

Prayer in busy lives

Prayer can often be seen as restful, quiet and reflective, a time to be at one with God, away from the pressures of our lives and the world around us. We can enjoy prayer when we are alone and silent as much as when we gather with others, surrounded by noise and activity, but can we come to prayer in the midst of a busy life? Is there space in our day or in our week for resting prayerfully with God?

As life becomes very busy, we often find that our personal time in prayer with God is the first thing to suffer. It may take several weeks before the realisation dawns that our prayer has ground to a halt—except, perhaps, for the times when we pray communally as a gathered congregation in church.

On the whole, the Bible says very little, if anything, about how to pray when life is demanding, crowded with commitments, deadlines and responsibilities. Prayer seems to be taken as an accepted fact of day-to-day life; that is, where there is faith, prayer is naturally a part of that life. Practically, however, within a busy life, that natural prayer may not always be as easy to accomplish or maintain as we would like.

Over the next two weeks, I hope we will come to discover, by delving beneath an initial reading of a selection of passages from the Old and New Testaments, a ‘hidden’ wisdom to guide and help us. This may mean that at times we need to read reflectively and imaginatively from the context of our own busy lives, as we seek both personal relevance and a way of maintaining a prayerful relationship with God.

The Bible may be relatively silent regarding prayer in the midst of busyness, but it is very clear that we are called to rest, to take time off from our work: ‘God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all the work that he had done in creation’ (Genesis 2:3). This verse calls us to hold life in a true balance. Where there is time to rest, there is time to develop a pattern of prayer—personal and corporate—that will become a foundation to sustain us when life is full of activity and prayer seems impossible.

All Bible quotations are taken from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible.

1 The better part? Listening at the edge

Luke 10:38–42

This passage recorded by Luke is made up of many layers: there is more to it than may at first meet the eye. On the surface we have Mary relaxing and listening to Jesus while Martha rushes around, distracted by all the jobs that need doing. We open this week's readings by asking lots of questions.

Are you, or have you been, too busy to pray? The first question to ask is 'why?' Then we can ask if there is an end in sight to the busyness, or not. Is it due to an increase in life commitments—in work, family or church—which consume so much time that prayer now finds itself exiled?

Do we, in fact, make our lives busy because that means we can say, 'I have no time to sit and pray'? If so, this raises the question of what we are trying to avoid, and whether it is related to our self or to the encounter with God in prayer. Do we want to avoid making the inner journey to look deep within our own self, or escape the issues to which we know we need to give prayerful thought? Are we eluding a sense of where God may be calling us or what he may be asking us to do?

Luke tells us that Martha is 'distracted' (v. 41) but he neglects to fill in the details. As hostess, and knowing the responsibilities placed upon her, Martha keeps busy, maybe preparing a meal for her guest or tidying away the washing, moving it out of sight. Whatever keeps her busy, it prevents her from going to join Mary, to sit at the feet of Jesus and listen to everything he has come to tell them. Martha is listening at the edge, perhaps hearing snippets of conversation, perhaps wanting to join in, but her busyness holds her back.

When life around us is very active, it can be difficult to leave what we are doing and simply sit and relax. Guilt can raise its head, telling us we can't stop—there's more to be done, and without us it won't be done. To stop and pray can then feel like an unaffordable luxury.

At this moment, what is your pattern of prayer throughout the week? How easy do you find it to go and sit and listen to God? What are the distractions that keep you from doing this?

2 The command to rest

Exodus 20:8–11

Jean Vanier, in his book *The Broken Body* (DLI, 1988), speaks of the importance of having a true balance between work and rest in our lives. The more pressurised and time-consuming our work or commitments become, the more difficult it can be to find the time and space in which to relax. There is also the possibility of forgetting how to enjoy times of rest. Vanier writes that we can become ‘like rolling locomotives, fuelled by anguish, and perhaps by the fear of stopping’. What happens when we do stop? He says that maybe ‘it is just to sleep more, or to potter around, not knowing what to do’ (p. 120). How difficult is it to stop and leave the busyness at one side for a time?

In the middle of the Ten Commandments, we read of the call not only to keep the sabbath day holy, but also to rest from our work as God did from the work of creation. This day of rest is given to us by God, who knows the necessity of rest for our general health—physical, emotional and spiritual. Where there is work without rest and ‘play’, life can very quickly begin to feel out of balance. To live a life in balance is to discover for ourselves the many and varied ways in which we can find moments of rest.

