



Introduction What Is Prayer?

On the surface this seems like an obvious question - prayer is, well, prayer? But whilst we may all think we know what we mean when we use the word prayer, do we really understand what prayer is? For example, prayer can be understood as speaking the liturgy as we read out or say from memory the prayers of the Eucharist or Matins. Prayer can be the bringing of all of our deepest concerns before God and reading them off like a shopping list, “*please heal so and so and let such a body get a well paid job*” etc. Prayer can be sitting quietly in the solitude of a silent church with only our deepest thoughts and a deep desire to be heard by God. Prayer can be the ecstatic utterances known as glossolalia or tongues in the New Testament or it can be the whispered mantra of the rosary. Prayer can be corporate or private, audible or inaudible. Prayer can be all or indeed none of these things. Prayer is - if we are honest - a mystery.

Jesus at Prayer

My intention in these three Lent Studies is to scratch the surface of what we can discover when we take a look at Jesus at prayer. He must be our model if indeed it is possible to reach back through the layers of church tradition and uncover something of the historical Jesus and his prayer practice. For much of our exploration we will be using our imaginations as we try to enter into his world and follow him along the dusty track into the wilderness where he so often went to pray.

One of the most frequently used greek words used for describing Jesus at prayer is *proseuchomai* (pros-yoo-khom-ah-ee) - *he would go off to some deserted place and **pray*** (Lk 5.16), *Now it happened in those days that he went onto the mountain to **pray**; and he spent the whole night in **prayer** to God.* (Lk 6.12). It is a word made up of two other root words, *pro* meaning *nearness* or *drawing near*, and *euchomai* meaning *desire* or *wish*. From this we can imagine that when used of Jesus it suggests that his practice was to get away and draw near to God in solitude. Another rendition of Lk 5.16 could be, *he would often withdraw to some lonely place desiring to draw near to God.* Or Lk 6.12, *Now it happened that, desiring to be alone and close to God, he withdrew to the mountain; here he would spend the whole night drawing near to his desire - communion with God.* Prayer for Jesus may well have been a way of withdrawing from the pressing needs of his daily life in order to draw near to God for renewal and refreshment in solitude.

The Temptation in the Wilderness

Why start with the story of temptation in the wilderness when looking at Jesus at Prayer? On the surface of it the story gives no definitive examples of Jesus praying in any traditional or practical sense. The story appears to be more about a dialogue between Satan and Jesus rather than a prayerful dialogue between Jesus and God. However, my approach will be to ask certain questions of this encounter that may lead us to answers that give us some indication of what prayer is at its heart rather than on the surface. So, to begin, let me take a flight of fancy and imagine we have access to the journal Jesus kept tucked inside his robe;

I am finding it increasingly more difficult to pray. The closer I feel to God the less I have to say. The harder I try to pray the further I feel from God. The words themselves become a barrier, a stumbling block on the road to entering the heart of the unknown mystery that is God. How can I put into words the things I am feeling? If indeed prayer is the process of putting into words what I am feeling and then addressing them to God as an objective other outside of my self, listening in. What use is it for me to phrase human language in an attempt to articulate my inner thoughts and feelings? Thoughts and feelings even I have difficulty understanding in any linguistic sense. Surely the one who knows my heart and mind knows my deep thoughts and feelings even before I attempt to utter them. More and more I am struck dumb in the presence of such mystery. Silence seems the only way forward and instead of words I offer my presence, my physicality as I prostrate myself on the ground; instead of words I offer my emotions expressed though tears of frustration and wonder; instead of words I offer my spirit as I empty myself in order to be filled – spirit for Spirit in sighs and groans too deep for words. Entering the wilderness I bring my self – all that I am body, mind and spirit – and dumb, I sense the freedom this affords me to truly enter into prayer – a wordless prayer through which, that which I thought to address outside of my self, instead addresses me from the depths of my being and returns to itself in wordless wonder. True prayer is the bringing of my whole self to myself knowing that I as I do so I am set free from my self to know that which is within me and without me in perfect communion. I must away to the wilderness

This is of course not an excerpt from the Journal of Jesus (but it would be fun to have access to such a document). It is in fact an excerpt from one of my own journals. For I have to confess to you that I have long found prayer something impossible to articulate in language. Words do not seem to be anywhere near adequate and I find myself in good company with Paul (Rom 8.26) as I confess that in my weakness I know not how to pray - and with him I rejoice that even so the Spirit of God will and does intercede through me in sighs and groans too deep for words (but more of that next week).

