

When I agreed to deliver this talk, the person asking me said, “Great, we’ve been having trouble finding someone to do a talk on prayer.” I’m not surprised! It is a huge topic to talk to: where to begin, how to end, and just what to say in the middle! So at the outset I need to give a health warning: I am no expert on prayer. If you have come today to discover the missing jig-saw piece in your prayer life, then sorry, I will disappoint you.

What I present today is not a crash course in how to pray; prayer manuals galore exist for that. Today, I want to try and look at why we pray and to try to understand the value of prayer in our lives.

The title attracted me: “Why Bother Praying?” In this interesting, readable book Leonard, in the final paragraph of each chapter, asks the question: “Why bother praying?” and then offers explanation as to why we should pray. I admire his questioning, but his answers, for me, don’t really get to the bottom of why we should pray.

There’s a startling realization to contend with at the outset, one that sounds a bit radical, possibly even an excuse for laziness in prayer, but one that ultimately frees us from a whole load of hang-ups about prayer. It is this: God doesn’t need our prayers. God is God. God is the creator, the initiator of all we see, all we are, all we do. We can create fancy theological and philosophical words to describe God’s metaphysical state, but at the end of the day, God is God, the creator, and we are the created. So what can we possibly say to God that God has never thought or heard before, or never considered before? If we’re honest: not a lot! This is liberating, if we think about it. Instead of trying to compete with God in our prayer life, we should realise at the outset that God doesn’t need our prayers. But God *wants* our prayers. This is our ‘what’s the point of prayer number 1’. You’ll hear me refer to ‘what’s the point of prayer number 1, 2, or 3 and so on’ throughout this talk: my way of drawing our attention to the fact that there is a point to prayer.

Our prayers are really important to God because our prayer life, what we do in prayer and how we do it, say truly significant things about who we are, how we see God, and

how we relate to God. Helen Julian beautifully describes it: “Prayer isn’t a competitive sport.”¹What I am trying to say is eloquently expressed in the ‘old’ weekday missal:

“You have no need of our praise, yet our desire to thank you is itself your gift. Our prayer of thanksgiving adds nothing to your greatness, but makes us grow in your grace, through Jesus Christ our Lord.”²

I could end the talk here: the point of prayer is that God wants our prayers. But, rightly so, I guess you want your monies worth, so I’ll go on.

First, we need to clarify what we mean by prayer. There are myriad definitions of prayer we could draw upon. However, following the adage ‘the oldies are the goodies’, it is the classic definition of prayer by Saint John of Damascus that I am using today: “*Prayer is the raising of one’s mind and heart to God.*”³ Ted Loder updates this to “Prayer is putting your heart in your mouth.”⁴ Both definitions stress fundamental points about prayer, points David Torkington⁵, a modern day expert on prayer and spirituality, puts across well:

“Prayer was merely the word used by Christian tradition to describe the way we go about radically exposing ourselves to the self-same Spirit that progressively penetrated the heart and mind of Jesus.”

“Prayer is a process of continual inner conversion that involves gently trying to turn, open and surrender the heart to God.”

“A means of prayer is good for you if it helps you, here and now, to keep gently turning your heart back to God.”

¹ Julian, Helen, CSF, *The Road to Emmaus – Companions for the journey of life*, (Abingdon: The Bible Reading Fellowship, 2008), revised edition, p82.

² Weekday preface IV.

³ Cf. Catechism of the Catholic Church (hereafter CCC), n 2559.

⁴ Loder, Ted, *My Heart In My Mouth: Prayers for our lives*, (Minneapolis: Augsburg Books, 2000), p 10.

⁵ Torkington, David, *The Prophet – the inner meaning of prayer*, (New York: Alba House, 1987), pp 18, 48, 49.

Prayer isn't a one-off activity; it is a way of life: our 'what's the point of prayer number two'. How I pray will change as I change, as my life experiences expand and contract with the passage of time. It is about connecting with the mind, the heart, the very being and essence of God, of Jesus and of the Spirit. It is about me, my mind, my heart, my very existence; it is about bringing all of *who I am*, in this moment, and all of *how I am*, in this very moment, into the gentle yet nurturing and radically transformative presence of the Trinity.

