mistake. If we are asked to bring news of our lives, good and bad, to God, how much of it is good? How often do we simply ask without considering for what we ought to be thankful?

One of our chief missionary obligations, along with bringing Word and Sacrament to all God's people, is to help them to establish a personal relationship with God through prayer which means introducing a balanced approach and not depicting prayer as supplicatory leverage or an act of exchange.

4. Mary & The Saints

If we understand supplicatory prayer as a process of self examination we will find it much easier to understand the role of the saints in general and mary in particular as intermediaries.

Think of a spectrum of divinity with the Creator God at the left hand end and us at the right hand end. Reading from left to right you would have:

| | | | | |
|---------|----------|------------------|------------------|----------|
| Creator | Redeemer | Mary | Saints | Us |
| God | God/man | Immaculate woman | Notable pilgrims | Pilgrims |

In other words, the people who are nearest to us are the saints and the 'person' farthest from us is the Creator. As what we are embarking upon is an exercise in self examination we might best be helped by undertaking comparisons between our own behaviour and that of the saints, Mary or

Jesus. All of these human beings are aids to our self understanding and we make ourselves vulnerable before God with their assistance and protection. In this sense we do not pray "to" saints, we pray with them, uniting our prayers in the Church Militant with their prayers in the Church Triumphant. We are not for a moment equating The Saints or Mary with God but we are recognising their role as benchmarks by which we can measure our own response to God.

5. Theodicy

Perhaps there is no area of our relationship with God that is more difficult to understand than the existence of suffering and evil in the world and as Christians we have a special responsibility to understand this, for ourselves and in our witness in the world.

Let us start with a hard but simple proposition: there is no use praying for the elimination of natural disasters or for a world without evil; both of these phenomena are part of our condition.

It is not easy to explain why we live on a planet which produces natural disasters and where people suffer from illness. Nor is it altogether easy to explain why there should be evil in the world which God created. Here is a starting point for discussion:

Without natural disaster and suffering there is no material which can allow us to make choices between various courses of action, more or less virtuous, in the power of God's grace. In other words, if it is our purpose as creatures to choose to love God directly and through our neighbour, that choice is not available to us in a perfect world. Our imperfection defines us as choosing beings. It is for this reason that we need to be so careful of the suffering, for what they are going through makes our choice possible. Those who suffer are, literally, martyrs for God's purpose.

For precisely these reasons, we cannot pray in a general way for a world without evil. Making wrong choices is an inevitable consequence of choice; if we only made right choices we would, in effect, not be choosing at all. This is why in *The Lord's Prayer* we pray that it should not be us that are tempted.

These are very difficult arguments, not made easier by the mistakes we frequently make in respect of the nature of supplicatory prayer.

Ultimately, supplicatory prayer is not a substitute for our taking personal responsibility for our world; that responsibility is its necessary precondition. God can do anything, including getting us out of a tight corner but praying for such an exception should only remind us of the rule: what we do, as individuals and as humanity, lies in our own power.

6. Questions & Exercises

- a) Discuss the steps prior to supplicatory prayer
- b) Read the prayers for a Service of Healing and discuss their meaning
- c) Consider the role of Mary and the Saints in the life of the Church and in our personal prayer
- d) Work in pairs with one person role playing a Christian explaining supplicatory prayer and the other playing a sceptic
- e) Discuss the phenomena of natural disaster, human suffering and the presence of evil.

Five - Alone with God

"For God alone my soul awaits in silence: Psalm 62.5

The essence of a relationship is what happens when we close our front door. We may be supported by social conventions of expected behaviour and by ritual; but what matters, ultimately, is what we bring in vulnerability to the beloved.

This aspect of prayer is the one which gives most people most difficulty and was the trigger for this course; but the central problem, similar to that which we experience in erotic love, is that we are led both to expect too much too soon and to expect that what we experience will correspond with some general expectation. We are snared by a spurious 'gold standard'. So let us imagine ourselves as fresh, young lovers, looking at the adult world for the first time.

If we return to the initial position of the lover and follow the usual - but by no means only - steps, we will not go far wrong.

1. Place & Time

Thinking about the beloved is not something we would only undertake casually, satisfied with the odd thought passing in and out of our consciousness; we want to concentrate on savouring the essence of the beloved, according it reverence and thinking of how we can combine our essence with it to further the relationship.

