



St Marylebone
Parish Church

Lent 1 2021 8.30 am

In the name of the Father and of the Father and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

On Wednesday, the Church's liturgy opened with an invitation to observe a *“holy Lent, by self-examination and repentance; by prayer, fasting, and self-denial; and by reading and meditating on God's holy word.”*

In a year that has been marked by all sorts of self-denial and fasting from family and friends, not to mention sopping, partying, theatre-going and every other aspect of what used to be taken for granted, perhaps it is time to focus on prayer. It is as Fr Jack remarked last Sunday – a way into glory.

George Herbertⁱ, the 17th century aristocratic priest-poet, described prayer like this:

*Prayer the church's banquet, angel's age,
God's breath in man returning to his birth,
The soul in paraphrase, heart in pilgrimage,
The Christian plummet sounding heav'n and earth*

*Engine against th' Almighty, sinner's tow'r,
Reversed thunder, Christ-side-piercing spear,
The six-days world transposing in an hour,
A kind of tune, which all things hear and fear;
Softness, and peace, and joy, and love, and bliss,
Exalted manna, gladness of the best,
Heaven in ordinary, man well drest,
The milky way, the bird of Paradise,
Church-bells beyond the stars heard, the soul's blood,
The land of spices; something understood.*

Herbert captures something of the truth that prayer is so very much more than the words we recite or the posture we take when we pray. It is about entering body, soul, heart and mind into the very glory of God.

Prayer is, or at least should be, nothing less than an all-consuming, all-nourishing, dynamic relationship, a mutual exchange, between the divine and man; an opening-up of the one to the other; a mutually engaging dialogue of honest speaking and expectant listening.

Prayer is – or at least should be - as elusive as ‘God’s breath’, as terrifying as ‘thunder’, as painful as a ‘thrusting spear’, yet also full of ‘gentleness, softness and peace’; as mysterious as the ‘Milky Way’; as exotic as a ‘bird of Paradise’ or a ‘far-away land of spices’.

What prayer *isn't* – or at least shouldn't be – is dull, brackish, burdensome, boring or simply a mechanical chore.

When Jesus' disciples asked him to teach them how to pray, he gave them what we now know as 'The Lord's Prayer'. And the Lord's Prayer is always a good place to start whenever we pray. Indeed, there are those who say that contained within its words is everything we ever need to know about prayer.

When we pray The Lord's Prayer we begin by acknowledging God's parenthood and holiness, by placing ourselves in personal relationship to the all-holy One.

We ask that God's Kingdom be established and flourish not just here on earth, as in heaven, but in and through us! through what we do and say; that the way we do things will mirror God's intended way of doing things.

In praying for our daily bread, we acknowledge our complete dependence on God.

And how could we ask for our sins and transgressions to be taken away, if we ourselves are not able to forgive those who wrong us?

When we ask not to be led into temptation and to be delivered from a time of testing and trial, we remind ourselves that it is by and through God's grace alone that we are saved and not through our own efforts.

Prayer is the means by which we are helped to think as God thinks; the means by which we lay ourselves open to God's mystery and love and glory, and throw ourselves in trust on his gracious mercy.

It is the means by which we share our life, our inner-most secrets, with God and the means by which God enfolds us in his love.

Prayer is how we get to ‘know’ God and it is the place into which we bring those whom we love and for whom we pray.

Michael Ramsey famously wrote that “*prayer is standing before God with people on your heart*”ⁱⁱ; bringing the people and the concerns nearest and dearest to us into God’s loving gaze – and then leaving the rest up to him.

And this is, perhaps, the hardest thing about prayer, leaving things up to God.

There is no right way – but there are plenty of wrong ways - to pray.

Nothing is too small or too large to pray about. And it can be enough, when the words or the thoughts do not come to us, simply to *want* to pray!

So this Lent, let us try to re-examine our prayer lives, let us explore new ways of praying, let us open ourselves to new ways of placing ourselves and those for whom we have concern into God’s loving presence and let us open our ears ever-more to hearing God’s voice.

Come along on Saturday to the School of Prayer, come along to our Thursday evening sessions, say the Lord’s Prayer,

quietly and slowly at least once every day.

This Lent, especial if *fasting, and self-denial* might be just too much to bear, may we simply find a few minutes each day to place ourselves into God's glory and perhaps there we will discover, perhaps for the very first time those "*Church-bells beyond the stars*", the "*land of spices*" our "*soul's blood*".
Amen.

ⁱ *George Herbert, 1593–1633, Prayer I*

ⁱⁱ *Michael Ramsey, The Christian Priest Today, SPCK, 1972*