

for today!

God will have worked within us in the interim and grown our spirit, dealt with various issues and brought us to a new understanding of him. We allow God to make an impact on our lives and the changes within us can be significant. Talking with Mark about the changes in his life and faith over a couple of years reminded me of the way that the route to satisfying our spirit in prayer is through making ourselves available and open for God to do business with us;

I think it's better to say that I've changed more than my faith has changed and I think that part of that is that it came through prayer, through praying with you and Gav and other people ... I think I'm happier being Mark than I was two years ago and I think that makes it a lot easier to live out a life of faith being more comfortable in myself.²⁸

To really pray, is often to ditch the formulae and to unzip the impermeable casing in which we have held together the messiness of our life. When we really pray, we open ourselves up to receive God in a powerful way. The relationship which we go on to develop with God over the years can transform us.

We may discover a new love for ourselves, for the place in which we live, for our neighbour. We may discover a release from old habits or attitudes which were stopping us from flourishing as full human beings. Mark partly ascribes his change to spending times in prayer, and sometimes praying with the company, love and support of other Christians. This puts a whole new level of value on the prayers we pray. It tells us that as the body of Christ, we should be committed to bring one another before God, for healing and restoration, being prepared to listen to God and speak words of grace and healing into that person, as God directs.

This fits no formula. This occupies no time frame. This is openness and availability to God at a priestly and costly level. When we pray for other people, or for situations that really matter to us (sometimes called interceding for others, or prayers of intercession), to repeat words is insufficient. Unless we really care that God heals and restores the person we are praying for, we have no right to expect God's love to work through us. The people I have most loved to pray for are still in my life, God's love for them rubbed off onto my heart and through committing to them in prayer, I have committed to them as people, I have begun to build community through prayer that properly loves. These prayers are ones full of intention and expectation that God will *do* a new thing and then *build* a new thing.

A few years ago, I met with friends who prayed for me. Prayerfully, before God, we dealt with 30 or so years of sludge which was clogging up my 'direct line' to God. There were sins, long forgotten but which had caused footholds of unholiness to pervade my life and inhibit my relationship with God as well as distorting my understanding of who I am as a child of God. The results were quick to show themselves. My husband has been jokingly complaining that it's the most expensive prayer ministry ever! In this prayer-time, I learnt to love my femininity and the clothes, make-up and other accoutrements that help to express this are part of the deal. God, in his love and wisdom, made me to be a woman and although I am also a Methodist Minister and church leader (men's work, some might argue), being female and enjoying it is OK too!

Change, at the levels of which Mark and I are speaking, are not found in a simple prayer going up to God. The prayers which we learn to pray in order to get to this point are born of getting closer to God. Through loving his word and waiting in his presence. Really praying is committing to God, not for a few 'dates' but for always and by fully entering into being part of that beautiful body of people fully committed to Jesus, the Church: the Bride of Christ.

The culture we are part of is one where being busy and dealing with issues on an instant basis has become normal. We fear the long wait. We resist having to so thoroughly engage with anything that renders us being out of contact or completely focussed to the exclusion of everything else.

²⁸ Mark McKnight: Changed through Prayer

This has de-skilled us in the art of prayer. We are able to give God a one-liner tagged onto the end of our dutiful daily Bible-Reading notes (handily incorporating the text for the day to save having to have Bible handy for further reading...)

When it comes to prayer, it is not possible to be only half-present and to still build our relationship with God. It is when we are completely given to being in his presence, we find that we lose the sense of time as we relax into the great joy of knowing Him.

How long should a church service be? An hour?

What about the length of the sung worship within that service? Ten minutes?

How many minutes should an ideal prayer not exceed? Three? Or maybe five if it is entertaining enough for everyone present to enjoy ?

How long was the sermon this Sunday? 27 minutes and 32 seconds?

Our time is counted to the second in a world of time-poverty. I preached the wedding address for a trainee lawyer and accountant. Paul had always taken a keen delight in measuring the exact amount of time 'I went on for' in a sermon and he timed, exactly, the duration of the sermon at his own wedding! A budding lawyer, he knew the value of time and his new wife, Lisa, would also share in that 'joy' as well as keeping the payments in the right column!

