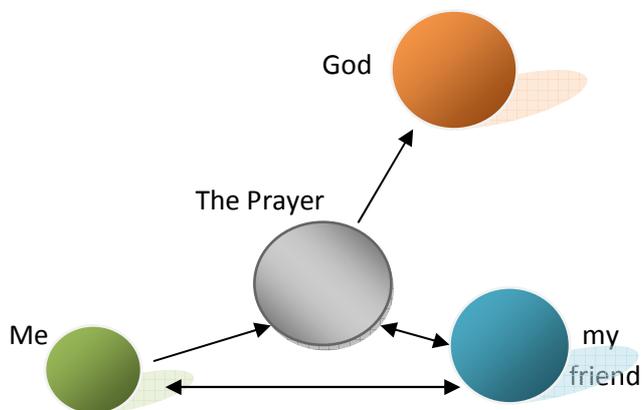


What on Earth is Prayer all about?

We are used to having special words to describe our activities at work, at home and when we relax, in a similar way in the world of Spirituality we have special terms to describe a variety of experiences and activities that are available to us all.

Vocal Prayers are those prayers we find either in a book, or perhaps someone has given us on a card, or a treasured family prayer handed down from a previous generation, one which sums up for us things that we perhaps find difficult to say. They may be words that we find helpful in times of sorrow or times of joy, words we like to say quietly to ourselves or words that we like to share aloud with others. Often these are the kind of prayers that we like others to join with us in speaking aloud. The Lord's prayer is of course one of the most ancient, coming out of the mists of time, and woven out of the teachings that Jesus gave about prayer. For some of us the words and tune of a favourite hymn evoke special memories. Whatever shape these prayers may take they seem to connect us with each other, or they connect us in a special way with someone that we love, even while they connect us to the living God.

If we could draw a diagram to describe how this happens perhaps it would look like this. So the prayer mediates what we would like to say to God, and in turn links me with the friend the prayer is for, or links me with God if the prayer is about my own needs.



This kind of prayer can take many different forms.

Contemplative Prayer or *Prayer of the Heart* as it is sometimes called, is another special word used

Thanksgiving We all like to be thanked for the times we have been there for others. God reaches out to us in love, even in the most trying and tragic situations, longing for us to allow love into our hearts and when we celebrate, God wishes to celebrate with us. The prayer of thanksgiving is really a lifting up of the mind and heart to the Living God in any circumstance, in thanksgiving for that special presence in our lives, and in the lives of those we love and care about.

Petition or Intercession When we wish to ask for help either for ourselves or for our family or friends this is the kind of prayer we need. We lift up to the Living God all our needs and desires, both for ourselves and for those we care about. We can be sure that our prayer will be answered, although it may not be answered in quite the way we expect. Augustine of Hippo wrote that God knows us better than we know ourselves, so it seems that God knows better than we do what our real needs may be.

Formal Prayer tends to take place amongst a gathering of friends or a gathering in church. This is when we use prayers that a community of people can say together, and is often a mixture of prayers and hymns.

Adoration and Worship. This kind of prayer could be private, when we are alone, or public when we are with a group. Our prayer is really a kind of loving acceptance of the presence of the Living God and an awareness of the light and life God has brought into our lives.

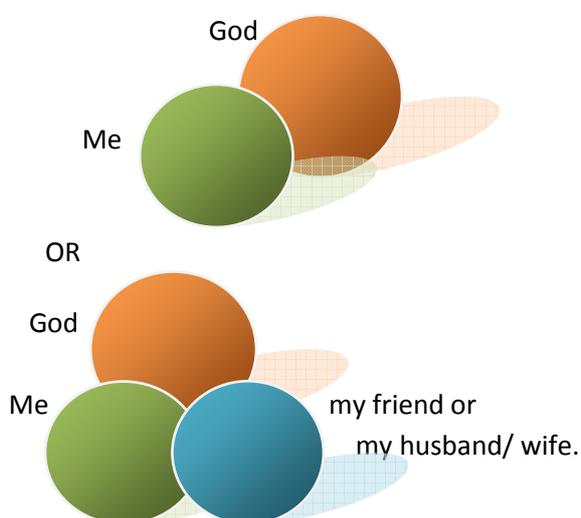
Prayer walking. Some of us are more active than others, and the idea of spending time alone in a room is not attractive, but we can practice prayer anywhere and a walk on the wild side can be a marvellous opportunity to lift up the heart to God, particularly as we live in the Lake District.

