

# St John's

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## A SIMPLE GUIDE TO PRAYER



*A collection of articles by Cameron Abernethy  
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# A SIMPLE GUIDE TO PRAYER

Many people ask the question 'How do I pray?' and many have written books expounding a wide range of answers. In many ways the answer to the question is simply, 'However you wish'.

At a very basic level one might simply find a space in which to be quiet and bring to mind the people or situations for whom you wish to pray. Words can be helpful, but are not essential.

If you have a favourite place then you might imagine the person for whom you wish to pray being in that place with you, or you might light a candle as a symbol of God's love (represented by the light from the flame) reaching out to them.

## **The Lord's Prayer**

When his followers asked him how to pray, Jesus taught them the following, which has become the prayer that unites Christians across the world and throughout time.

This is a version of the prayer that is used by the Scottish Episcopal Church:

Our Father in heaven,  
hallowed be your name,  
your kingdom come,  
your will be done,  
on earth as in heaven.  
Give us today our daily bread.  
Forgive us our sins  
as we forgive those who sin against us.  
Do not bring us to the time of trial  
but deliver us from evil.  
For the kingdom, the power, and the glory,  
are yours, now and for ever. Amen

This little booklet draws together a number of articles on prayer written by Cameron Abernethy, a member of St John's trained in spiritual direction.

We hope that you will find it useful.

# The Examen Prayer

A friend recently shared this joke with me – ‘The Franciscans, Dominicans, and Jesuits were having a big meeting that went well into the middle of the night. Suddenly all the lights went out in the meeting room. The Franciscans immediately took out guitars and sang songs, the Dominicans began pondering the meaning of the darkness and forming a sermon on the subject. But the Jesuits went to the basement, found the fuse box and reset the breaker.’

Putting such obvious stereotypes to one side, this joke seeks to illustrate the practical nature of Jesuit spirituality. One of the fundamental tools suggested by St Ignatius, the founder of the Jesuits, is the Examen Prayer. The aim of this prayer is to develop a growing awareness of God within daily life and support each person in more fully living out God’s love within the world.

Over the centuries, many different wordings of the Examen prayer, also called a Review of the Day, have been written. The one below is a more contemporary version of the Examen Prayer.

**Step 1: Coming into God’s Presence**

*I settle myself for prayer, perhaps by being more aware of my breathing*

**Step 2: Review the day with gratitude**

*I allow the day to play through my mind like a video. I notice the joys of the day, no matter how small or insignificant they might appear.*

**Step 3: Pay attention to your emotions**

*I reflect on the feelings experienced today in both the joys and the sorrows. I ask what God might be showing me through these emotions.*

**Step 4: Stay with what seems significant**

*I ask the Holy Spirit to bring my attention to something that God thinks is significant, no matter how small or mundane it appears.*

**Step 5: Look toward tomorrow**

*I ask God for what I need for tomorrow to more fully live out God’s love in the world.*

At the end of the Examen St Ignatius recommends talking to Jesus, as with a friend, about this time of prayer. In this conversation, or colloquy, it is useful to notice anything that was easy in the prayer and anything that was challenging. The time of prayer usually concludes using the words of the Lord’s Prayer. Once familiar with the Examen prayer, it can be helpful to write one’s own version of the five steps.

More information on the Examen, including alternative versions, can be found at <http://www.ignatianspirituality.com/>

# Centring Prayer

Sometimes our hearts and minds can feel too busy to attempt to pray using words and it can be helpful to turn to centring prayer. Like many prayer experiences from across the spiritual traditions, it begins with taking time to notice our breathing and using this as a way of settling into prayer. As we let our awareness move from the thoughts in our head to the simple action of inhaling and exhaling, our bodies can relax and our minds settle down a little.

Within the Jewish and Christian scriptures, the word for breath can also be used for wind or spirit and so denote the active presence of God within the world. We might recall the image of the Spirit of God hovering over creation in Genesis or the dove coming to rest upon Christ after his baptism in the Jordan. Centring prayer can encourage one to notice the Spirit of God as she rests upon us and draws us deeper into God.

Here are a few simple guidelines for centring prayer:

- 1) Take time to find a comfortable position for your body. This is usually sitting in an upright manner, your feet flat on the ground and your hands resting in your lap. This should be a relaxed but alert posture.
- 2) Let yourself become aware of the sounds around you, those outside of the room and those inside of the room. Notice the sounds and let them fade into the background.
- 3) Slowly turn your attention to your breathing. Pay attention to the breath as it moves in and out of our nostrils. Keep your focus there for a few moments
- 4) As you continue to breathe, begin to think of words to accompany each of the inhalations and exhalations. You might like to think 'Jesus Christ' as you breathe in and then 'have mercy' as you breathe out.
- 5) Stay here for a few minutes and rest in the presence of God's Holy Spirit.

# Nurtured by Nature

I wonder how many of us have sat or knelt down to pray and found our minds overwhelmed by distractions. It can be all too easy for our desire to pray to become lost within the demands of life. When I find myself in such a circumstance I go out from my flat and spend time in God's creation. This can involve sitting in the Botanic Gardens, walking around Holyrood Park or gazing out over Newhaven Harbour. The change in place enables me to leave behind my many distractions and let my awareness settle on the present moment. Such direct experiences of nature reveal something of God's goodness and grace expressed through the beauty of creation.

The psalms celebrate the wonder of God's creation repeatedly and often employ powerful imagery from nature itself to explore our relationship with God. One useful technique is to take a psalm and spend time pondering its words within nature. Below are some suggestions for praying with the psalms, inspired by the surrounding creation.