A life in balance is the example given to us by the monastic communities that live by a rule of life, the best-known probably being that of St Benedict (c. AD480–547). His rule enables the whole of life to be placed within a perspective of possibility, aiming for a true balance of activity and rest.

To find this balance means looking at the pattern of our lives—all the activities we are involved in, including work, family life, hobbies, friendships, church, prayer, and ‘me’ time. Is there a time and place for everything? Is there time to rest, to take a day off from work, and time to keep the sabbath holy? A true balance and pattern in life can be a foundation stone of hope to sustain us when life becomes over-demanding.

3 Sharing the load

Exodus 18:13–23

The scene is set, with one very busy man and one man who sees the reality of the problem lying behind all the activity. Moses was trying to do everything on his own. He wasn't busy through ambition but simply because he cared for the people, who came seeking advice, justice and a resolution to their problems or complaints.

Justice was regarded as a gift from God, so Moses, as their leader chosen by God, was the first person whom the Israelites would approach for help. The people sought out Moses to ask for God's advice rather than praying directly to God themselves; after all, that was the prophet's job! Moses didn't stop at dispensing justice, however: he also wanted to teach the people, thus adding to his workload (v. 16).

Moses is given some sound advice by his father-in-law, Jethro the priest of Midian: not only will the people wear him out but, if he continues to be so busy, he won't be as effective in making judgments. Moses hears and accepts the advice, and sets about finding other people who have the necessary qualities to help him in his work.

It took a close family member to point out to Moses that he needed to slow down and look after himself if he was to continue in his ministry. Often, it is those closest to us who see more than we expect them to, and pray for us in our busyness. It may be, though, that insight into our busy lives comes from someone we don't know too well.

How often do we need someone else to tell us what we should be able to see for ourselves—if only we weren't too busy to see it? How easy is it to hear what they say and act upon it? Moses had his father-in-law to help him see the true perspective of his busy life and identify what he needed to let go and share with others. If you need to discern the true picture of your life, is there someone you know and trust, with whom you can speak, whose advice or listening ear you value?

4 Done unto

Mark 15:1–5

Jesus stands before Pilate. He answers one question only, and then remains silent, much to the amazement of the governor. The silence of Jesus as he enters his passion is probably most profoundly felt in the Gospel of Mark, where previously Jesus has always been portrayed through an image of busy activity. Now, he no longer ‘does’ actively but is ‘done unto’. Yet, even through his passive silence, his presence remains active. He can do nothing except to follow the way he has followed for so long, a way embraced in his life and expressed in an active outpouring of love, now to be poured out, paradoxically, in passivity.

In a world that seems to encourage productive activity, it can be very difficult to stand by and watch the busyness of others when it has been taken from us. For example, it is hard to be ‘bound’ and ‘silenced’ by illness, short- or long-term, having to rely on others to come and ‘do’ for us. There may be a need to ask for help, a need to take and accept the help of others. Alternatively, the sense of being ‘bound’ and ‘silenced’ may reflect our inner feelings when life seems to be on hold as we wait for an exam result or job offer.

During these times, when time may stretch out endlessly in front of us, what happens to our prayer life? Whenever our energy and concentration are reduced, prayer can become difficult to enter into or even think about. Life is stalled, yet it is busy—a busyness filled with the passive activity of waiting. In this waiting, God is present with us. But who is the God we pray to (if we can) at those times?

W.H. Vanstone writes in *The Stature of Waiting* that ‘God also waits; and it is in waiting that he invests the world with possibility and power of meaning’ (p. 109). The passion of Jesus shows to us the waiting of God, which is full of meaning for us. In our own waiting/busy times, maybe our prayer is simply one that reaches out quietly to ask God to wait and watch with us.

5 Lord, have mercy

Luke 18:9–14

This well-known parable is a story of different approaches to God, and of different expectations and beliefs held by those who come to God in prayer. The Pharisee expects much but says little of any depth and honesty within his lengthy prayer. The tax collector expects nothing but, within the brevity of his prayer, opens himself totally before God.

The tax collector is commended for his honesty but also, maybe, for the simplicity of his words, offered as they are in humility, exposing the truth of his inner being, his inner needs. Simplicity in prayer can be the forgotten element of our relationship with God. A few words sifted out of the many that lie within us can often cover the essence of what needs to be said and express a far greater truth.

