

Alone with God

I don't think any of us would dispute the importance of prayer, and we would also acknowledge the importance of regular times *for* prayer, but at the same time many of us struggle to put that theory into practice. Increasingly we are busy people and all too often there just aren't enough hours in the day for all the things we have to do and all the commitments we have to meet, and yet where does our relationship with God and our spiritual life figure in our busy-ness and our commitments? Maybe if God physically followed us round the house, sat in the car with us, took a seat at the business meeting or walked round the shops with us, it might remind us that he's there. And yet spiritually he does and he is, but because we don't actually see him, or because we don't recognise him, it's easy to forget that he's there, wanting to talk to us, waiting for us to talk to him.

We can, of course, talk to God in prayer at any time - whilst we are out walking or working or whatever¹ – and that's always a good thing to remember and to do, but in terms of actual formal prayer time there are two things we need to do. The first is to develop a regular habit of prayer, to quite deliberately set aside prayer times throughout the day and, as far as possible, these have to be avidly defended against all the other things that will try to muscle their way in, persuading us that they are more important. The second, which goes along with that, is the importance of creating a place for prayer, somewhere where we can be alone with God, somewhere free of all the usual noise and distractions above which we struggle to hear his voice. It might help to have a focus for our prayer – a candle or an icon, for example - and even to play some quiet devotional music (such as plainchant) if that is conducive to our prayer. It will also help to switch off, or ignore, the phone and the doorbell.

As children we were taught to say our morning and night prayers and possibly grace before and after meals, but we may not have developed our prayer life beyond that. We may sometimes find ourselves struggling to keep even these few prayer times in our day. Religious, in their convents or monasteries, are required to observe up to nine prayer times during the day *and the night*, not just as part of their lifestyle but so they become “powerhouses” of prayer driving the Church and the church – capital c and small c. Secular priests have five prayer times from the Divine Office throughout their day as they too pray for the Church and the church. “There was among the Jews a daily practice of offering prayer of praise at certain fixed hours, and the first Christians, as Jews, continued the custom.”² And, of course, we are quite familiar with the requirement of all devout Muslims to pray five times a day, and in some Islamic

¹ A devotion such as the Rosary is especially appropriate for such times. Do we carry a Rosary – even just a ring Rosary - in our pocket or handbag?

² *A-Z of the Catholic Church*

countries everything stops at those times – shops and businesses close and remain closed - until the muezzin signals the end of prayer. The call to prayer serves as a useful reminder to non-Muslims in those countries just as church bells do in our own and the monastery “Angelus” bell used to for workers in the fields.

Morning and night prayer should be a minimal practice for us and we should try to develop the habit of finding additional times for prayer throughout our day, planning them around our other activities or, better still, planning our activities around them. And that’s where my second suggestion comes in of finding suitable places where we can be alone with God, as free as possible from all the distractions around us.

Even Jesus found this difficult to do:

In the morning, long before dawn, he got up and left the house, and went off to a lonely place and prayed there. Simon and his companions set out in search of him, and when they found him they said, ‘Everybody is looking for you.’ (Mk 1 v 35-36)

When Jesus received this news he withdrew by boat to a lonely place where they could be by themselves. But the people heard of this and, leaving the towns, went after him on foot. (Mt 14 v 13)

Then he said to them, ‘You must come away to some lonely place all by yourselves and rest for a while’; for there were so many coming and going that the apostles had no time even to eat. (Mk 6 v 31-33)

He tried to take his disciples away to quiet places where they could be alone to recharge their spiritual batteries, or where he could commune with his Father, but it never seemed to work. The people were understandably keen to see Jesus, to listen to him teach and preach and to witness his miracles, but they seemed to lack any sensitivity to his need to be on his own from time to time and would set off to look for him and bring him back to their communities.

