



DIOCESE OF
LINCOLN

The Lent Course 2025

TEACH US TO PRAY

The more you learn about prayer, the more you realise how little you know. That's true of a lot of things, of course, but it's particularly true of prayer. Prayer is a mystery that deepens with experience and understanding. So learning to pray isn't something we ever finish. It is a lifelong journey in which each new thing that we discover suggests a dozen more things to explore.

This year, our Lent Course explores prayer through the lens of some of the simplest things we ever learn to say: please; wow; sorry; and ouch. We will learn together how each of these words opens up a different way of thinking about prayer, and different practical approaches to praying. In the final section, we think about the kind of prayer in which we say nothing at all.



Saying Please

The most obvious kind of prayer is the kind where we ask God for things. Please make somebody well. Please may we have fine weather at the weekend. Please give me the strength to get through the day.

Asking God for things is sometimes called 'petition' or 'intercession'. In this first week of our course we look at prayer through the lens of saying 'please' to God. **What is really happening when we ask God to do things for us?**

FIRST THOUGHTS

Do you like asking for things? When you pray, what do you ask for? Is asking God for things an important part of your prayer life? Is it the only thing you do when you pray, or do you hardly ever do it?

Spend some time thinking about these questions. Jot down some of your thoughts.

BIBLE READING

Read the following two passages from the Bible.



Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

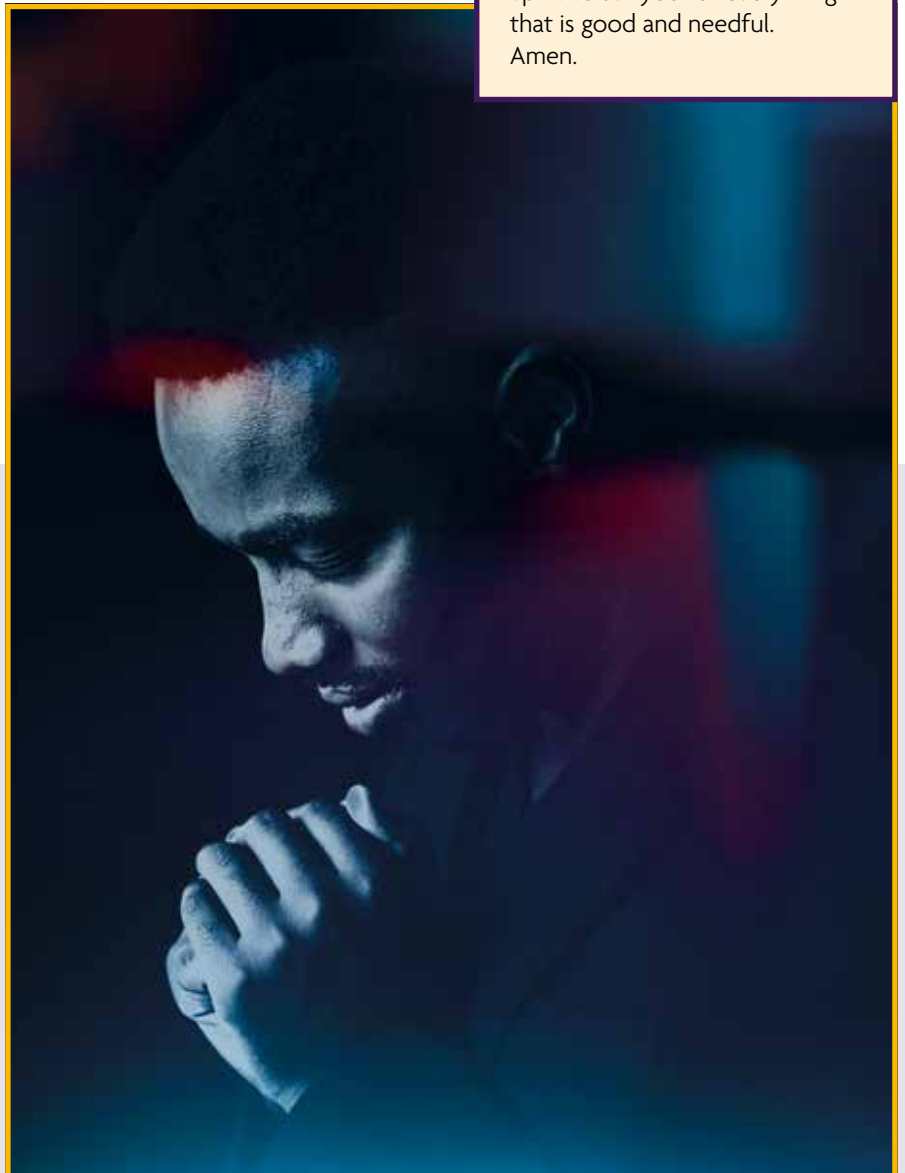


[Jesus said,] 'Ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for bread, will give a stone? Or if the child asks for a fish, will give a snake? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him!



OPENING PRAYER

Almighty God, your Son Jesus taught his followers to pray to you as a Father who loves to give his children good gifts. Teach us to pray, and guide us by your Spirit to ask you for everything that is good and needful. Amen.



These passages encourage us to ask God to give us things. They seem to promise that God will give us the things that we ask for. Has that been your experience? If not, what has?

Apart from encouraging us to ask God for things, what else do these passages invite us to do?

Spend some time thinking about these questions. Jot down a few of your thoughts.



A BIT OF BACKGROUND

When we ask for things in prayer, our prayers are sometimes described as 'petitions'. When our petitions ask for things for other people, they are also called 'intercessions'.

Few (if any) Christians would claim that every time they ask God for something in prayer they receive exactly what they have requested! Yet the Bible is clear – we are to ask, and we are to expect to receive. James 4:2-3 says '... you covet something and cannot obtain it; so you engage in disputes and conflicts. You do not have, because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly...'

Some spiritual writers suggest that every time our prayers are unanswered it is because there is something wrong with our prayer, for example, a lack of faith. Other writers emphasise how important it is for intercession to be a kind of prayer that flows out of a much richer prayer life in which we are increasingly 'tuned in' to God. Jesus himself told a story comparing the prayer life to someone who wakes a friend in the middle of the night to ask for help, and refuses to take no for an answer.

Perhaps the most important insight comes from the central petition of the Lord's Prayer – 'thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven'.

Before moving on to the next section, jot down some of your thoughts.

ASKING GOD FOR THINGS – HOW, WHEN AND WHERE?

Our public worship is full of prayer, but the sections of our services that are called 'the Prayers' or 'Intercessions' are those that focus on asking God for things. These tend to centre on the needs of individuals, and of the wider community and world. In the Eucharist, we ask God to come among us in the miracle of the sacrament.

The Bible encourages us to pray in this way together, so prayers of intercession are an important part of public prayer. But solitary prayers can include intercessions and petitions as well. One writer suggests that we use 'flash prayers' – silent, private prayers for people as and when we meet them. It's worth a try. It certainly makes a difference to how you react to people you normally find annoying!

THE PRAYER OF FAITH

Every Christmas it was the same. My Dad would grumble and mutter all the way up to Christmas Eve. I don't want anyone waking me up in the morning. No presents until after church. Then, when Christmas morning came, he was always the first on the landing, wondering where everybody was, and asking why no one seemed to have remembered what day it was. We would take a millisecond to come to, and then rush downstairs to find the tree surrounded by presents and stockings hanging from the mantelpiece.

My Dad loved to give us presents. He still does. This year, he nearly cried when my son opened his present from him. It made his day, and watching it made mine.

How would we pray if that was how we thought of God?

What would that do to our confidence, our faith, our persistence in prayer?

FINAL THOUGHTS

Take the last few minutes to jot down any final thoughts.



CLOSING PRAYER



Heavenly Father, keep us faithful in prayer. Show us the things that we need most to ask for, and give us the confidence to ask for them boldly. Amen.

Saying Wow

Another fairly obvious kind of prayer is the kind in which we tell God how marvellous God is. Lord, you are holy indeed, the source of all holiness. My God, how wonderful thou art. Father, Lord of all creation...

This is sometimes called 'praise' or 'thanksgiving'. In the second week of the course we look at prayer through the lens of saying 'Wow!' to God. **What is really happening when we tell God how great He is?**

FIRST THOUGHTS

Do you like saying thank you? When you pray, what do you thank God for? Is saying thank you to God an important part of your prayer life? Is it the only thing you do when you pray, or do you hardly ever do it?