Lectio Divina is the Latin term which describes the devotional reading of Scripture. We take a short paragraph from Scripture, and spend time considering its meaning for us. Following the example of St. Francis of Assisi you may open the Bible at random, and read where it opens until a passage leaps off the page catching your attention, then you spend time slowly reading and re-reading it until you feel moved to pray. Sometimes it helps to have a note book with you, to jot down any thoughts or ideas the passage gives you, and then spend some time, giving thanks, asking for your needs, or praying for another on the theme of the Scripture reading. Or you can just allow the scripture passage to lift up your heart to the Living God, and words are not necessary.

to describe a slightly different experience of prayer. Here words are not really so important. If anything it

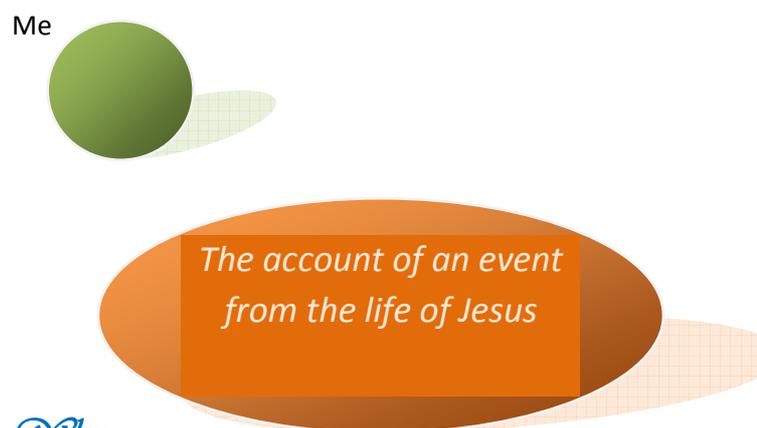
is much more like those silent times when we feel so close to another person that words would only get in the way. Of course this often happens when we love someone dearly, and it's just good enough to hold hands or sit close to each other and savour that moment of feeling utterly safe, and completely at home with another person, loving them and knowing that we are loved in return. This is like Contemplative prayer.

Perhaps we began with some vocal prayers, but soon they just get in the way and now we need time to be still in God's presence, as the words of the hymn goes, *'Be still for the presence of the Lord, the holy one is here'*. And we find that our heart reaches out to the Living God in silent love, and we know that we are not alone, we know that love is being offered to us. We have to be careful that we don't spend so much time reaching out in love to the Living God, that God cannot get through to us. We almost have to create a kind of bowl within our hearts, open and ready to receive God's love. But then we have to do that if we are to receive anyone's love! A diagram might look more like this.....and it might take place at home, or by the lakes, it might take place in a church, or on a walk on the fells or some other favourite place.



Meditation is another form of prayer, and it's the name given to times of prayer, when we set aside a specific time to be alone and to be still. Perhaps you think about a story from Scripture; an event perhaps from the life of Jesus, one which attracts you in particular. You try to place yourself within the event, either as someone who takes part, someone in the crowd, or someone watching from afar, or even a significant person within the story. Then you try to

picture the event, and see where you fit into the picture if you have that kind of visual memory, or you work out the kind of conversations you might be involved in. What do you see and hear? What does Jesus say to you? How do you feel? Then you lift up to the Living God all these thoughts and feelings. You allow the Risen Jesus to speak to you and you speak to the Risen Lord.



When you start to pray it is wise to set aside only a short period of time, as long periods set aside for prayer may just leave you open to many distractions and in the end you will not find it helpful, and almost anything else will seem more worthwhile!

Distractions during *Prayer* are normal, and to be expected. We are all different and we all have different concentration spans! When we first encounter the Living God, prayer is very attractive. It's rather like falling in love, we want to spend time with the one we love, nothing is too much trouble, and we long for their company. Once we have discovered that the Risen Jesus is really concerned and involved in our lives, and is reaching out to us, longing for our company and that we all have the capacity within to reach out to the Living God in turn, prayer is easy.

But of course there's a catch. If we are true to our prayer, we will gradually find it difficult, in fact almost anything else will seem more interesting, and gradually we will find reasons to neglect to find time for prayer. This too is normal. And here we need to make a decision. Was the love real in the first place? If so it's worth some hard work. It is worth powering through until we encounter the Lord in a new way.

Sr. Ann-Marie 2009