



## The Bishop of Lincoln

### Raising the Spiritual Temperature – Paper Three

*How to Pray to be Those who Radiate the Love of God*

#### Introduction

I would really love to work with all our churches to promote the further development of our capacity for building each other up in prayer. I have elsewhere referred to Archbishop Michael Ramsey who wrote and spoke passionately about the Holy Spirit and the hope that we all might know the power of the transfiguration of Our Lord. I pressed the Friends of Durham Cathedral when I was a canon there to fund a Transfiguration window in honour of Ramsey who had been the bishop of Durham. In the window the unmistakable figure of Ramsey features among the disciples waiting on Jesus. He was one among the many, each with a unique response to the glory of God.

#### Ways of praying

There are many well-tested ways of praying, some very ancient like the desert spirituality of Egyptian hermits out of which came the Jesus Prayer (see below). We are deeply invested in the stable rhythms set out in the Rule of St Benedict and the development of the Daily Office which has brought us Morning and Evening Prayer in the Book of Common Prayer and in Common Worship. The missionary orders of friars introduced aids to devotion: the Franciscans introduced the crib to focus on the Nativity of our Lord, and the Dominicans promoted the use of the Rosary. From the very early centuries of the Church devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary, the martyrs and other saints was very much a popular 'bottom-up' movement. There have been powerful insights into mystical union with Christ from the likes of Mother Julian of Norwich, St Teresa of Avila, St John of the Cross and – in the twentieth century – Evelyn Underhill. The warrior saint who created the Jesuits, St Ignatius Loyola, has given us profound approaches to a challenging order of prayer, and to praying with the Scriptures which is increasingly popular among Evangelicals as well as other Christians. Fr Thomas Keating has popularised Centering Prayer in America (hence the spelling) which encourages quiet contemplation around the repeated use of a word or phrase from the Bible or other spiritual writings.

The life of prayer is not just for monks and nuns and mystics. Before the Reformation and even more afterwards, household prayers and the gathering of families to pray and read the Bible morning and evening was considered as the necessary complement to attending Church, be that the bishop's household or any other family. Martin L Smith, who has written among other things about praying with the Bible, tells the story of his search as a teenager to uncover a forgotten holy well near where he lived. He isolated its location to a particular field, shying away from the muddy area where the cows were gathered. It took him a long time to realise that the holy well was supplying sweet water for the animals which spread and took in the muck. The sweet water of prayer often brings us balm in the mess of life as we live it. We can romanticise the life of the 'prayer specialists' in religious communities; but they take real life into the monastery, so that – as one Anglican monk told me – if a brother were to be murdered, the rest would all be suspects.

The rawness of our prayer is captured perfectly in the Psalms. No wonder they form the heart of our daily liturgical prayer as Anglicans, along with all the historic churches. Luther referred to the Psalms as his 'Little Bible', summing up all aspects of our encounter with God, whether we are joyful or grieving, triumphant or laid low by suffering or injustice. There is no point pretending before God. God sees all. He bears the full expense of love on the Cross for our sin. He takes all the violence of sin on Himself, not defining God against anyone. This is what enrages evil but what gives us hope that we can come before God in whatever state we are. Sometimes, God can feel far away just when we need God; but the testimony of many Christians is that even God's apparent absence is so palpable that we know God is real even if hidden. Even when we are puzzled or perturbed, we stick to our promise to keep turning up.

The Jesus Prayer began as a very ancient tradition in the Eastern Orthodox churches, and has become popular in the West. It is a powerful invocation of the name of Jesus and a means of seeking forgiveness from God. Its simple form is: 'Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner'. It is a humble repeated prayer for quieting the mind and waiting on God. It is that waiting on God which is so important. In his gospel, St John's word for this is 'abide' (in the Greek μένω). It has such a rich depth and range of meaning which includes the quest for God, coming to know Jesus and discover our union with God. It also underpins our discipleship as those who abide in the love of Jesus and thereby are no longer servants but friends (see John 15). Yet before all that it means turning up and waiting on God, be that in the silence in our special place in church or home or on a run or a dog walk. I do not know anyone who claims to be good at prayer, although I hope we all know holy people. Ramsey – who was a saint in many people's view – said that that the turning up is our calling as God-loving people. A leading puritan evangelist in the United States said, 'We pray until we pray'. We trust the Holy Spirit to take our incoherent thoughts, our hidden motives, our distractions and our yearning for God and draw us towards 'the freedom of the glory of the children of God' (Romans 8). 'Likewise, 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' (Romans 8.27-27).