Spend some time thinking about these questions. Jot down a few of your thoughts.

BIBLE READING

Read the following passage from the Bible.

Praise the Lord!

Praise God in his sanctuary;
praise him in his mighty firmament!

Praise him for his mighty deeds;
praise him according to his surpassing greatness!

Praise him with trumpet sound;
praise him with lute and harp!

Praise him with tambourine and dance;
praise him with strings and pipe!

Praise him with clanging cymbals;
praise him with loud clashing cymbals!

Let everything that breathes praise the Lord!
Praise the Lord!

This passage exhorts us to praise God. It reminds us of God's 'mighty deeds'. What sort of things does this bring to mind? What has God done to be worthy of our praise and thanks? The passage also speaks of God's 'surpassing greatness'. What does this phrase mean to you?

Spend some time thinking about these questions. Jot down a few of your thoughts.



OPENING PRAYER

Almighty God, you create and sustain everything that is, and call us your children. You sent your Son Jesus to save us from our sins and bring us the gift of eternal life. Teach us to pray as those who are truly grateful for all that you are and all that you do. Amen.





A BIT OF BACKGROUND

When we say 'thank you' to God our prayers are sometimes called 'thanksgiving'. When we mention the greatness and goodness of God and his actions in our prayers, this is more generally known as 'praise'.

The Bible is full of encouragements to praise God. It is also full of examples of people praising God, from the ancient people of Israel through to the company of heaven in the book of Revelation. Christian worship relies heavily on these examples: Mary's song of praise at Evening Prayer; Zechariah's at Morning Prayer; and many Eucharistic Prefaces laden with biblical language and imagery.

Prayers of praise and thanksgiving are a particular focus for church music. Hymns like 'Praise, my soul, the king of heaven', settings of Gloria in Excelsis, and modern worship songs like 'Blessed be your name' join words of praise to music of joyful exultation. Praise and thanksgiving are important parts of Christian prayer not least because they remind us of who God is. (God does not need to be reminded of this!) They get us looking in the right direction, towards God as God really is. Or, put differently, they help 'tune in' our spiritual radio to the right station.

Before moving on to the next section, make a few notes about what you have just read.

THANKING GOD FOR THINGS – HOW, WHEN AND WHERE?

Our public worship is full of praise and thanksgiving, often using words taken directly from Scripture. Hymns are particularly important in praise and thanksgiving because, as St Augustine observed, music joins the prayer of the mind to the prayer of the heart. Each Eucharistic Prayer begins with a Preface, praising God for his 'mighty acts'. This, too, is often sung.

Solitary prayer may also involve praise and thanksgiving. St Ignatius of Loyola taught an exercise called the Examen. In this exercise, we review the day past, asking God for insight, and giving thanks for all that has taken place. It's harder to give thanks for things that have been difficult or painful, but by doing so we may become conscious of lessons and growth, and become more open to healing and restoration.

THE PRAYER OF JOY

Zennor is a place on the north coast of Cornwall that is full of sad memories for me. It is where my best friend's father and brother were tragically drowned in 1988. Last summer I returned there for the first time in over 20 years.

As my family and I walked the cliffs, we turned a corner to see a rocky headland covered in heather and gorse, and a riot of colour. The granite cliffs and the roaring sea stood behind, the best flower arrangement in the world in front. And I felt the kind of joy that

bubbles up inside you, overcomes you, refuses to be tamed or controlled.

I wasn't expecting joy – perhaps that's why it was so powerful when it caught me. But catch me it did, and the joy became praise, thanksgiving to God for the extravagant, exuberant, excessive wonder of who God is and what God has made. Wouldn't it be great if everyone in church felt this way every week?

FINAL THOUGHTS

Take the last few minutes to jot down any final thoughts.



CLOSING PRAYER



Heavenly Father, keep us faithful in prayer. Show us as much of your glory as we can bear to see, and free our hearts to respond with grateful thanks and praise. Amen.

Saying Sorry

A lot of our prayers are the kind in which we tell God that we feel guilty and ashamed. Lord, have mercy upon us. Forgive me, Father, for I have sinned. We have followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts.