At the heart of prayer, and *the* key point I want to put across today, is the notion of that prayer is an *encounter*: our 'what's the point of prayer number 3'.

For me, Jean Vanier captures all that is good and not so good about modern life: "We've become experts in communication, but we're not so good at presence."⁶ There's nothing new in what Vanier is saying: as far back as the 18th century, we were being encouraged to become aware of the "sacrament of the present moment".⁷

We need to go back to basics, to open ourselves up to an encounter with the Trinity. Jean Vanier⁸ again: he says that an encounter is not an exercise of power; it demands real humility, deep vulnerability. True encounter is a shock to our ego: we can't get away with simply creating noise, of superficially communicating with those around us, including God. We need to stop holding back, stop trying to protect ourselves, to get over our fears, to lose all sense of power and being in control, and to allow ourselves to be loved. Let go and let God...love us!

Look at Genesis 3:9. God calls out "Where are you?" In the midst of sin, of shame, of recognising and acknowledging their nakedness, Adam and Eve hear the voice of God calling to and for them, seeking them out. In Genesis 3:21, God makes garments for them;

⁶ Vanier Jean, Being open to being transformed, article published in 'The Tablet', 19/26 August (summer edition), 2017, p 6.

⁷ Jean-Pierre du Caussade, (d.1751) Abandonment to Divine Providence, (New York: Dover Publications, 2008).

⁸ Vanier Jean, Signs of the Times – seven paths of hope for a troubled world, (London: Darton Longman & Todd, 2013).

they are clothed by God: God still loves them and wants them to have dignity. An encounter with God is a moment of deep joy, real communion. It is a moment of beatitude. It can also be a moment of transformation: Paul on the road to Damascus. It is a moment of real presence, real love, and real joy: a moment of transfiguration.

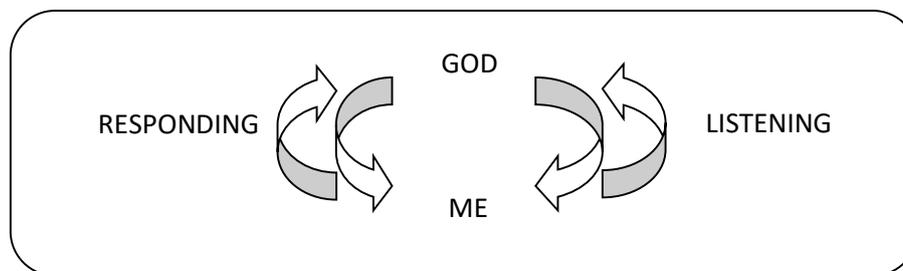
Frank Wallace⁹ says that prayer is an encounter, not a performance, and it is all about relationship. Remember our definition of prayer: “*Prayer is the raising of one’s mind and heart to God.*” There are two people mentioned here; two people in encounter, in relationship: God and the ‘one’.

Wallace states that the:

- Lifeblood of any RELATIONSHIP is COMMUNICATION
- Lifeblood of COMMUNICATION is LISTENING
- Lifeblood of LISTENING is RESPONDING

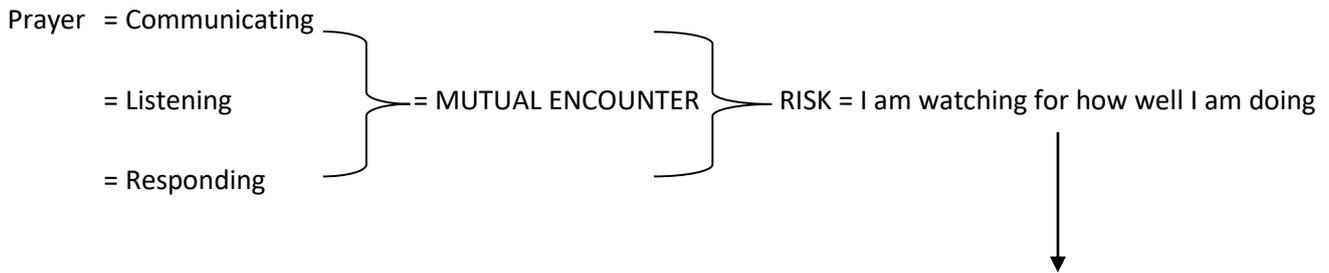
The relationship between God and me is a continual dialogue of listening and responding.