Another of my journal excerpts is in the form of a song I wrote whilst on retreat back in the early 1990's;

Searching for the words to tell how I'm feeling deep inside,
There are no words – only sighs
Feeling for a way to worship drawing closer to the edge
There are no words - only sighs

You hear the cry of the wounded heart
You see the plight of the lonely soul
You're with the wonderer out in the wilderness
You're on the side of the seeking mind
And you will not forsake the Spirit's sigh

Wrestling with the dreams I have I am falling to my knees
There are no words - only sighs
Aching in your arc of love in the face of all you are
There are no words - only sighs

Prayer as the offering of our whole self – body, mind and spirit.

In the prayer of Jesus I sense a searching for that which is beyond words and expressed in his entire person – body, heart, mind and spirit. This is echoed in his call for us to love God with our whole being and for Jesus prayer is surely his desire to express his love for God in all that he is and all that he does. We can find this in his encounter in the wilderness. If we approach the temptations of Jesus as examples of all that he himself has wrestled with over a significant period of formation out in the wilderness, long before his baptism, we may have a clue of how prayer played a crucial role in his ability to face them.

Body Prayer

The first of the temptations is aimed at Jesus' physical needs. After a period of fasting he would have been hungry and the first test for him would be to feed himself – to satisfy his physical appetite. Jesus must have practiced mastery over his physical appetite for years and here we see the fruit of that discipline in his ability to resist simply giving in to reaching out for the stones to be turned to bread and fill his belly. Very often our own physical appetites whether for food or for leisure or entertainment can come into conflict with our intention to set aside time to pray and focus our attention on being still before God.

I want to suggest that here we find a model for praying with our bodies in order to have an understanding of our own physicality, and by implication, our own mortality. Sometimes in prayer we will need to practice sitting or kneeling, maybe even prostrating our bodies as an act of drawing near to God. Our breathing is also important as we learn to slow our breathing down in order to find stillness at the centre of our being. For Jews (as for Muslims) prayer has always been a physical activity involving posture and action. We may learn from this as we consider how we might use our bodies in prayer.

Heart & Mind Prayer

The second temptation is one of testing Jesus' understanding of himself as one who is loved and chosen of God. The suggestion that he 'proves' this love by throwing himself off the precipice is a test of how well he understands himself to be loved. For the one who has a strong sense of self and as one who is accepted by God there is no need to 'prove' that. One reaches this sense of self only when we have been able to lay ourselves bare before God in every aspect of who we are. In prayer there can be no concealment – all must be laid bare before God, every thought and every emotion, thus we will know ourselves as accepted for who we are and our self esteem does not become an issue that can separate us from God. Prayer is the free and confident expression of all that we are before God believing that we will be welcomed into an intimate place of acceptance.

Spirit Prayer

The final temptation is one of testing Jesus' heart of worship – who will he worship and for what reason? Is his worship a matter of 'what's in it for me?' or is it a matter of – this I freely give because it is all that I desire. Fundamentally, worship or prayer is not a question of what is in it for me. We offer prayer as a means of deepening our relationship with God. Jesus was fully at one with God in his spirit and fully devoted to God in prayer. The thought of having any other focus of devotion or worship was completely foreign to him. Our prayer life must follow his example. Prayer is our discipline of drawing near to God to make him our hearts desire. This is our sensible worship as Paul says in Rom 12 - *offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, dedicated and acceptable to God; that is the kind of worship for you, as sensible people.*

Prayer as the Offering of our Whole Self

So then, we begin this journey with Jesus offering our whole self to God. We accept that we are inarticulate but we rejoice that our first requirement is simply to draw near with a desire to be in communion with God. From this no doubt we will grow more and more accustomed to opening ourselves up to God in every aspect of our lives. We will begin by finding a suitable posture for placing ourselves before God in an open attitude of prayerful presence. We can then allow ourselves to open every thought and every emotion to God with or without words. We need not hide or conceal anything of who we are before the one who loves us unconditionally and longs also to be present to us as we are present to him. Finally we draw near in spirit knowing that God is Spirit and as Jesus says in John chapter 4, God is actively seeking out those who will worship in spirit (and in truth). Spirit is represented as wind and breath, which in turn speaks to us of flight and freedom. It is when we open ourselves to prayer in the spirit that we can experience true freedom to be ourselves before God. This is what we see in Jesus – the one who knows himself fully to be one with God – surely this is the ultimate aim of prayer, to draw near with a strong desire to commune and become one with God.

Next session we shall look at some practical ways in which Jesus may have practiced this kind of prayer.