Saying sorry to God is sometimes called 'confession'. In the third week of the course we look at prayer through the lens of saying 'sorry' to God. **What is really happening when we tell God that we feel badly about what we have done? Are there particular ways of praying that are especially suited to expressing remorse?**

FIRST THOUGHTS

Do you like saying sorry? When you pray, what do you say sorry to God for? Is saying sorry to God an important part of your prayer life? Is it the only thing you do when you pray, or do you hardly ever do it?

Spend some time thinking about these questions. Jot down a few of your thoughts.

BIBLE READING

Read the following passage from the Bible.

This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light and in him there is no darkness at all. If we say that we have fellowship with him while we are walking in darkness, we lie and do not do what is true; but if we walk in the light as he himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin.

If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.

This passage tells us three things: that none of us is without sin; that we need to confess our sins to God; and that if we do confess our sins God will forgive us. But what does it mean to be a sinner? How should we go about confessing our sins to God? What does forgiveness actually mean?



OPENING PRAYER

Almighty God, you are holy and in you there is no darkness. We thank you that you sent your Son Jesus to die for our sins and to command us to forgive as we have been forgiven. Teach us to pray, make us true penitents and bring us to the joy of your redeeming love. Amen.



Spend some time thinking about these questions. Jot down a few of your thoughts.



A BIT OF BACKGROUND

When we say 'sorry' to God our prayers are generally called 'confession'. Confession is strongly associated with the attitude of 'penitence'. Being penitent means being conscious of sin in our lives, and this is reflected by the outward behavior of confession.

Scripture encourages us to confess our sins to God, but it also tells us that we need to confess them to each other (James 5:16), and in John 20:23 Jesus gives his apostles a role in the ministry of absolution – what they forgive will be forgiven. Penitence, confession and forgiveness, then, are part of how we relate to each other as Christians, and not reserved to our prayer lives.

Indeed, while we need to confess our sins to God and receive God's forgiveness, this does not take away our responsibility to seek each other's forgiveness for the things we do to wrong each other. Our prayer lives may be crippled by our failure to do this – Jesus said seeking reconciliation with one another was a higher priority than going to worship (Matthew 5:23-26).

Through history, penitence has occasionally got out of hand! Sorrow for our sins is a healthy part of the normal Christian life, but it is not the whole story and should always lead on to the joy of being forgiven. It is worth asking, though, whether penitence has now become too small a part of the way we practise our faith.

Before moving on to the next section, make a few notes about what you have just read.

SAYING SORRY TO GOD FOR THINGS – HOW, WHEN AND WHERE?

Our public worship generally includes an act of penitence, and every eucharist must contain one. We are invited to confess our sins in quite general terms. This is usually (but not always) followed by an absolution, in which a priest declares God's forgiveness. Some times of year, such as Lent and Advent, are more penitential than others.

Many Christians find that one-to-one confession of specific sins is also a helpful part of their prayer lives. This is sometimes known as the sacrament of reconciliation. For those struggling to accept and receive God's forgiveness for specific sins, or in the grip of unhealthy feelings of guilt and shame, this can be an important way forward.

Solitary, private confession to God is also worthwhile, but care needs to be taken to avoid the cultivation of neurotic feelings of guilt. The purpose of penitence is to lead us into the peace of knowing ourselves to have been forgiven. We can lose sight of this if we neglect to ground our confession in the life of a praying community and expose it to compassionate counsel.

THE PRAYER OF PENITENCE

I lied. Forty years later, I can't remember what the lie was or what it was about, but I can remember feeling so guilty that I could barely breathe.

Eventually, when I could bear it no longer, I knocked on my parents' bedroom door, and owned up. It was excruciating: I could hardly stand, and at various points I thought I was going to be sick. What was I expecting? That they would kick me out on the streets? That they would yell? I don't know, but what they did do was to congratulate me on my courage in admitting my wrongdoing, forgive me instantly, and ask if there was anything they could do to make it easier for me to tell the truth in the future.

The pain of acknowledging my failure and imperfection was extreme. Then

and now, I like to give myself and others as few opportunities as possible to criticise! But the relief, the delight, the joy or knowing myself to be loved and forgiven by people who knew what I'd done was extraordinary.