Prayer is about giving and receiving:



But there is a risk here: in the midst of this mutual encounter, I may get caught up in what I am doing: am I saying enough prayers? Are my prayers of a good enough quality? There is a danger that my prayer descends to the level of mere activity, of becoming a performance: we need to remember, prayer is being, not doing.

⁹Wallace, Frank, SJ., *Encounter Not Performance*, Newtown Australia: E J Dwyer, 1991, p 3.



That is, prayer becomes an activity, a performance: prayer is being not doing

Why do I allow my prayer to become a performance? Is it because that to engage in a real encounter with God, I need to come before God naked. Recall Job (1:21):

Naked I came from my mother's womb, naked I shall return; the Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord.

Go back to our definition of prayer: "*Prayer is the raising of one's mind and heart to God.*" It is the raising of my mind, my heart to God, and no one else's. It needs to be the mind and heart I have *right now*; not last week's mind and heart, nor the one I hope for next Tuesday, but the one I have NOW.

A quick word about feelings in prayer. Wallace¹⁰ says they are a good thing: they are messages about me to me, a spontaneous response to a person or situation. We maybe need to recognise and acknowledge our feelings more openly and honestly as we enter into prayer. And for those who experience anxious feelings in prayer:

"Anxious feelings are not bad; it is just that we need to hold these anxious feelings in a larger vessel of hope."¹¹

To enter into a real encounter with God, to delve deeply into the relationship prayer offers us, we need to come before God totally naked, totally honest about who we are and how we are right at that moment.

¹⁰ Wallace, 1991, p 35.

¹¹ Hermes, Kathryn, J., FSP, *The Journey Within – Prayer as a Path to God*, (Ohio: St Anthony Messenger Press, 2004), p 81.

But we are afraid to do this. Why? A quote from John Powell¹² offers insight:

“I am afraid to tell you who I am, because, if I tell you who I am, you may not like who I am, and it's all that I have.”

We think that what God sees will never be liked, never mind loved. But we need to remember that we are made in God's image and likeness. We need to remember that God is love¹³ and God loved us first.¹⁴

We think that we need to be perfect, holier than thou, certainly holier than God, to come into God's presence and be ourselves. What folly!

As Wallace sates: “only the Trinity is perfect”.¹⁵ The rest of us need to learn and accept and love our imperfections. If I am perfect, then I have no need for the Trinity!

Take the Hebrew and Greek notions of perfection. The Greek concept states that to be perfect, we need to measure up to some ideal, to be flawless, to never have sinned. The Hebrew concept states that to be perfect is to simply walk in the presence of God.¹⁶

I know which notion of perfection I prefer!

But we even have a problem with this, as our image of God, which can so easily affect our understanding of prayer, causes us anxiety, puzzlement or even real trauma. We allow ourselves to be stuck with ‘second-hand’ notions of God: our relationship with God is stunted by the images and understanding we have had passed on to us by parents, school or the church. We fail to develop our own more mature understanding of and relationship with God. We can have destructive images of God¹⁷, as a great examiner in the sky who will pass or fail us at the end of life, or we have a God to whom we present a problem and

¹² John Powell, SJ. Why am I afraid to tell you who I am?, (London: Harper Collins, 1969), p 4, emphasis mine.

¹³ Cf. 1 John 4:16.

¹⁴ Cf. 1 John 4:19.

¹⁵ Wallace, 1991, p 10.

¹⁶ Rolheiser, Ronald, OMI, Prayer – Our Deepest Longing, (Ohio: Franciscan Media, 2013), p 7.