Time is precious and yet we are often so miserly with the amount which we will give to Jesus. If we look again at our list of addresses for approaching God in prayer, we may discover ones such as Father God, Lord Jesus, Almighty God, Heavenly Father, Loving God, Lord, Gracious God ... and others which express reverence and holiness. Charles Wesley described him as Lord and Ruler of Time in his hymn, 'Crown Him with Many Crowns': *Hail him the Lord of years, the Potentate of Time!* We would do well to respond positively to this command and to take a wider and more honest view of our relationship with time and God.

We watch hours of TV, play computer games, Xbox, Wii. We go on 'chat' and browse Facebook, talk on the phone, stare out of the window or rearrange our furniture without any sense of being robbed of time. Apply the same principles to our time spent with God, as we invest in the precious pearl of our faith and amazing revelations begin to happen in prayer and worship. We are pulled to be in God's presence and find our relationship with him deepens quickly, when we stop clock-watching. Time after time, I have been in prayer and worship-filled meetings where 'time' has been called mid-worship or mid-prayer and the meeting had been wound up and closed down. With this has come a sense of deprivation; that we were being cut off from something important and life-giving.

It has often been my experience that time takes on a new and Godly dimension when we really pray. I had accepted an invitation to lead a service which would be largely prayer-based in a church a couple of hours drive from home. The regular minister was there, also nervous, and being 'busy' in his nonchalance about the service and my being there, albeit with his permission.

He did not know me and I had resisted all of his efforts to organise any 'form' for the service as I assured him that it would be better if, for this particular service, we would let God, through his Holy Spirit, direct the course of the evening. People arrived and the service began at 7-30. I aimed to finish at 9pm.

After a while, when we had prayed and worshipped in adoration of God, we were immersed in His presence and I started to move onto the time of ministry. The hour had gone - evaporated. The regular minister glanced up at the clock and did a double-take as he noticed how much time had passed.

God was powerfully present that night and I praised Him for it. He set his own timetable and wrought his own purpose in that time which his people had offered him. Being with God places us in the realm of the eternal. We are with him on his territory, in his Kingdom and it is wonderful!

I love that sense of God's eternal presence overwhelming all other thoughts and desires, our priorities and our lurking fears. With him, there is not even a sense of security, it is meaningless as his presence in its awesome holiness defines its own meaning in which there is no vocabulary for our trivia or worldly nonsense!

The ancient hymn writers knew what this meant as they captured their prayers as verses to equip the people of God to truly worship him:

*When we've been there ten thousand years,
Bright shining as the sun,
We've no less days to sing God's praise
Than when we'd first begun.*

This rapturous verse appended to John Newton's *Amazing Grace* gives insight into the timeless eternity of being in God's presence, fully with him. Instead of simply viewing it as a picture of what Heaven is like when we actually get there, see it as a more wistful hope of the worshipper interrupted by constraints of earthly time. Likewise, in the great hymn, *Love Divine*, Charles Wesley captures a picture of the worshipper and of being in God's timeless presence in the beautifully descriptive lines:

*Changed from glory into glory,
Till in heaven we take our place,
Till we cast our crowns before Thee,
Lost in wonder, love, and praise.*

It is vital that we discover the awe of waiting in prayer and worship in the courts of the eternal God in order to make sense of the order we give our own, everyday life. To pray, we do not plug in a series of codes whereby we summon the great, omnipotent listener who will do our bidding. To pray, we honour and revere and so build the relationship with which Father God has blessed his people, the *crown of his creation* through giving us the potential of living with him.

Look at Genesis 1:27 :

*So God created mankind in his own image,
in the image of God he created them;
male and female he created them. (NIV)*

Here, we see the honour that God gave human people as the pinnacle of creation, with oversight over all creation and with the intention for relationship as we are indeed made in God's image.

When we begin to pray, really pray; we approach God, not with the variety of polite addresses which we have learned for the occasion, nor with the series of serious requests which we would make of him. When we really begin to pray, we approach God in order that we may be with him and through this intimacy, have our world-view and self-view transformed as we are changed to be more like him. He teaches us to pray by his presence dwelling within us. We become ever less self-conscious and ever more Christ-conscious.