The Bible promises us God's forgiveness, and God already knows (better than we do ourselves) who we really are and what we've done.

What would our prayers of confession be like if we were confident these things were true? How would a deeper experience of God's forgiveness of our sins be reflected in our attitudes to one another?



CLOSING PRAYER

Heavenly Father, keep us faithful in prayer. Show us how much you long to forgive us and heal us, and free our hearts to receive your grace with joy and thanksgiving. Amen.



FINAL THOUGHTS

Take the last few minutes to jot down any final thoughts.

Saying Ouch

Sometimes the only thing that we have to bring to our prayers is our pain. Deliver me, O Lord from my affliction. Take this cup away from me.

Expressing our pain to God is sometimes called 'lamentation'. In the fourth week of the course we look at prayer through the lens of saying 'ouch' to God. **What is really happening when we cry out to God in our distress? What kinds of practical approach to praying are particularly well-suited to this? What can we do to develop this aspect of our personal prayer lives?**

FIRST THOUGHTS

Do you like admitting that things are hurting? When you pray, do you tell God about your suffering? Is saying 'ouch' to God an important part of your prayer life? Is it the only thing you do when you pray, or do you hardly ever do it?

Spend some time thinking about these questions. Jot down a few of your thoughts.

BIBLE READING

Read the following passage from the Bible.

Hear my prayer, O Lord;
let my cry come to you.

Do not hide your face from me
on the day of my distress.

Incline your ear to me;
answer me speedily on the day when I call.

For my days pass away like smoke,
and my bones burn like a furnace.

My heart is stricken and withered like grass;
I am too wasted to eat my bread.

Because of my loud groaning
my bones cling to my skin.

I am like an owl of the wilderness,
like a little owl of the waste places.

I lie awake;
I am like a lonely bird on the housetop.

All day long my enemies taunt me;
those who deride me use my name for a curse.

For I eat ashes like bread,
and mingle tears with my drink,

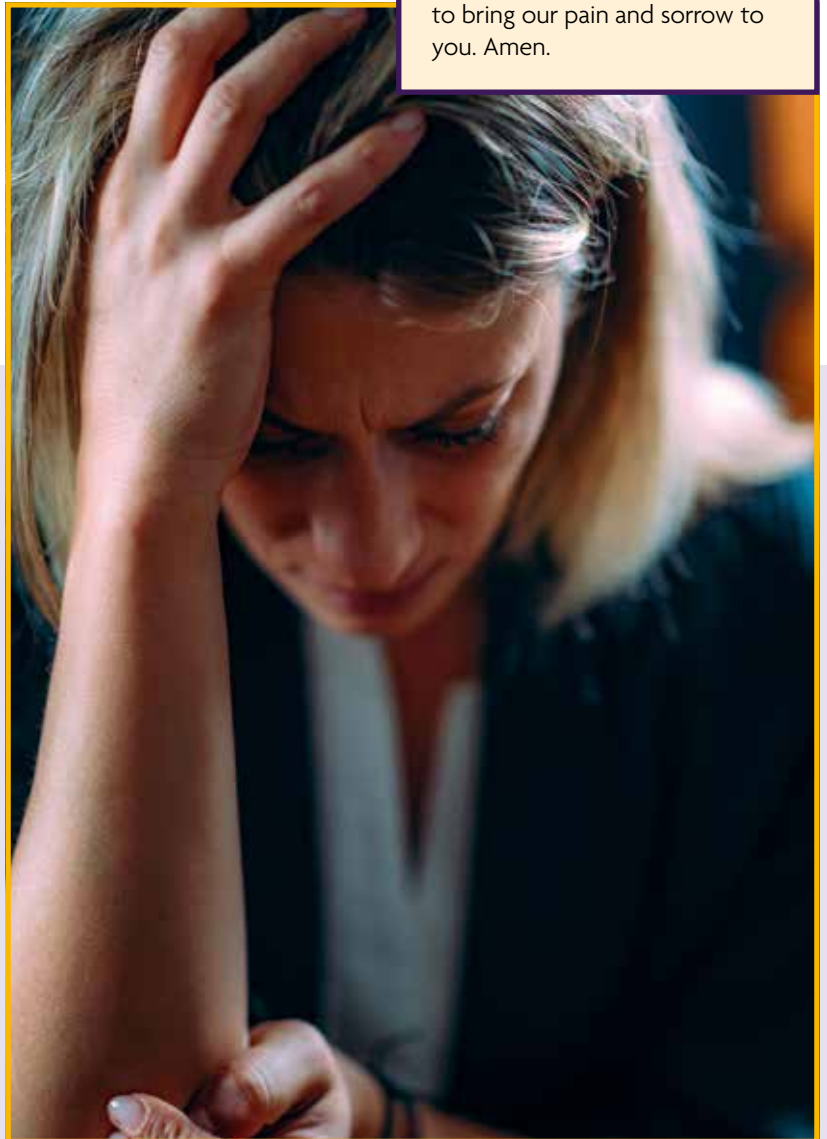
because of your indignation and anger;
for you have lifted me up and thrown me aside.