I among many find Eucharistic devotions foundational to the life of prayer through adoration before the Blessed Sacrament, bringing everything to Jesus in his presence. The Cure d'Ars, a hugely popular spiritual guide in post-Napoleonic France, found an old man sitting quietly in the Sacrament Chapel in the parish church, his face turned intently to the Tabernacle. The priest asked him what was going on. The old man replied, 'Jesus is holding me in his gaze, and I look on Him'. When our evangelical churches introduce a time of worship it means that it is time to sing. Singing to God's glory together or on our own is active and reflective praying and connects modern worship songs with traditional hymns

and the singing of the psalms by choirs. Listening to sublime religious music like Brahms Requiem need not be passive listening but our transport into quiet participation. We need High Mass and Hillsong.

Many people find that poetry is a huge aid to prayer. On my shelf I find George Herbert, John Donne, Wilfred Owen, Rilke, Auden, Wendy Cope, Elizabeth Jennings, TS Eliot, Geoffrey Hill, Malcolm Guite and many others. Mark Oakley, the Dean of Southwark Cathedral, writes beautifully about prayer and poetry in books like *Splash of Words* and *The Collage of God*. The same applies to the inspiration of art. I wrote a chapter about Eastertide in a book edited by Mark Oakley inspired by paintings and sculpture entitled *A Good Year*.

### **A spiritual MOT...**

I once had a car which had the heating on full as soon as the engine was switched on. It certainly raised the temperature, but not in any spiritual way. Fortunately, the car was due for its MOT and I discovered that squirrels had chewed relevant cables which had to be replaced. Curses turned to thanksgiving. Most of us could do with a regular if not frequent spiritual MOT, with the opportunity to be able to have a conversation about our prayers. As lay people, anyone should be able to approach their parish priest or other local minister. Sometimes, however, we could be held back for some reason to have that local conversation and might gain from a one-off or more regular conversation confidentially with someone outside our immediate circle. This will almost certainly be the case for most clergy and many lay ministers.

This is usually what we understand by the term 'spiritual direction'. Across the Diocese we are blessed in having a number of experienced and wise practitioners who are disciplined and exploratory in prayer themselves who offer additional spiritual care to individuals and groups. I have benefited hugely from lay as well as ordained directors personally, some of them religious sisters or brothers. For some spiritual direction will also involve engaging with the sacrament of reconciliation or confession with a priest. It might just as well be on offer as prayer ministry at New Wine or Spring Harvest or on pilgrimage to Walsingham or to our own Regional House at Edenham. The Cathedral, our mother church, offers an open invitation to experience this ministry. For some of us who are priests and bishops, it is a ministry we can offer even after physical weakness means that we can no longer preside or preach. I have belonged to the same cell group for forty years made up of clergy committed to praying for and with each other. Mutual support in prayer is very important, be that with a prayer partner or a regular small group. And it is not all about words. Shared silence can be very powerful, as any of us who have participated in the Watch on Maundy Thursday will know.

Such confidential conversations can be a source of great healing and knowledge of forgiveness. It is in the safety of these conversations that people can speak for the first time about abuse that they have suffered and to be reassured that they are not the guilty person. More widely, healing and wholeness are at the heart of our ministry as followers of Jesus the Healer. I am sure that we all pray for the healing of people who are on our hearts and rely on others to pray for us in our own need.