¹⁷ See Wallace, 1991, p 10 ff.

expect a solution, formulate a question and expect an answer, or ask for guidance and expect a response.¹⁸ Praying to God from such an understanding leads to finding ways to placate God. Praying to God in such a way is to remain in an infantile state of prayer, and to pray to a God whose love is conditional. We need to recall the image of the father in the parable of the prodigal son: the image of the lavish father, who gave himself away whilst still alive, the image of the father who stands looking and waiting for the son, and who runs to meet him, and who tenderly, lovingly wraps the errant son in the biggest dad hug of all time!¹⁹

At the heart of prayer, at the heart of our encounter with God, there is no judgement, no evaluation: God receives us just as we are, who we are and how we are, at the very moment we run to meet him. This is not to say God wouldn't be happy if we were to change our ways sometimes:

“O that today you would listen to his voice! Harden not your hearts...”²⁰

We need to allow our image of God to develop: our ‘what’s the point of prayer number four’. Words of Saint Richard of Chichester²¹ help us here:

“May we know thee more clearly,

Love thee more dearly,

and follow thee more nearly.”

How can we achieve a more mature image of God?

Spiritual directors or prayer guides can help us clear away misconceptions about God, of self or of prayer; but we need to recall that prayer is a gift from God, and God alone.

¹⁸Nouwen, Henri, *The way of the heart – the spirituality of the desert fathers and mothers*, London: Darton Longman & Todd, 1981), p 62.

¹⁹ Cf. Luke 15:20b.

²⁰ Cf. Psalm 95:7b-8.

²¹Richard of Chichester, b.1197, d.03.04.1253; canonized 1262, quoted in *The SPCK Book of Christian prayer*, (London: SPCK, 1995), p 66.

Prayer is helping us believe we are living the mystery of God: our 'what's the point of prayer number five'.

There's a wonderful story of the person who went to the spiritual master and asked to be shown how to pray. The Master simply ignored the person. The person persisted, asking time after time to be shown how to pray. Eventually the Master grabbed the person by the scruff of the neck, dragged the person to the river, and held the person's head under the water, until the person was gasping for breath. Released from the Master's grip, the person staggered to the shore.

"I only asked you to teach me to pray", protested the person. The Master replied: "I've just given you your first lesson. When you desire to pray with the intensity with which you just desired air, you will be on your way."²²

We need to move from talking to God to talking with God; from monologue to dialogue, to allow ourselves to be drawn, not driven into prayer.

We need to remember that prayer is not:

- About God
 - For God
 - Something I do to God
- } But is a loving relationship with God: "*Be still and know that I am God*".

It all sounds like hard work, but a saying of Anthony de Mello comes to mind: "*Muddy waters let be, will become clear.*"²³ The literal translation of the words "pray always" are "come to rest."²⁴ To pray is to rest with God; to rest with God is to listen to God: our 'what's the point of prayer number six'. Not without accident is the first word of the Rule of Saint Benedict *Obsculta*: "LISTEN".²⁵ This is both an instruction and an invitation to

²²Wallace, 1991, p 21.

²³Quoted in Wallace, 1991, p 44.

²⁴Nouwen, 1981, p 59.

²⁵The Rule of Saint Benedict, Prologue. Translation referred to here is the one by Abbot Parry, OSB, (Herefordshire: Gracewing, 1990), p 1.

openness, to reciprocity. Being obedient to listening is not easy, it requires a total kenosis, an emptying of self so as to create space for the Trinity to move in and fill us with their love. This invitation to listen is an invitation to prayer, to love. As Richard Rohr stresses:

“...great love is always a discovery, a revelation, a wonderful surprise, a falling into ‘something’ much bigger and deeper that is literally beyond us and larger than us.”²⁶

We have a word for this: God. The means to God is prayer. Are we open to such a discovery, such a wonderful revelation and surprise? Are we ready to meet the crazy lover, as Saint Catherine of Siena describes God?²⁷ I hope we are, because this is the person who wants to meet us in prayer. God wants to meet us: our ‘what’s the point of prayer number seven’.

But how do we meet such a person? As Saint Augustine says: “My heart is restless, O God, until it rests in you.”²⁸ We struggle to find the time, to make the space to rest with God.

Ronald Rolheiser²⁹ says that we’re not bad people, just busy people, who live in a “virtual conspiracy”: we crave constant communication, need for amusement, distraction, to be catered to and for 24/7; we’re so attentive to so many things around us, to the noise of modern living, that we’re developing *permanent attention deficit disorder*: we’re not particularly attentive to anything, especially to what is deepest inside of us.

