

Praying in Advent

How can I pray?

There are all sorts of methods, expounded by all sorts of teachers. Most of them tell us that our whole personality has to be attended-to before we can properly pray. So it isn't about escaping from one or other area of our life; prayer involves your whole self. In particular, bodies that are left unattended usually protest.

I think it's hard to pray when you're physically uncomfortable; you keep thinking about the draught from the window or the ache that's developing in your joints. If you can get into a restful position, perhaps your body will let your mind explore without interrupting so much.

The mind can also be noisy. Too many words, too much logic, and prayer gets invaded by the cash-register and the work-schedule. We must be ready often to descend into the heart, to the place where we give ourselves wordlessly in love.

It's hard to avoid distractions – the invasion of outside concerns, like the book you meant to find, the 'phone-call you meant to make, the cheque you should have written. If you follow the Lord's advice, *and pray in your private room with the door shut*, you tend to find yourself surrounded by all sorts of jobs. When prayer gets a bit difficult, the temptation to leap up and sort something practical becomes almost irresistible. So I think there are some prudent steps one can take:

- **Pray early** If you're up really early, no-one will ring you and you won't be tempted to ring them. You can come to value this peacefulness very highly. There is no better time to be attentive, or free of distraction.
- **Try praying somewhere neutral** If you're physically away from books and papers and the keyboard you can't get inveigled into working, which is virtuous enough to feel like a valid alternative.

Finding a key Most people need a "way in" to prayer, which can often be found by receiving some words of Scripture, and trying to hear them as God's word to me. In some sense our praying self needs to be sensitised, so that we are ready to experience the closeness of God, much as decorators talk about *getting a key* when they roughen up a surface to accept paint. Perhaps there is something or someone you need to pray about; if so, you probably already know. Perhaps God has something you need to pray about; searching for him will usually reveal what it is.

Standing back Prayer can deepen in me as I stand back and take a broader view of my life. I can ask God to remind me of his closeness to me, of his loving concern for me and for all I love. I can seek to discern what he has in mind for me, when he put together the person I am. I can bring to God the awkward or disturbing factors I am facing, and make the problematic areas into places where grace is at work, where there is opportunity for growth and change. It makes all the difference to see myself from God's viewpoint, to stop living heroically lonely.

Being, not doing Having a time where *I refuse to work* reminds me that what I am is much more important than what I can do. Simply *to be*, in the presence of God, is absolutely sufficient. This is where God loves me, and I can learn to love God who made me and holds me in being. Simply to breathe becomes an act of obedient love, the beat of the heart accomplishes his design as my Creator. My gift of time to him begins to accomplish his design as my Father, as *I return home*, like the wasteful

son in the parable. Letting God greet me, welcome me, and restore to me the honour of his – and my – true home makes praying into a feast.

Praying together It is very important that prayer shouldn't become some kind of privatised experience separating us from each other. God wants us for himself, but this will not prevent our belonging to each other. It is as one body, therefore, that God saves us, not in penny numbers one by one. We therefore pray "in Christ", we come to the Father with Jesus, in the Spirit of Jesus and of the Father; our prayer involves us in the threefold communion which we call the Holy Trinity. When we pray, therefore, we are always in community.

The silent presence of others praying can be immensely supportive to us. We are all involved on a personal pilgrimage, but it is a converging one. Christian prayer always brings us closer to each other; this is why people following the call to be hermits find themselves praying for all the world.

To pray for another person is like wakeful parents discussing their sleeping child. The dialogue is unknown to the one we pray for, but it is far from fruitless.

Praying regularly If we pray only "when we feel like it", prayer is reduced to a piece of self-expression or a personal therapy. This doesn't express what happens in prayer. Prayer is a real encounter with the true God. Even when we don't feel like it, God is God. Paul says prayer should be "continuous", which I take to mean *sustained whatever the conditions*. God doesn't leave so precious a gift unused or unrewarded. He will not fail to meet us, whatever the weather in our life. A very significant commitment, therefore, is that required of a monk: to get the body out of bed and into Church, to arrive, alert for God, in and out of season.

Becoming like God One of the things that happens when human beings mix with God is that they start to resemble God. If you are visiting God regularly, you will not live like someone far from him. If you share the state of your heart with him regularly, this fact will change you into a saint – one whose life lies open to God and is constantly seeking to reflect him as he is. So one of the things you can allow to unfold in prayer is, *how do you want me to be?*

The qualities we most value in God will give us the answer. Perhaps for Augustine, it was his peerless holiness, his endless wisdom, his eternity. For Francis, his compassion, his generosity, his creative love. For Mary Magdalen, his forgiveness, his power over evil, his ability to liberate. Mysteriously, the tumultuous Augustine begins to seek holiness, the rich Francis seeks poverty, Mary Magdalen, possessed by devils, belongs to Christ raised from the tomb.

For a period of two weeks of Advent, until the end of term, there will be a time of shared prayer at each morning in the PB Chapel. A short reading will be followed by silent prayer for a quarter of an hour. What time would you like it to be? (a) 8 30 (b) 8 45 (c) 9 00?