Another associated and highly sensitive area of spiritual concern is the ministry of deliverance. We have a very wise and skilled Deliverance Group commissioned by me and under my authority which responds to cases of spiritual disturbance in people's lives and homes. Nobody outside this group has any authority to engage in even minor exorcism. I mention this not only because of its importance, but because we are all under authority and accountable. When people are entrusted with the soul's health of any other person we need to know that they are properly trained, equipped and supported. One of the

consequences of the pandemic and its aftermath has been that the Community of St Hugh which sought to provide a framework for mutual support and encouragement has effectively lapsed. The commissioning or re-commissioning of spiritual directors needs to be attended to and mutual support revived.

It was within spiritual direction that I first experienced a sense of calling to the priesthood as an adult. Being accompanied in our life of prayer is often how we and others uncover a vocation in us. It is my expectation as the bishop who sponsors candidates for ordination and for licenced lay ministry that everyone on the journey of discernment is so accompanied. Having discovered its benefits, my hope and expectation is that everyone will want to continue to receive the support and spiritual insight available to us.

### **Missional spirituality**

What might we expect to see and measure externally from this? Clearly, the deepest measure is supernatural and entirely for God to judge. However, I believe that greater attention to how we frame and support raising the spiritual temperature will bear significant fruit in our readiness to pray more together and alone. I would hope that we shall see greater confidence to challenge in ourselves and in our culture that the 'Big I Am' is what counts. In marriage we speak about a couple becoming one flesh, not to be a two-headed monster but individuals who find their true selves by giving themselves away to one another. In prayer we can discover how much God loves us which enables us to have an ordered and realistic love of self as we come to the foot of the Cross of Jesus. On that basis, we would hope to see an outbreak of humility in our listening and serving. We can look to experience richer worship of many kinds, delivered and enjoyed with an even deeper sense of God's presence with us in God's mercy and grace. I dare to hope for evidence of a renewed missional spirituality which will be attractive and expand our sympathies and our readiness patiently to engage with the needs of our world in their many forms.

A good example of what I mean by missional spirituality is modelled in a new framework for planning for growth produced by our Mission Enablers in the Diocese. It is called *Seeking God: Seeking Growth*. Everything begins in worship, prayer and meditating on Scripture. The defining prayer of the framework for discussion, planning and action is:

**Holy God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.  
We come to you, source of all life and hope  
seeking your will and your blessing for this church and this community.  
Speak to us, we pray, and help us to listen  
as we share our words, our worship, our working and our waiting.  
Show us the treasure that you see in our community,  
open our eyes to see things afresh.  
Give us courage and wisdom  
to make the changes that will be needed  
in order to be the church you are calling us to become.  
Holy God: Father, Son and Spirit, lead us into growth,  
for your glory and your honour.  
Amen.**

The Mission Enablers write:

‘By using these materials, we pray more people will experience God’s reconciling love in Christ Jesus, join in worship, build deeper relationships, and grow in faith together. Regardless of your church’s size, vocation, tradition, every Christian has a role in God’s mission. We invite you to explore how this can look in your church.’

It is all about growing in worship, growing in discipleship and growing in service. This work is grounded in the Five Marks of Mission to **TELL** the story of our salvation, **TEACH** the faith and make disciples, **TEND** God’s people, **TRANSFORM** the unjust structures of society and **TREASURE** the earth as God’s good creation.

*Seeking God: Seeking Growth* draws on Genesis 49.22: ‘Joseph is a fruitful vine, a fruitful vine near a spring, whose branches climb over a wall’. The vine drinks and feeds from the spring and so becomes life-giving and fruit-bearing. Indeed, it is so healthy it is growing beyond the wall against which it was planted. We are asked as local churches and individual Christians what would it be like for us to be like the fruitful vine, drawing on Jesus, the well of living water? What if we could move beyond our existing walls?

## Conclusion

As you can see, all of our common life is inter-related. Everything we are and do is rooted in God and the compelling message of the Gospel that we have salvation through the sacrifice of Christ on the cross, and that we are commissioned and empowered by the Holy Spirit for service to the world.

God the Father, greater than great,  
God the Son more loving than love,  
God the Holy Spirit closer than close.

Emboldened by this God, let us raise the spiritual temperature among and within us.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Gregor', with a stylized cross at the end of the signature.

BISHOP OF LINCOLN  
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