Cheryl-Anne who is a member of Madonna House, a Catholic community in coastal North Yorkshire, describes the early days of her life with Jesus;

One night, when I was 18, I had an experience of God. He just poured himself into every crack and crevice of my being with love and it was profoundly personal and so I knew, that night, that there is a God who loves me, who calls me and wants my love and that the rest of my life will be spent in him. It was an amazing experience and from that point on - I didn't know anything about formal, private prayer just what you do in church - but I found myself talking to God all the time and hearing from him and just thought this happens to everyone. When you come to know God it's a love-relationship and you think about him all the time. I started to read the scripture to understand more and more who he was and I'd walk down the street and - not in an audible way - but I could hear him speaking

to me, teaching me about himself. This inner world became, in a sense, more real than this (bangs chair) world. I remember clearly, I was at university and walking down the street looking at shops and being aware of people or being in a lecture hall and taking notes and being totally present to what was going on and yet - it's somewhat akin to a woman being pregnant - you're more aware of this inner Life, it's a deeper level, even though you're fully attentive to what you're doing. So I thought this was normal and then in the process, I discovered the Catholic church, other ways of praying, retreats and that kind of thing, but from the beginning, it's been this interior life with God, this seeking God and this receiving of God's love, whatever form it would take through the years.²⁹

I love the description of Cheryl Anne's early days with Jesus. There is no division between her faith and the rest of life, it is one. Her relationship with Jesus overarches her whole being. As she does her earthly duties and has her earthly experiences they all find their natural order, coming under the importance of her knowing and living with Jesus. He is with her, powerfully present in all of her ordinary routine.

There is no prescribed method, no ritual or programme to follow for her to get to know God. Knowing God is all part of the reality of her life. As Cheryl-Anne describes her early days of relationship with Jesus, there is no demarcation of the time allotted to her faith. There is no separation at all between who she is and who she is when she is at prayer. Instead of grudgingly giving an extra hour to worship and prayer, her whole being is caught up in a heavenly adventure. Being with Jesus is not circumscribed by a time frame. This is hugely challenging to those of us who measure out our lives to fit a diary or schedule. Does prayer, Bible study, and worship; the very fabric of our faith find a valid place in among the meetings and the preparation time, the allocated hours for completing items from the menace of the 'to-do' list? I fear the answer is so often that it does not. Building relationship with God is unquantifiable in the value of the time spent in prayer, but essential for a Christian's life to flourish.

It distresses me greatly that prayer is not generally taught as an adventure, an epic quest full of thrills and anticipation. Cheryl-Anne is still radiant with the joy of the memory of Christ's first pouring of himself into her life. Mark is in constant discussion with God about all manner of important issues of life. I am constantly excited about how God's promises are going to be revealed in my own life and in the lives of those among whom I work and whom I love.

The reality for many people is that the adventure of prayer has failed to live up to its potential.

Students returning from their first term at university report that they have gone to their respective Christian Unions expecting to pray to find that, when practised by the leaders, prayer is *telling God things*.

The students reporting this know that this is a poor reflection of what prayer can be, but for how many others has this become the praying person's default setting? We have prayer books - full of words, adulations, exhortations, exultations. We have been brought up on structured liturgies which propel us with great verbal dexterity from here to eternity and suddenly the prayer is done. Finished.

Prayer over.

²⁹ Madonna House: Cheryl Anne, *Discovering God in Prayer*

Compare this with the richness of Cheryl Anne's daily adventure with God as he converses with her and her willingness for him to meet with her in this way. She receives from God as God tells *her* things: note the critical difference here!

These students have found verbosity to be lacking in spirit.

They question; Where is the 'being' of prayer, the worship, the waiting on God? Where is the losing of self in the arms of the Almighty and finding yourself to be *fearfully and wonderfully re-made*? (See Psalm 139 and 2 Corinthians 5:17)

These students know that prayer has a dynamic shift during its course, but they also know that prayer is the 'main event' of a Christian gathering and that through patience in prayer, God will reveal his heart for whatever circumstance the praying people intercede. Prayer, they know is purposeful but never codified or perfunctory. For Cheryl Anne, addressing God and then ticking 'prayer' off her daily agenda would be a travesty. She knows that the reality of life is found in him, so his presence and the expectation of hearing from him should be a permanent state for every believer.

We come into God's presence hopeful and expectant. We have given him our hearts and lives, asking Jesus to be our Saviour. We have lived out this pattern of faith and are developing a living relationship with God through Jesus. *Teach us to pray!* said the disciples who already knew the theory and the scriptures from their childhood, but had recognised that in Jesus there was a relationship which was key to communicating successful and exciting prayer.

