

Deepening Our Relationship with God- Reflections on the Prayer Course



What do you do when you want to deepen a valued friendship? The chances are you will spend time with that person and share thoughts, feelings and listen to each other whilst consolidating the connection between you. That's how it is with God, to deepen our relationship with Him we spend time in prayer, talking and listening to God.

Prayer can be sitting in silence, connecting with creation or simply chatting to God. However, there are other ways to pray, some ancient, that can help to deepen our prayer life and experience the transforming work of the Spirit. All prayer is either vocal, meditative or contemplative.

At the end of the summer, and for four evenings, twelve of us met in the church to learn more about prayer. First, we experienced what it is to be still, how to detach from the day's buzz through becoming aware of our bodies and breathing to ultimately draw God into our hearts. Following this, the Examen was taught. This is a way to review the day which heightens one's awareness of God in our lives by looking at the day through His eyes and asking

ourselves where we have been close to Him e.g. sensing his spirit of peace, love, joy, energy, life and community, and, equally important, where we have been turned away from Him by turning away from our neighbour, driven by our own agenda, or fearful, anxious or proud, relying on our own abilities.

In the second week Lectio Divina was introduced, an ancient form of prayer made popular by St Benedict in the sixth century. This is praying with scripture by reading a passage a few times and being open to the words that stand out or resonate for us, chewing them over and reflecting on what they mean for our lives. These musings are then taken into a conversation with God where it may become clear what changes are needed in our lives. The final stage is a time of resting in God, where the true gift of contemplation may be experienced.

Our third week was praying with our imagination, when we place ourselves fully within a story from the Gospels. We become onlooker/participants and give full rein to our imagination. We used the story of Bartimaeus, the blind beggar, where Jesus is speaking to him at the side of the road. We feel the hot Mediterranean sun beating down. We smell the dust kicked up by the passers-by. We feel the itchy clothing we're wearing, the sweat rolling down our brow, a rumble of hunger. We see the desperation in the blind man's face and hear the wail of hope in his words. We note the irritation of the disciples. Above all we watch Jesus—the way he walks, his gestures, the look in his eyes, the expression on his face. We hear him speak the words that are recorded in the Gospel. We go on to imagine other words he might have spoken and other deeds he might have done. We imagine speaking to him and what he might say in return.

Imaginative prayer makes the Jesus of the Gospels our Jesus. It helps us develop a unique and personal relationship with him. We watch Jesus' face. We listen to the way he speaks. We notice how people

respond to him. These imaginative details bring us to know Jesus as more than a name or a historical figure. This is a way of praying that can bring us into a closer encounter with Christ.

The final week explored using art in prayer, similar to Lectio Divina but with images or paintings. This is a tradition from the Eastern church that is increasingly appreciated in the West. It's often very rich for people who prefer to pray visually. Many of us were taught to close our eyes when we pray. Praying with religious art or icons is an ancient prayer practice that involves keeping our eyes wide open, taking into our heart what the image visually communicates. We focus not on what is seen in the icon or piece of art, but rather on what is seen through it — the love of God for us. This is prayer without words, with a focus on being in God's presence rather than performing in God's presence. By praying with an image, it hoped that it will enable a deeper reflection on a particular passage of scripture.



The course evaluations were very positive, participants wrote of becoming more aware of God's presence in their lives and of finding the different ways of praying effective together with learning to wait in silence for God. Further resources such as websites and reading material were shared with the group. Encouragingly, the course has given rise to a weekly prayer group in the church. This will be open to others and it is hoped new leaders will emerge as the group grows and develops.