This short prayer of the tax collector became a part of the early tradition of the Orthodox Church as it developed into the 'Jesus Prayer' ('Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me', sometimes with the addition of the words 'a sinner'). It originated in the fourth century with the Egyptian Desert Fathers as a repetitive prayer in which to seek the mercy of God.

The prayer grew in popularity across the Christian East, being used in Russia from the eleventh century, and was promoted in England through the writing of the 14th-century hermit, Richard Rolle. It was, and still is, a prayer of stillness and contemplation. In medieval England, though, it became a more emotive form of prayer—a way of seeking and feeling a deeper personal awareness of Christ's humanity and God's love for humankind.

If the Jesus Prayer is a contemplative prayer, which needs space and time to be prayed effectively, how can it help us when life is busy? We need to look at the way the tax collector prayed the words, simply and quietly before God. This is a prayer that grounds us, reminding us of the God who is not only ever present with us, but seeks simplicity and honesty from us. It can also be adapted to express whatever we desire at a particular moment: 'Lord Jesus Christ, watch over me', '... pray in me', '... still me' or '... be with me'. It is a prayer for the busy times as well as the quiet times.

6 Choices: choose life

Deuteronomy 30:15–20

Moses stands before the gathered community of Israel and speaks about how their covenantal relationship with God should be lived. He reminds them of the meaning of the covenant God has made with them and the decision that they have to make, based on that covenant—to choose between life and death. They have to decide whether to walk in the way of God and so live with God in their lives, or to take the path away from God and live without God.

Moses has learnt to discern the call and presence of God moving within him. Now he comes to the people, encouraging them to discern God's presence with them, to reflect upon all that God has done for them, and will continue to do if they choose to love and follow his way. The covenant relationship of faith is central to discernment, as it is 'a covenant with God: an agreement by which God and God's people agree to live in mutual love and fidelity' (David Lonsdale SJ, *Dance to the Music of the Spirit*, p. 35).

Each day, choices and decisions have to be made; some will be simple and relatively trivial, others far more difficult and life-changing. The choices made will, we hope, enrich our lives and so draw us closer to living the way of God, as Moses sought for the people of Israel. Discernment is about looking at the situation in which we are placed and distinguishing the better path to take; it is (again in the words of David Lonsdale) 'the capacity to live a fully and truly human life'.

If our days are crowded with activity, living a 'fully and truly human life' may appear impossible, and the process of discerning which choices are best becomes increasingly difficult. If discernment in decision-making requires space and prayerful attention, being busy may mean that we are not as open or alert to God's presence or guidance as we would like to be. Whenever important choices are to be made, discerning the way to 'choose life' may require us first to look at the busyness of life, and then to step outside of that busyness.

Has there been a time when you have had to make a decision in the midst of busyness? How easy or difficult was the process of discernment needed at that time?

Guidelines

We come to our ‘day of rest’—but how busy a day of rest will this be for you? For those actively involved in any area of ministry or church life, there is work to be done before any time of rest can take place. In the time you have free this day, how will you spend it? How much time will you give to doing what you enjoy doing?

On this day of rest, spend some time reflecting over the past week.

- How busy a week was it? Is this normal or unusual?
- Looking ahead, where will the quiet and restful moments be?
- How and where will you spend time with God?
- Which, if any, of the readings this past week has spoken into the busyness of your life?

The Bible may be silent on how to pray when we are busy, but it’s clear that both rest for our renewal and refreshment and time in prayer are important when we seek to deepen our relationship with God.

11–17 January

1 The better part? The balance of life

Luke 10:38–42

We begin the week by revisiting the story of Mary and Martha. The scene set before us reveals a picture of ‘doing’ and ‘being’. Martha is all busy activity, attentive to the needs of her guest, while Mary enjoys a more passive being, simply sitting at the feet of Jesus, attentive to the words he speaks.

Separated into their particular roles, the passage shows an imbalance: the difference between Mary’s ‘doing’ and Martha’s ‘being’ is very pronounced. Who does have the better part—Mary or Martha? The answer may depend upon knowing the wider, and hidden, story of their lives. This glimpse into one event shows only a very small part of the greater whole, and calls us to ponder on the balance between doing and being at