***Psalm 1: The righteous person is like a tree planted by streams of water.***

Find a tree and take time to truly see this wonder of creation expressed in trunk, branch, stem, leaf, flower and fruit. Notice the areas of growth within your own life and consider what fruit might you be bearing.

***Psalm 16: You have made known to me the path of life.***

As you walk along a path bring to mind your own journey with God over the past few days, weeks, months or years. Allow yourself to notice those times of closeness with God and give thanks for them. Allow yourself to notice when God felt distant, or even completely absent, and be aware of what was going on for you then. Where are you on the journey with God at this moment?

***Psalm 19: The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of God's hands.***

Take a few moments to enjoy the sky, the clouds as they drift by, perhaps even the sun as it rises or sets. Let your mind wander as you drink in the very glory of God revealed in creation. Notice the feelings within your heart, the sensations within your body as well as the thoughts in your mind.

***Psalm 42: Deep calls to deep in the roar of your waterfalls; all your waves and breakers have swept over me.***

Sit beside a waterfall or the sea and listen to the movement of the Spirit within God's creation. What do you need to flow into your life from God? What is the grace you would ask for from God to pour into your life today?

***Psalm 62: God alone is my rock and my salvation.***

Take a moment to pick up a stone or a pebble and hold it in your hand. Let yourself become aware of its shape and how it feels in your palm. So often David found rest, security, shelter and safety within a rocky cave. Perhaps there is an area in your life where you need God to be your rock, to offer shelter and sanctuary to you. Talk to God about this as you hold onto the stone or pebble.

# Praying with Art

I wonder when was the last time you allowed yourself the opportunity to create a new work of art, a painting, a doodle, a sculpture or a collage. As adults, we can all too easily become caught up in a world solely occupied by serious words, and forget our God-given capacity to play and create. Whenever I raise the possibility of using art as a way of praying, I can see the look of fear that drifts over some people's faces. For them, like myself, art was something for those individuals with talent rather than a way of expressing our own unique creativity. But using art as a form of prayer is not about demonstrating our artistic skills or talents but instead it is a way of expressing our relationship with God. For we know that art can offer a new perspective and fresh insights as well as an opportunity to release our emotions.

## How to use art as prayer?

- 1) I take a moment to be quiet and still in the presence of God, allowing my mind to notice how I am feeling in this moment. I decide on the passage of scripture I wish to use as the inspiration or starting point for my prayer today. I might read it over several times or play it on an mp3 player as I create.
- 2) I take time to gather the materials and tools I wish to use for my art today. I let myself just hold them in my hand. I might feel the paper I am going to draw / paint on or allow the clay / collage materials to move between my fingers.
- 3) When I feel ready, I might begin to draw, paint, mould or cut out shapes, patterns or images. I don't begin with the intention to create something specific in this time, but rather allow the Spirit of God to direct my thoughts. It is not about getting it right but letting my mind just wander as I create my art.
- 4) I give myself the time I need to create my art, probably in silence to allow myself to be fully aware of God's presence with me. I might drift back to the scripture passage during this time to revisit thoughts or ideas.
- 5) When my art feels finished, I just stop and look at it for a few minutes. I might notice what feelings are present within me as I look or touch it. I might think about how this speaks to me of my relationship with my Creator. I might wonder if I need to ask God for forgiveness or healing in this moment of my life. I close by giving thanks to God for this time.

Useful link <http://www.prayerwindows.com/> and <http://consecratetheday.com/creativity/creativity-home/>

# Lectio Divina

The art of *lectio divina*, or divine reading, has a long history with the Christian tradition, and has long been practised by monastics as a way of deepening their prayer lives. There are traditionally four stages of *lectio divina*, namely *lectio*, *meditatio*, *oratio* and *contemplatio*.

*Lectio* involves reading or listening to the passage of scripture being read slowly and gently, allowing time to stop and notice anything that stands out or catches one's attention.

*Meditatio* gives time for one to mull over the word, phrase, image or thought that arose during *lectio*; to unravel its importance or meaning as one sits in the presence of God. Through *meditatio* we allow God's word to become His word for us, a word that touches us and affects us at our deepest levels.

*Oratio* is an opportunity to have a conversation with God about the content of one's meditations, to listen to God's spirit and so allow our deepest selves to be healed and transformed.

*Contemplatio* is a time to rest in the presence of God in silence, and so savour one's relationship with a loving and personal God. Out of such contemplation can also arise the impulse to respond in a more active way within the world in your life.

A suggested way of *lectio divina*:

- 1) Choose a text of the Scriptures that you wish to pray. Many Christians use in their daily *lectio divina* one of the readings from the daily office; others prefer to work slowly through a particular book of the Bible.
- 2) Place yourself in a comfortable position and allow yourself to become silent. Use whatever method is best for you and allow yourself to enjoy silence for a few moments.
- 3) Then turn to the text and read or listen to it slowly two or three times. Savour each portion of the reading, constantly listening for the "still, small voice" of a word or phrase that somehow says, "I am for you today."
- 4) Next take the word or phrase into yourself. Memorize it and slowly repeat it to yourself, allowing it to interact with your inner world of concerns, memories and ideas. Do not be afraid of "distractions." Memories or thoughts are simply parts of yourself which, when they rise up during *lectio divina*, are asking to be given to God along with the rest of your inner self. Allow this inner pondering, this rumination, to invite you into dialogue with God.
- 5) Then, speak to God. Whether you use words or ideas or images or all three is not important. Interact with God as you would with one who you know loves and accepts you.
- 6) Finally, simply rest in God's embrace silently and passively. Consider if there is an action that God is leading you to from this time of prayer.
- 7) When you wish to draw your time of prayer to an end you might find it useful to say an 'Our Father' or the Grace.

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