The problem we have with prayer is that our expectations are too high and too false: we desire constant spiritual highs, moments of perpetual enlightenment. But life’s not like that. Such moments do happen; they are precious, grace-filled moments. But recall, at the end of the Transfiguration, Jesus and the three disciples had to come down the mountain and live the valley life once more. The biggest challenge we face in our prayer

²⁶ Rohr, Richard, *Falling Upwards - A spirituality for the two halves of life*, (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2011), p xxvii.

²⁷ Saint Catherine of Siena, *Dialogues*.

²⁸ *The Confessions of Saint Augustine*, Book 1, n 1.

²⁹ Rolheiser, Ronald, *OMI, Prayer - Our Deepest Longing*, (Ohio: Franciscan Media, 2013), p 12.

is the challenge of 'nothingness'; those moments when we feel nothing is happening. Patience in prayer is key. All the great spiritual masters and writers, from desert fathers and mothers, to medieval mystics, to modern day contemplatives, all share a common message regarding prayer: we have to show up for prayer and we have to show up regularly, and we need to become experts in patience:

“The highest teaching on prayer in the Gospel can be summed up in a single word, and that is waiting. It’s all in the waiting. Now is the time when you must learn to wait.”³⁰

As scripture tells us: “with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day.”³¹

Our prayer life needs to reflect our psyche: who we are and how we are. As Rolheiser says, we’d struggle to eat a seven course meal every day; sometimes we just need the simplicity of a sandwich!³² We need rhythm to our prayer life, we need ritual: look at monks and nuns; they don’t treat God as a visiting dignitary, they journey week in, week out with the God of rhythm and routine. Monks and nuns living in monasteries and convents know also that to take seriously the adage that prayer is the lifting of mind and heart to God, then every thought, every feeling is an entry point into prayer. We tend to try to pray only when we feel good, centred, reverent and in the mood to pray and worthy of praying. So we don’t, therefore, pray when we precisely NEED IT - that is, when we’re not feeling good, or centred, or reverent, or worthy of prayer. Remember what Saint Paul says: “For whenever I am weak, then I am strong.”³³

All of who we are in prayer, the boredom, the inability to focus or to find the right words, having too many pressing needs to pray for and not knowing what or who to pray for first,

³⁰Torkington, David, *The Prophet – the inner meaning of prayer*, (New York: Alba House, 1987), p 108.

³¹ Cf. 2 Peter 3:8.

³²Rolheiser, 2013, p 5.

³³ Cf. 2 Corinthians 12:10.

all of these things are entry points into prayer, for they are who we are and where we are at *that* moment. But we need to move ourselves, to move our prayer and find the still calm presence of the one who love us. At heart our prayer needs to be this verse from Psalm 46: “Be still and know that I am God.”³⁴

What we need is solitude in prayer. As Henri Nouwen is at pains to stress, solitude is not being alone; it is being alone with God.³⁵ We are alone with God: our ‘what’s the point of prayer number seven’. Solitude is not easy: the desert father, Anthony of Egypt, tells us why:

“...the one who sits in solitude and quiet has escaped from three wars: hearing, speaking and seeing; yet against one thing shall he continually battle: that his, his own heart.”³⁶

Modern life is so noisy, with too many distractions. Kathryn Hermes says we live with a “TV mode of prayer”:³⁷ just as we flick from channel to channel in the hopes of finding something to watch, we flick from prayer to prayer, hoping to encounter God, instead of risking everything to allow the God who has already encountered us in our birth to speak to us. What we need to do, instead of learning new ways to prayer, is to break open the word of God already in us. How do we do this? Solitude and silence:

“The need for true solitude is a complex and dangerous thing, but it is a real need.”³⁸

³⁴ Cf. Psalm 46:10.

³⁵ Nouwen, 1981, p 59.

³⁶ Quoted in Jamison, Abbot Christopher, Finding Sanctuary – Monastic steps for everyday life, (London: Weidenfeld& Nicholson, 2006), p 41.

³⁷ Hermes, 2004, p 66.

³⁸ Merton, Thomas, Seeds of Contemplation, (Hertfordshire: Anthony Clarke, 1961), p 41.