My days are like an evening shadow;
I wither away like grass.



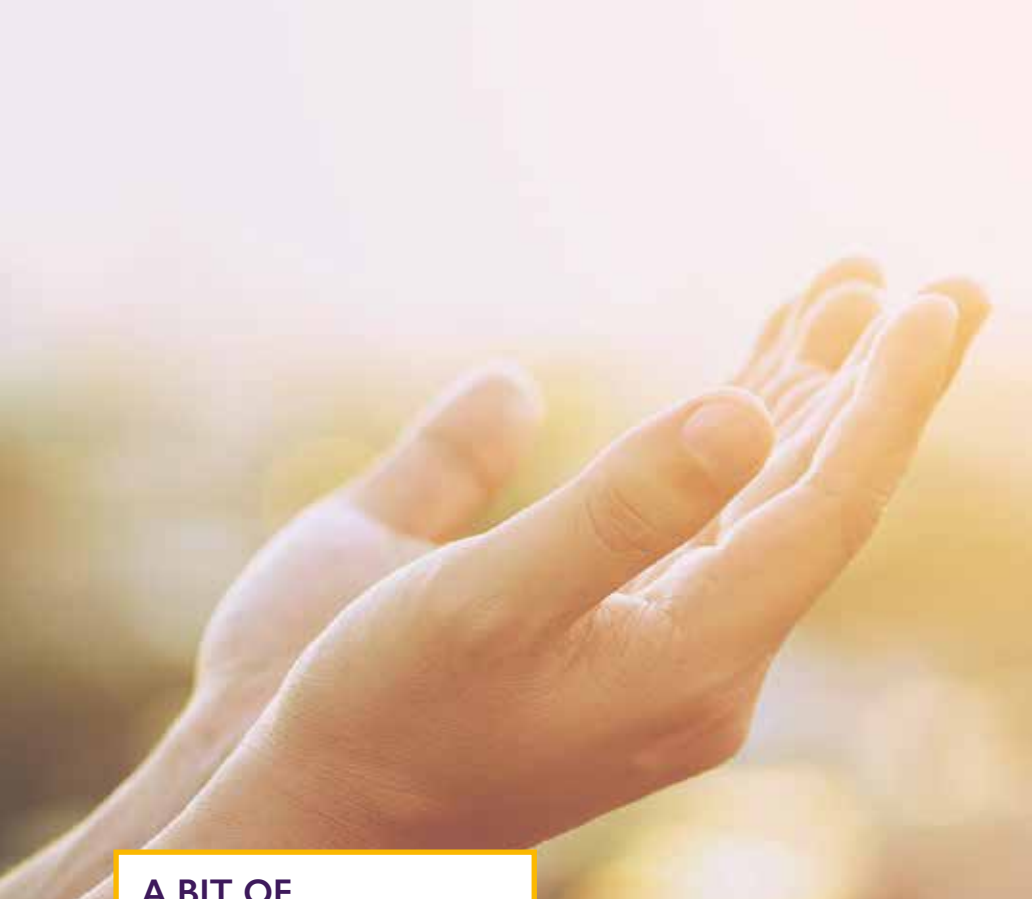
OPENING PRAYER

Almighty God, you are our Father and you love us without limit and without reservation. We thank you that you sent your Son Jesus to prove your love by sharing our suffering. Teach us to pray, and give us the confidence to bring our pain and sorrow to you. Amen.