We know the feeling. In a busy family home it can be almost impossible to find undisturbed time and a quiet place for the prayer that is essential spiritual nourishment for our relationship with God. I have a friend who, every time her children asked what she wanted for Christmas or her birthday, would say: “Five minutes of peace and quiet each day”. It never happened. If we don’t find that quiet time for prayer, if that need fails to be respected by those around us, it should be no surprise if we begin to feel spiritually impoverished because our prayer life, our time spent with God in prayer – even just in silence - is suffering. How can we find that “lonely place” Jesus so often tried to find, a place where we can be alone with God, a quiet place for that prayer which is, quite literally, *vital: life-giving, life-sustaining?*

Through the prophet Isaiah, God says to each one of us:

Come to the water all you who are thirsty; though you have no money, come! Buy corn without money, and eat, and, at no cost, wine and milk. Why spend money on what is not bread, your wages on what fails to satisfy? Listen, listen to me, and you will have good things to eat and rich food to enjoy. Pay attention, come to me; listen, and your soul will live. (Is 55 v 1-3a)

The Lord will feed us, will nourish us spiritually, in proportion to how much we offer him the opportunity to do so. If we are always too busy, if we reach the end of the day and our prayer time has been notable by its absence, then we really need to do something about it.

It shouldn't ever become a matter of having to sacrifice other commitments and responsibilities, but rather it's a matter of acknowledging that our responsibility to ourselves and to our relationship with God that is central to everything else we do and are must find a place, must be given a place. And somehow those around us have to realise and accept that we need that time and space – just as they do also. And how about a family creating that time together by developing the practice of family prayer – not as a substitute for personal prayer, but as a way of encouraging a little extra (even short) prayer time in the day in addition to personal prayer.

A very pertinent reflection came to mind from the “Office of Readings”, an excerpt from the *Introduction to the Devout Life* from St Francis de Sales:

The practice of devotion must differ for the gentleman and the artisan, the servant and the prince, for widow, young girl or wife. Further, it must be adapted to their particular strength, circumstances and duties.

True devotion never causes harm, but rather perfects everything we do... Not only is it unharmed to any state of life, it adorns it and beautifies it. Precious stones of all kinds when steeped in honey become more brilliant thereby.

Devotion makes the care of family peaceful, the love of husband and wife more sincere, the service of one's king more faithful, and every task more pleasant and a joy.

It is not only erroneous, but a heresy, to hold that life in the army, the workshop, the court, or the home is incompatible with devotion. Purely contemplative, monastic or religious devotion cannot be practised in these callings; yet, these are not the only kinds of devotion; there are many others suitable for those who live in the world and capable of leading them to perfection.

The other side of the coin for those such as priests whose lifestyle would generally be assumed to be much more conducive to a regular prayer life compared to a busy parent or someone in a place of work all day, is the fact that even for them prayer doesn't happen automatically and what St Ignatius of

Loyola calls “apostolic availability” can create conflicts with one’s prayer life. We get into the practice of praying the Office throughout the day because it was a required part of our daily routine even in the seminary, but it can be all too easy to let some of that prayer time slip once we are out in the real world in a busy parish. Prayers at the beginning and end of the day are more easily said, less easily missed, because those are quieter times of the day, but midday prayer can become a frequent casualty when trying to find even just the five minutes it takes can sometimes be surprisingly difficult. I suppose the question is whether we are missing prayer simply because we forget or because we allow other things to take priority, or because there are quite legitimate demands on our time that we can’t simply walk away from. From his own background of pastoral ministry working with the poor, St Vincent de Paul offers these reassuring words:

If at a time set aside for prayer, medicine or help has to be brought to some poor man, go and do what has to be done with an easy mind, offering it up to God as a prayer. Do not be put out by uneasiness or a sense of sin because of prayers interrupted... for God is not neglected if prayers are put aside in order that such work may be completed.

Sometimes whatever we are doing simply isn’t compatible with prayer, but at other times our work can be prayer or we can pray while we are working - simple, short prayer that acknowledges our awareness of God-with-us. Again, a traditional devotion such as the Rosary is easily said as we work or walk, not necessarily meditating on the mysteries if we can’t remember them or it’s not the way we personally pray the Rosary, we just make it - in the nicest sense of the word - a “background” to our activity, bringing God and, in this case, Our Lady, into our day and into what we are doing.

Thinking about the friends we have, much of what enriches those friendships has to do with how often we see them and how much and how often we talk with them. As with friends, so with God. He is always there wanting to talk to us, waiting for us to talk (and listen!) to him. In order for our relationship with God to be enriched and nourished, time spent with him in prayer only at the start and end of our day may not be enough and especially if that time too is sometimes missed.

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