

OPENING PRAYER

The possibility in this session is that we spend so much time talking about prayer that we do not actually take much time for prayer itself. So we prioritise the experience of prayer and put it first. Spend more time with this passage. We settle in, let God speak to us about his presence with us, in life, over the past three weeks of being together.

We begin the prayer by being brought to stillness using our attention to our breath.

I myself took them by the arm
 . . . I was leading them
 with human ties,
 with leading-strings of love.
 Hosea 3b-4a



Quiet music . . . time with God, trusting that he is here whether we feel it or not.

WHOLE
GROUP

What's standing out for you about our journey together this last three weeks?

This evening we are going to look at that life-long journey with God and how the shape that our relationship with God takes over the different seasons of our lifetime.

WITH YOU ALWAYS

*On the journey with
the Lord*

The session opens with the beautiful passage from Hosea, reminding us that God is with us, loving and leading us – even if there are many times when we do not feel his presence.

The session is an opportunity to revisit how we have related to God over our lifetime, how we have prayed and how those ways of praying have changed as we have changed. Reflecting on the different elements of prayer – security, searching and intimacy – we see how each may predominate at various life stages.

We also reflect on how to be with God in prayer and the challenge to be yourself when times are tough and God seems distant.

A few things about prayer before we start:

- **Prayer has begun in us already.** From the moment of our baptism, the Holy Spirit has been engaged in an unceasing litany, making the prayer of Christ our own prayer (Louf see *Nearness* p122).
- Thus we cannot and do not need to manufacture an experience of God in prayer. Prayer is happening; the gentle holy breath blows where it will. Like good sailors **we can at best hope to position ourselves so that we might be more attentive to its movement within us.** (Martin Laird)



SMALL GROUPS

Take as much (toilet paper) as you want. For each sheet, name one way of praying. It can be personal to you or simply a way you know exists but have not often tried.

Whole group feedback about the different ways of praying.

Has your prayer changed over the years? As you look at the different ways of praying can you see how some were more frequently used than others at different times, different seasons. . . **whole group** . . . briefly.



When we think of prayer, quite often we think of fixed ways of praying; we assume that we were taught well as children and that the prayers from them suit us well as adults now. In no other circumstance of life would we make these assumptions, we grow and change with our friends, we change how we live, we change our clothes, their style and the size. We grow into our outgrow certain aspects of life and of prayer. No longer the confines of the school uniform; the challenge in feeling at home with God and with ourselves is to find a prayer that fits.

Background to next input – to be touched on only briefly.



Ask these people how they would feel about putting on the coat they wore at school and the answer would be immediate; even if they could find it, the coat would be too small; they had long since outgrown it! It would not suit; it does not fit. Yet suggest that the same logic be applied to their chosen method of prayer and be met with blank expressions; they simply had not thought it was possible or necessary to change the habits of a lifetime.



The prayers we were given as children served us well. They helped us to pray together with family and with the parish community. They gave us a structure and a much-needed routine. Their familiarity might also have given us reassurance in a changing turbulent world; the prayers stayed the same; God at least was consistent and dependable. These same prayers may serve a similar function for us as adults. They provide stability in a shaky world, something familiar and dependable. However, stability for some can be stagnation for others and some of us may need to look again at the way we are praying. Our prayer is an expression of our intimate relationship with God; our own particular way of tuning into the Spirit praying within us. Prayer is not a handbag. One size does not fit all. Prayer needs, for part of the time at least, to reflect our own uniqueness, our own personality.

Consider your hobbies and pastimes – what do you like doing?
How is this aspect of your personality reflected in your preferred way of praying?



TEA BREAK

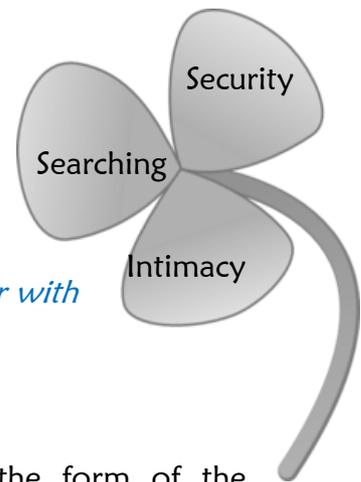
What's standing out for you from the first half?



Another way of considering the different seasons of prayer is to view the elements of prayer using a structure first suggested by a theologian called von Hugel, more recently adopted to apply to a modern setting.

Firstly, in our prayer there is an element of **security**. This is represented in the formal prayers we learn, the comforting and familiar rituals and liturgies in which we participate at home and in Church.

In centre of group, lay out bible, rosary beads, Catechism . . . inherited traditions, trusted “truths” secure practices, together with the liturgies we share with generations before us



Secondly, there is an element of **searching**. This takes the form of the conversations we have with God, the psalms of struggle and anger, the space given over to questioning, to reading and discussion; to learning about God.

In centre, place books such as Radcliffe’s “Why be a Christian?” Hughes “Where are you God?” – valid questions about why we believe what we believe. Also place mug of tea, tissues and pain killers . . . times of confusion and sorrow, life doesn’t make the same sense. We have uncomfortable questions, long hours in company of good friends, struggling with them, with God . . . in the kitchen places of life.

Finally, there is an element of **intimacy**. This is represented by the part of our prayer that is an experience of God present with us, or, at least, helps foster such awareness. The music, candles and incense of our liturgies; silence shared; scripture, people; places; all contribute to the element of intimacy, that sense, however fleeting or elusive, that the God to whom we pray is with us now.

Statue – a sign of God reaching for us. Always in touch, but us needing some touch of that touch . . . candles, music . . . things we use to remind ourselves, to connect with the amazing mystery of God present to us.

I myself took them by the arm
, . . . I was leading them
with human ties,
with leading-strings of love.
Hosea 3b-4a



Slow down. Let the words settle. Get the following from the group – by asking how what has been said compares with their own experience of their prayer life, their relationship with God

These elements assume a different priority at different stages of life and we might guess at the general pattern that develops over a lifetime. A child's prayer will have a greater emphasis on security, a teenager's on searching and an adult's on intimacy. However, life is complex; the pattern is rarely experienced in such a tidy and predictable fashion. Life's challenges, God's mystery, our own painful growth and development; all can throw us on choppy waters. The element of security in our prayer can quickly be outweighed by the element of searching. The felt-sense of intimacy ebbs and flows. Our prayer changes with life's seasons.

What matters in all of this is that we hear prayer as an invitation to be real. So often prayer can seem a cold experience, God seem very far away simply because we are entertaining him in the good room, polite conversation, best behaviour, nothing real passes between us. We are asked to invite God into the Kitchen places of our lives and to express our joys and frustration with openness and trust.



BUT WHAT IF GOD STILL SEEMS FAR AWAY?

It is of little consolation to know that God is mystery. However much we hope to be conscious or aware of his presence in our prayer, for most of us, most of the time, that presence is beyond our ability to sense or understand. Furthermore, there are periods in life, for some of us long periods where prayer seems totally devoid of any consolation, of hope. Life can feel like a wilderness, a wasteland. God is still there. The Christ whose actions permeate the Eucharist reaching out into daily life, still acts within and around you. The God who seems so very far away is a home in the wilderness. More than this, God does some of his best work in wilderness.

Let's pray . . . quiet time again with the passage

I myself took them by the arm
. . . I was leading them
with human ties,
with leading-strings of love.
Hosea 3b-4a

I will lead her into the wilderness
and there I will speak to her heart
Hosea 11:6



WHOLE
GROUP

What stays with you from this evening? A word or phrase to capture it?

Evaluation can be used as part of this final process or completed afterward.

AMEN