This Psalm, and many others like it, comes from a place of deep suffering. The poet's anguish cries out to God. Have you ever prayed like this? Do you feel that you are allowed to pray like this?

Spend some time thinking about these questions. Jot down a few of your thoughts.



A BIT OF BACKGROUND

When we say 'ouch' to God our prayers are sometimes called 'lamentations'. The Bible is full of prayers of lamentation; there is even a whole book called Lamentations! It's not just an Old Testament thing, either. Jesus took the words of the Psalm as his own from the cross when he said, "My God, why have you forsaken me?"

In fact, the Bible commands us to bring our suffering and pain to God in prayer. James 5:13 says "Are any among you suffering? They should pray"; and 1 Peter 4 says "if any of you suffers as a Christian, do not consider it a disgrace, but glorify God because you bear this name".

The Christian faith does not offer us a life free from pain or promise us that God will always take our pain away when we pray. In fact, Jesus continuously warned his followers that they would experience great sufferings and persecutions, a prediction that has been borne out by the history of the church. However, we are commanded to be faithful in prayer through all that we suffer, and to make sure that we suffer "for righteousness' sake".

Before moving on to the next section, make a few notes about what you have just read.

THE PRAYER OF LAMENTATION

It was my first night home after coming out of hospital. My right arm was in a plaster cast from fingernail to elbow, my hand twisted to minimise the tension in the wrist. I would be spending another 24 weeks like this over the coming years, as operation after operation tried to repair the damage to my hand after a serious accident.

It was also the first night on which I knew, in the way that one sometimes knows things like this, that I would never get full use of the hand back, and that what I would never be able to play the piano properly again.

It was the first time in many years that I had cried, really cried. I'm not sure I said any words at all, out loud or in my head, but those tears were a prayer. I wasn't asking for anything. I wasn't apologising for anything. I was just pouring out my pain and grief to God.

What response did I expect? None, I think, but a response of

FINAL THOUGHTS

Take the last few minutes to jot down any final thoughts.



SAYING OUCH TO GOD – HOW, WHEN AND WHERE?

Public worship is not always the most helpful context for prayers of lamentation. There are exceptions: the liturgies of Good Friday and hymns like "Drop, drop slow tears" are good but rare examples. Typically, these focus on lamentation for sin, as much saying sorry as saying ouch.

The reason for this is that suffering is very personal. When we come together to worship, it's right to focus on the things that we can say to God with one voice, but our cries of pain are often very individual. Prayers of lamentation, then, are more naturally suited to smaller groups where a high level of trust has been established. Sharing these intimate matters with a few other Christians can transform your prayer life.

Lamentation may also play a large role in personal, private prayer. Here it can be helpful to keep a journal. The value of a journal lies not just in recording the painful experiences that you have brought to God in prayer, but being able to see, with hindsight, how God has responded.

sorts came nonetheless. A simple acknowledgement is how I'd describe it. A reassurance that God knew how I felt. Not in a dismissive, impersonal way, but in a profound, intimate and infinitely compassionate way, God knew my pain.

Prayer isn't always like this. It isn't even often like this, but when it is, it can be among the most profound of all spiritual experiences. I don't hope to find myself there again, but I remember it as a place when I was closer to God than in many far more joyful moments.

CLOSING PRAYER



Heavenly Father, keep us faithful in prayer. Show us your great compassion, free our hearts to receive your comfort, and open our eyes to see you walking alongside us. Amen.

Saying Nothing

The final kind of prayer that we are considering in this course is the kind where we say nothing at all.

Praying without words is sometimes called 'contemplation'. In this fifth and final week, we look at prayer through the lens of saying nothing to God. **What is really happening when we sit quietly in silent prayer? How exactly does one go about praying in this way?**

FIRST THOUGHTS

Most of us think naturally of praying as 'talking to God', but how often do we experience this as a conversation? When you pray, do you find yourself doing most of the talking? Does God speak to you? Are you able to describe how this happens?

Spend some time thinking about these questions. Jot down a few of your thoughts.

BIBLE READING

Read the following two passages from the Bible.

The Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

Come, behold the works of the Lord;
see what desolations he has brought on the earth.