“Silence is God’s first language; everything else is a poor translation. In order to hear that language, we must learn to be still and rest in God.”³⁹

But how can we even begin to enter into solitude and silence. To do this, we need to ‘put out into the deep’.⁴⁰ The disciples had toiled all night, with no success. They needed to head to the shore, to head for rest. Then they met Jesus. They had to trust Jesus, and put out into the deep.

I am touching on contemplative prayer. Contemplative prayer is not a technique; it is a way of being present to what’s really inside our own experience: the raising of my mind, my heart to God. It is something we need to work at:

“Too many still think that personal prayer is an optional extra for the extraordinary pious, for the young, for the novices passing through the first fervour, or for the aged, who are too old for apostolic work...a luxury that simply cannot be afforded by the busy man-about-town religious of today, who has got the whole world to change by their intensive missionary endeavour...[but] if they cannot afford time for prayer, they won’t be able to give love to others, because they will be spiritually bankrupt themselves.”⁴¹

We are too easily put off by words such as contemplation, silence, or solitude. What is being asked of us is really quite simple: to turn up and shut up, and to allow God to be present to us. Our ‘what’s the point of prayer number eight’: to allow God be present to us. We are too easily put off trying to pray, especially when we struggle with prayer. Carlo Carretto offers inspiration and hope for these desert times of prayer.⁴² The desert is a

³⁹Thomas Keating, *Invitation to Love – The Way of Christian Contemplation*, (London: Bloomsbury, 2011 [20th anniversary edition], p 105.

⁴⁰ Cf. Luke 5:5-6.

⁴¹Torkington, 1987, p 77.

⁴² Carretto, Carlo, *In Search of the Beyond*, (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1966).

biblical expression; it is not a goal but a passing stage, a stage of preparation.⁴³ The desert is a space within one's own life, it is to seek solitude, to withdraw from people and things, not just as an absence of noise. It is a place to be self-sufficient, "learning to remain undisturbed with one's own thoughts, one's own prayer, one's own destiny...to localise one's own personal contact with God, to draw breath, to recover one's inner peace...when all is said and done, creating a desert means nothing more than obeying God."⁴⁴

Prayer is not a method or technique; we constantly need to remind ourselves of this: prayer is a relationship, an encounter.⁴⁵ Jesus knew this: "Abba" was the honest cry of the heart from Son to Father. The example of Saint John Vianney is a wonderful reminder to us of how simple silence and solitude can be. When asked why he spent so long in Church, eyes fixed on the Blessed Sacrament, he replied: "I stare at him and he stares at me." The important point is that they both stared! Prayer is our "Amen", our 'so let it be', our response to God lovingly staring at us: our 'what's the point of prayer number nine'. We need to remember that we are not admired, but loved; not simply needed, but wanted.

To end where I began: Richard Leonard quotes words of Pedro Aruppe, who was Superior General of the Jesuits from 1965 to 1983:⁴⁶

*Nothing is more practical than
finding God, than
falling in Love
in a quite absolute, final way.*

⁴³ Cf. Elijah – 1 Kings 19:8; the wilderness wanderings of the people of Israel, and Christ himself in the desert – Mark 1: 12-13.

⁴⁴ Carretto, 1966, p 19.

⁴⁵ Burrows, Ruth, OCD, *Essence of Prayer*, (London: Bloomsbury, 2006), p 15.

⁴⁶ Leonard, 2013, p 18.

*What you are in love with,
what seizes your imagination,
will affect everything.*

*It will decide
what will get you out of bed in the morning,
what you do with your evenings,
how you spend your weekends,
what you read,
whom you know,
what breaks your heart,
and what amazes you with joy and gratitude.*

*Fall in Love,
stay in love,
and it will decide everything.*

So, what is the point of prayer?

Stare at God. Gaze at Jesus. Look deeply at the Holy Spirit. Fall in love with the Trinity. In stillness of heart allow ourselves to encounter the ones who love us. In silence respond with the gentle response of simply being there. Pray well; and allow our heart and mind to encounter the Trinity who is love, who loves us, and loves us just as we are. To be loved by the Trinity and to love the Trinity back: what grander point to prayer do we really need?