We frequently associate thoughts with places and times. So it is with prayer:

- Place. It is helpful to find a place where we can pray in a condition as near to peace as is possible. In our contemporary, noisy world, complete silence is usually quite difficult, so work out what level and kind of noise your prayer can withstand, eg some people can manage background music but some cannot; some people do not mind the occasional interruption. We must be clear with those with whom we share space what our minimum requirements are so that they can be negotiated; the clearer we are, the better. We might also want to collect a few objects near our regular place of prayer such as a few books, a favourite picture, a small statue or a piece of stone. Finally, it is not possible, in spite of a massive, unhelpful tradition to the contrary, to pray in a state of discomfort.
- Time. Although there will be some variations because of the complex lives we lead, we should adopt a framework of prayer from which we can, if necessary depart. Most of us will want to pray in the morning and the evening. Again, we should be specific with those who share our time so that our clear requirements are negotiated. It is important to be sensitive to the way our need for quiet prayer fits into a family routine; we won't be thanked for fixing a time to pray which appears to

let us off house work!

- Most of our prayer will be in a set place in our home but there is occasion for a set period of prayer in the middle of the day when we might be at work or elsewhere. Rather than praying ad hoc (particularly if the prayer is triggered by a minor crisis) it is best to give ourselves a few minutes - for example during the lunch break - consisting of a little silence and a little formal prayer.
- Posture. Comfort and posture are extremely important. Find a chair that supports your back so that you do not slouch; ideally, your head should be balanced on your shoulders so that its weight is supported by your spinal column, allowing you to keep a straight back without the need to bring this about consciously.

2. Content

As we have often noted, the essence of what we do should be its proper balance. Most of us will want to establish a blend of three elements:

- Silent prayer;
- Scripture;
- Formal prayers.

We might want to think of these as the contemplation of the beloved, the history of our love and the celebration of it in poetry and prose.

There are a wide variety of prayer books and scripture reading cycles; we should work out what is appropriate according to the time we have. Some people adopt the formal structures of *Morning, Evening and Night Prayer* as set out by the Church of England both in traditional and contemporary language, inserting Lectionary readings and this is a good starting point, in full or edited, until we have the confidence to edit for our own purposes.

3. Process

Although we might move between different machines and stimuli in different order every time we make a visit to the gym, most of us will find that we fall into a routine, not least because, for example, it is logical to take a dip in a pool after vigorous exercise rather than before it; and we usually start with the more simple and less demanding and then work our way through to the more demanding and more complex.

The following process, then, is by no means absolute but it is so commonly practised that it has the virtue of being tried and tested:

- i. Assemble all the materials for the period of prayer;
- ii. Sit carefully and allow for a few minutes of silence in the ante chamber to prayer; for some of us this few minutes will be enough to rid us of distractions but for others it will not; don't worry. For most of us it is

better not to try to 'fight off' distractions; let them work their way through from full flow to a trickle. For most of us they will never completely stop. There will always be some 'interference';

- iii. Use a formal structure of written prayers and Scripture;
- iv. Either:
 - Enter a period of silent prayer followed by personal prayers; or
 - Say personal prayers followed by a period of silence;
 - End with a formal or extempore prayer bringing a proper close to the communications.

The balance of these elements may depend upon the time of day: most of us will want to use our morning prayer to acknowledge God above all else and to fit ourselves to do his will in the course of the day whereas we will probably need time in the evening to examine how well we have done. If this is so, then we are likely to have a much longer period of silencer in the evening than the morning.

4. Silent Prayer

As has already been indicated, this may either precede or succeed our own personal prayers. The choice largely depends upon whether we want to use the silent time for self examination before we articulate our own prayers or whether we want to articulate our prayers as a precondition to shutting out the world.

As a general rule, the more practised we are in prayer the less time we need in formal prayer and scripture reading before our minds are as at rest as they reasonably can be from external distractions. There are, however, no set rules. If we find that we are subject to constant interruption by the world outside, we might spend more time at the beginning in the ante chamber; but sometimes the world outside needs to be confronted in our silent prayer; sometimes there are issues that cannot and should not be denied because, as we have noted earlier, self examination is an integral part of praying

Some people find it helpful to contemplate a picture or hold a physical object in their hand, others want to drain all earthly sensation.