He makes wars cease to the end of the earth;
he breaks the bow, and shatters the spear;
he burns the shields with fire.

'Be still, and know that I am God!
I am exalted among the nations,
I am exalted in the earth.'

The Lord of hosts is with us;
the God of Jacob is our refuge.

What might it mean to say that the spirit of God intercedes for the saints? What does it feel like to be still in the presence of God?

Spend some time thinking about these questions. Jot down a few of your thoughts.



OPENING PRAYER

Almighty God, by your Spirit you speak to us, bringing us comfort, counsel and inspiration. Teach us to pray, and help us to listen, to hear, and to receive all that you have to give us. Amen.



PRAYER

A BIT OF BACKGROUND

Silent prayer is often called 'contemplation'. Some people also use the term 'meditation'. For me, the idea of meditation suggests various ways of praying with the imagination, for example, visualising a scene or a story from the life of Jesus, or using an icon or a short, repeated prayer. Contemplation, by contrast, suggests the kind of prayer that happens when we set aside time to come into God's presence and do nothing. And say nothing. Nevertheless, both words speak of an approach to prayer that is concerned with stilling ourselves to receive what God has to say, and what God has to give, rather than over-filling our prayer lives with our own words, so that God can't get a word in edgeways!

The Bible suggests that silence is often the appropriate response to the majesty of God; Habakkuk 2:20 says that the whole earth should be silent in the presence of God. Similarly, many of the great spiritual writers of the church have taught the practice of silent prayer. Thomas Merton's *Elected Silence* is a modern classic, while medieval writers from the Carmelite tradition like St Teresa of Avila still inspire many.

One way of thinking about contemplative prayer is that we wait silently to see what emerges in our consciousness, and allow that, whatever it is, to become our prayer. It might be that we remember a task that needs completing – we offer it to God. It might be a person who needs healing – we let our compassion for them be our prayer.

Before moving on to the next section, make a few notes about what you have just read.

SAYING NOTHING TO GOD FOR THINGS – HOW, WHEN AND WHERE?

Some Christian groups practise silent prayer when they come together for worship. Anglican worship, by contrast, is very 'word-led' and in the Church of England we can struggle to make space for silence. Some exceptions include the Maundy Thursday Watch, and spaces for short silence in some of our other liturgies.

Smaller groups may meet together for silent prayer, too, and this can be helpful. However, for many Christians, silent prayer is the most intimate, personal of all ways of praying. There are too many techniques to describe in detail. One that may be helpful is described below.

Set aside the time, and protect the space. It is important that you know you won't be interrupted. Have a notebook to hand, and a pencil. Make sure you are comfortable, but not so comfortable that you are likely to fall asleep. As thoughts and images enter your mind, resist the urge to hold on to them, or to push them away. Receive them with compassion. Then offer them up to God. You may find that some of your thoughts suggest the need for urgent action. Write these ones down. When you have finished, write down any other things that have emerged for you in the time, and make sure you review these at a later time.

THE PRAYER OF CONTEMPLATION

She was from the East End of London, this nun who was leading our Quiet Day. I'd never really experienced a Quiet Day before and my main feeling about it was 'What am I supposed to do?' She sat in the middle of the chapel in a chair three sizes too big for her, and talked for about three minutes.

'You know, quite often when we pray we're saying "Oh Lord, I just ask you to do this, and I just need you to do that, and I just pray that you give me the

other thing" and the Lord is thinking "Oh, I just wish you'd shut up."'

The chapel was filled with awkward laughter. Was this blasphemy? Did our nun know what she was saying? She did. Over the years, I've often found those words surfacing in my mind as I've tried to pray. Listening to God isn't easy, and sometimes I keep talking because I fear the silence that may engulf me if I stop. The discipline of shutting up in the presence of God is far from well-developed in me, but when I do manage it, what I discover isn't an empty silence, but a stillness charged with grace.

FINAL THOUGHTS



Take the last few minutes to jot down any final thoughts. This week is the last week, so allow yourself to look back over the whole course. What have you learned? What will change in your prayer life as a result of having been through this course?

CLOSING PRAYER



Heavenly Father, keep us faithful in prayer. Help us to learn how to still our hearts and quieten our minds so that we can hear what you have to say to us. Amen.