There is a world of difference between knowing the actions and words that form prayers and taking prayer to wield as a weapon of God's loving intervention in a world dominated by anger, brokenness, despair, unfairness and hardship. The Christian can rightfully use prayer to break down spiritual walls of apathy, hatred and violence. They have the authority to pray peace and healing into the very core of a person or situation and to let God's healing radiate outward from there to affect every part of the person's life. Praying really begins when we recognise the difference that Jesus makes within our own lives. We discover how our personal responses to the world around us are changed. We are bound to see the world through new eyes as Jesus gives us the lens of God's own love through which we view the people we meet. We no longer view people with different viewpoints as being an enemy, but, through God's eyes, we now view them as our brothers and sisters. We now get angry at injustice and demand action.

Through a closer relationship with him, Jesus changes our personality - not to make us freaks or to strip us of our human uniqueness - but his grace allows us to shed the shells which we have built over our true selves. It may take many years before we realise that our own transformation has been the result of prayer. Our constant submission to Jesus has allowed our self-made solutions to be dissolved under his gracious hand.

We go to him. He loves us. We become better at love. Prayer's impact is to always make a difference, and that difference is always within the goodness of God's character.

When I was a new minister, one of my good friends at the church became very ill. A committed smoker who had worked in the petro-chemical industry, he contracted cancer of the throat and soon lost weight and began to look poorly and emaciated. He was a church steward, an elder, who always had plenty to say in meetings, happy to err on the side of controversy if the situation arose. He was capable of derailing a meeting with a well-timed phrase or objection, but when no one was looking, he was generous and full of compassion. During the first month of his illness, I visited him at home, committing to pray with him and his wife every week.

“I will pray for healing for you,” I promised. “I don’t know what God will do, but God is good and we can trust that.”

So I prayed. He got worse. The cancer treatment was brutal and despite his bluster and bravado, I could see his strength ebbing from him. After a particularly bad week, another of my church elders caught me in conversation and she told me Bob was going to die. She reminded me that Jesus’ healing sometimes meant taking people home to be with him. I drove home in tears: it didn’t feel right. I went to pray with Bob again, knowing that I believed what I had told him: ‘God is good and he will do something good.’

On the next Sunday at church, we bowed our heads in prayer and he was there at the back, occupying the place of maximum disconnection from the service. As I lifted the people to God in prayer, I noticed his hands outstretched, reaching and open to God: full of hope, expectant that God would hear him. The next thing I noticed was that his hands were raised in worship.

Later, on entering their home, I became aware of a softening in the atmosphere between him and his wife. There was a new tenderness between them and a love in the looks they exchanged. In hospital, he graciously surrendered to the ministrations of women doctors and nurses, trusting in their expertise without diminishing them and receiving bad news with good grace from consultants of all ethnicities. He had discovered himself to be a child of God and had begun to behave like one! As I led his funeral, we sang the final verse from his favourite hymn;

*When Christ shall come with shout of acclamation
And take me home- what joy shall fill my heart!
Then I shall bow in humble adoration
And there proclaim, my God, how great thou art!*

My voice was shaking and tears were running down my face as I lifted my hands in worship and surrendered my friend into the care of his Lord.

Bob had gone home.

Transformed by the love of Jesus, he was the recipient of prayer that does violence to that which is not of God within us. Grace broke through and healed his spirit. He became more like his Saviour.

Prayer makes a difference when we truly invite God to be present and to bring his wholeness to wreak glory over our brokenness and frailty. A list of words, hurriedly inserted into a busy schedule does not demonstrate a priority of God’s presence over a life devoted to his Lordship and love.

When we really begin to pray, we discover that God is at work inside us and in the world we inhabit. He creates us ever more in his image as we surrender into his jurisdiction our time, our intellect, our career, relationships and all the important bits that make us who we are. Prayer makes it easier for us to be ourselves, as the subtle layers of sin and other junk are washed away. To really pray, we need to rid ourselves of the notion that prayer is a formula, and let it pervade the entirety of our life, stopping to lose ourselves in the wonder of his love whenever we find the least excuse to go there.

Prayer gives your faith a sharper edge. Not only does it comfort and protect, it also lends Power and Authority to your situation. It cuts free, cauterises and tears down things that are not of God. It takes away the normal nuisances that you have learned to deal with but that cost you energy every day. Prayer places your hand in the hand of your Father in Heaven - the Lord of Heaven and Earth - and that same power that raised Jesus from the dead begins to transform your world.

If the church is ready for adventure, let us start to pray as though we really believe in God!

¹⁸I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in his holy people, ¹⁹and his incomparably great power for us who believe. That power is the same as the mighty strength²⁰ he exerted when he raised Christ from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms... (Ephesians 1:18-20 NIV)