The first approach - contemplation, uses the object of fixation to help us to put the world outside its 'frame' and to clear spiritual ground. We are not 'paying to' the object but praying with its assistance, just as we might read more easily with a magnifying glass or hear more clearly with a hearing aid.

The second approach - mediation - demands a degree of perseverance of which most of us are not capable and we should therefore not expect 'results' unless we have applied ourselves to the task with great care over a long period. To begin with, we can try to use a short prayer and repeat it until we achieve a degree of tranquility; if we get this far we will have done well. The objective is to establish such a state of tranquility that the Spirit within us brings our love of God to the surface, so that we become aware of it and can therefore communicate it. Here the language is very difficult as some people

think of this kind of meditation as going 'into' themselves but if we think that the Holy Spirit is our core, it might help to think of that presence being brought towards our human surface. Simultaneously such a state will allow us to be open to God's communication with us

As we draw to a close, this is a good time to remind ourselves of some of the things we have been saying throughout the course, relating them to silent prayer:

- First, we are involved in communicating with God; that we can do so is a mystery and, therefore, we are bound to face difficulties; but praying in the mystery of the Creator is our purpose as creatures
- Secondly, no matter what difficulties we face, we have been told by Jesus that we will always be given the resources we need; to help us concentrate it might be helpful to think of the Holy Spirit not outside us but within us
- Thirdly, even with such support, any 'success' we have is bound to be partial; we might think of our image of transmitting and receiving information. Our transmission, following self examination, is easy enough because God knows our 'thoughts' but our reception of God's self communication will be like listening to an old fashioned radio transmission that get stronger and weaker, sometimes disappearing altogether so that we can only hear the shape of the words but not what is being said while other stations are creating interference
- Fourthly, however, the extent to which we receive and understand the communication depends upon our experience and concentration
- Finally, this steady, methodical process of silent prayer is not to be considered as a necessary precondition to experiencing something amazing. For most of us, silent prayer will be hard work and it will frequently be unrewarding; but we must persevere in the way that we should in trying our best to hear and please our beloved. If God wills and if we, by practice and mode of life, leave ourselves open to god, then we may experience sensations which we could describe as illuminating or numinous in our own homes similar to what we experience during the performance of a great piece of sacred music, in the course of a sermon which particularly moves us or when receiving Communion.

5. The Essence of Love

Praying to the beloved is remarkably similar to human loving:

- First, it starts with and continues to involve stringent self examination; anything that we say has to come from a self conscious and honest heart;
- Secondly, we are not in it for what we can get out of it; our purpose in love is not to be gratified by but to please the beloved;
- Thirdly, no lover will want to confine addresses to formal statements or reminiscence; love challenges us to reach out towards the ultimate in feeling and language;
- Finally, the great power of love is to go beyond the physical and the verbal but these are a necessary precondition to that blissful state of wordless wonder. We know its possibility and our longing for it is so great that we should be prepared to go to great lengths to experience it.

And when we do, we will know the meaning of love.

6. Questions & Exercises

- a) Compare the relationship with God with a relationship with the beloved;
- b) Share resources such as prayer books and Scripture reading cycles;
- c) Discuss the challenges and rewards of silent prayer;
- d) Share your experience of the numinous;
- e) Evaluate the course.

Epilogue - The Praxis of Prayer

Now that we have worked together through the five units of the course, no matter what differences of approach we adopt in our own relationship with God, I would like to think that we have reached some basic conclusion in common:

- First, that prayer is something we do rather than talking about doing, that we learn about it through praxis;
- Secondly, even though we will all have highly personal relationships with God, there are some common approaches which most of us will adopt, including thinking carefully about our approach, working consciously at modifying our behaviour and taking care to establish a balanced relationship; and, ultimately, leaving ourselves open to God's self communication with us.

But perhaps the most helpful conclusion we might draw is that we are not alone; not only are we involved in an enterprise in which God 'wishes' us to succeed, we are striving to communicate in a tradition stretching back to Jesus and beyond in the company of countless fellow Christians, not least our own peers from from whom we usually expect least but who have the most to offer; not forgetting that we, too, have much to offer.