

TFTD L11: A five-minute prayer

TFTD Lent 1: Monday March 7th

PRAYER: ACTS 2.42

This week's theme for *Thought For The Day* is PRAYER.



I'm grateful to Sarah Williamson for finding this lovely poem by Mary Oliver:

***Praying* (by Mary Oliver)**

It doesn't have to be
the blue iris, it could be
weeds in a vacant lot, or a few
small stones; just
pay attention, then patch

a few words together and don't try
to make them elaborate, this isn't
a contest but the doorway

into thanks, and a silence in which
another voice may speak.

HOLYHABITS

They committed themselves to the teaching of the apostles, the life together, the common meal, and the prayers. [Acts 2.42, The Message]

Acts 2.42 describes the basic four Holy Habits which have been markers of the Christian life ever since. (You might like to check out this verse in your Bible to find what other words we use for them.) **Committed themselves** is the same word used in 2.46, where *The Message* translates *followed a daily discipline*. So this is about prayer as a **habit** — not just turning up when you feel like it! Note too that Acts says **the prayers** — which implies a regular habit of prayer. Prayer can be spontaneous — but using set prayers is OK too!

Establishing a regular, committed habit of prayer is one of the absolute essentials of the Christian life. It's as basic as breathing — or eating! Lent is a good time to think about this — maybe to try something different just for a few weeks. But how do we do that?

I can remember the time and the place where I discovered this for myself, when my children were quite small. The grandparents were visiting, and we had gone over to Bolton Abbey for a family picnic. Everybody was playing (or dozing) happily by the river, so I slipped into the half-ruined Abbey to snatch a few moments of quiet — a rare treat in itself.

On the way into the church I picked up a 5p prayer card which said:

To help you use 5 minutes in prayer.

5 minutes sounded about right (I very rarely had more than 5 minutes for *anything* in those days), so I sat down in the rustling silence and read it more carefully. It went on:

Be quite still for a few moments and bring into your mind the fact that you are with the God who created the whole world; the beauty of sunshine and children; the power of the wind; and the peace of this church.

That struck a chord. It started with where I was. My life was full of good things, and I was enjoying it all (well, most of it). But somehow prayer seemed to have got squeezed out. There just wasn't time in the mornings, getting everybody up for school and playgroup — and last thing at night, I just fell asleep. As a teenager, I used to have quite an elaborate prayer routine at bed-time — too elaborate, in fact. I also had a five-year diary with a lock (blush!), so I had to think of something significant to write — as well as reading my Bible and trying to pray in a sincere and meaningful way. It got to be a bit of a palaver, I'm ashamed to say (I was relieved later to find that C.S.Lewis had the same problem as a teenager.) None of this survived the transition to the realities of motherhood. I knew something was missing — but I didn't know how to find it.

The card went on: **Now think of the Cross and remember that you are with God who made you and loves you.**

Now say this prayer, pausing at the end of each line:

**Lord, overshadow me with your Spirit.
Banish distraction, inattention, coldness;
Make my eyes to see, my ears to hear,
my tongue to speak, my soul to be still;
And be merciful to my prayer, and to me, a sinner, for Christ's sake. Amen.**

That was all. A simple way of slowing down my racing thoughts, slowing myself down enough to pay attention, to be where I was — even if I only had 5 minutes. And I liked the way the prayer seemed to be saying in advance, I'm not very good at this, God — I'll probably get it wrong. That seemed to be OK too.

And then it went on to give examples of four different kinds of prayer — four different things you might want to say to God: a sorry prayer, a thank you prayer, a prayer 'If you are in trouble or worried', and a prayer for 'someone who needs your prayers'. You didn't have to say them all — they were prayers to be used when needed. (I've printed them at the end). And I liked the way it gave me some words to say — but also left space to add in my own. I found that really helpful. It reminded me that when we pray we are never alone: other people have knelt here in prayer, and their words can help me when I can't think what to say.

And then it finished with a prayer for going back out into my busy, happy life: a prayer to take home with me (I took the card, too). It made me feel that my mixed-up life could be part of my prayer, too:

Before you go home, say:

**So let me, O Lord, be with You, and be happy.
May my very life be the vision of yourself,
And every sense and member and breath
Wait upon your word and run upon your service,
My Lord and my God. Amen**

That prayer card changed my life. (I still have it — very battered!) It gave me the confidence to seek out those 5-minute moments that do occur, even in the busiest life, to be still and pay attention. (Eddie Izzard was once asked, What's the secret of writing good comedy? Turning up for work, he said: just being there. I think the same applies to prayer.) I tucked it into my Bible, and started to read through the psalms, one a day, when I had time. When I started work in Sheffield, I used to find 5 minutes to say my prayers on the train. If there wasn't time some days, that was OK — I wasn't going to

fall into the trap of creating a prayer back-log. But it was surprising how often there was space — and how much I missed it when there wasn't.

There are many ways of praying, of course — but this is one that worked for me, and I wanted to share it with you. I found it a practical and meaningful approach that helped me to make prayer part of my complicated life. Feel free to print this one out and use it if you feel it would be helpful. And let me know if you've got any favourite prayers or poems you'd like to share!

God bless,
Loveday



THE BOLTON ABBEY PRAYER CARD

No copyright listed, but some of these prayers come from Eric Milner-Wright, Dean of York.

To help you use 5 minutes in prayer.

Be quite still for a few moments and bring into your mind the fact that you are with the God who created the whole world; the beauty of sunshine and children; the power of the wind; and the peace of this church.

Now think of the Cross and remember that you are with God who made you and loves you.

Now say this prayer, pausing at the end of each line:

Lord, overshadow me with your Spirit.

Banish distraction, inattention, coldness;

Make my eyes to see, my ears to hear, my tongue to speak, my soul to be still;

And be merciful to my prayer, and to me, a sinner, for Christ's sake. Amen.

If you are conscious of some particular sins:

Remember that God is faithful to forgive our sins and say:

Humbly and sorrowfully I crave your forgiveness:

For every weakening thought to which my mind has roamed;

For every word spoken in hastiness or passion;

For every failure of self-control,

For this ... and this ... and this

Grant that as the days go by, your Spirit may more and more rule in my heart,

giving me victory over these and all other sinful ways,

through Jesus Christ our Lord.

If there is something you wish to thank God for:

Remember that God wants to hear a thankful person and say:

I give you most humble and hearty thanks

for all your goodness and loving kindness to me,

especially this ... and this ... and this ...

Grant that I may show forth your praise

Not only with my lips but in my life,

Through Jesus Christ our Lord.

If you are in trouble or worried:

Remember the promise of Jesus, 'I am with you always,' and say:

I am distressed, O Lord, and bitterly downcast, because

Though I know so little, help me to go on believing in your love

When I cannot understand,

And when the path of reason is darkened,

Let the light of faith shine in my heart.

If you know someone who needs your prayers:

Remember that God wants to use you as a channel of his love, and say:

To your loving guardianship, O Holy Father,

I commend all those who are dear to me, especially ... and ...

Be in every sore heart, every stricken home, beside every bed of pain,

Giving to each one the blessing of your peace,

Through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Before you go home, say:

So let me, O Lord, be with You, and be happy.

May my very life be the vision of yourself,

**And every sense and member and breath
Wait upon your word and run upon your service,
My Lord and my God.**

HOLYHABITS

PS there will be a chance to talk through some of these issues in the CHURCHES TOGETHER LENT GROUPS meeting on Monday evenings or Thursday afternoons through Lent. Do come along if you can. Or if you can't come in person but would like the discussion notes, just let me know and I'll add you to the list.

NEXT WEEK: LENT 4: SERVICE (Holy Habits chapter 13). Monday March 28th, 7.30 pm @ SPJ / Thursday March 24th, 2.30 pm @ AEMC. (Revd Robin Pye)