

## Chapter 2    **Actively Learning to Pray**

How do we learn to pray? For many, there is more of a personal expectation that they simply ought to be able to pray due to their being a Christian, and because prayer is one of a Christian's activities. It may never occur to us that some kind of process or guidance might help us to learn to pray effectively.

Of course, some personalities resist any form of process in their life at all cost, whilst others are desperate to have a system for everything and would expect that prayer be able to fit into a system that they acquire or devise. However, we all have to admit that we need to learn to walk, talk, play sport, cook, use technology - even if we have not used a manual or scheme to gain proficiency in any of these fields. It is through trial and error, watching others, patient application and commitment that we learn.

My small boy, Aidan, as a baby was very keen on getting onto feeding himself. He was frustrated at being fed the good stuff from a spoon held by mummy whilst he clutched a piece of wholemeal toast! He wanted to participate. After all, he'd been watching eating with utensils take place since he was days old. Now was his time. We handed him a spoon and the eating began. He had such fun! He was orange with baked beans from the top of his head, with every exposed piece of skin being liberally coated with juice and escaped beans. He smiled and laughed with satisfaction as he generously loaded up his spoon and aimed it at the centre of his face. High chair, floor, child, walls, parents - covered in beans. But our boy was learning to eat with the absolute determination and expectation that he would be good at this. And he was right.

Aidan demanded a spoon of his own so that he could feed himself. We also must apply that principle to our desire to truly learn. We must make a decision to discover prayer.

Whether we are a Christian of many years, or starting out in our faith, it is finding a determination to learn to pray that will lead us to truly develop the skills we need.

We might have seen people who matter to us pray and copied their motions.

We may have been to a church which uses a written down format for the service and joined in with the responses with the other people around us.

We may have had no experience of prayer other than what we have seen on TV or during school assembly, the Christmas Carol Service or when we've been desperate and shouted to God for help. These starting points all give us some information about what prayer is and to whom it is addressed.

As people who are followers of Jesus, learning to pray is necessary to our growth and development as disciples. The first Disciples who walked with Jesus began their journey with the knowledge brought with them from their early traditions. They would have had their own opinions on worship and prayer. During the course of their time with Jesus, they began to realise that more was possible, and so they sought to learn how to pray as Jesus prayed. This way, although they didn't yet know it, when the time came, they would be capable of building the church, making wise decisions about development and personnel and be convicted, utterly convinced, of God's great love for them as individuals and the world at large.

If prayer is such a necessary part of our relationship with God, it should be taught with great care and diligence such that every disciple may have the opportunity to properly extend their understanding and practise of prayer.

As we learn, we have questions about how prayer works and even what constitutes a prayer. Is prayer the words we utter, stumble over, panic about getting right? Does true prayer happen when we are quiet and still? We can either wrestle with these questions

and try out some answers until we are satisfied that we are on the right tracks, or we can decide it's all a bit too much and give up until someone spoon-feeds us with a prayer for each day.

I see many people struggle with prayer because they take the route of getting the perfect form of words. In a composite of the words of many people with whom I've shared in fellowship over the years, they say; "We can't pray, Catherine, we wash up and we bake cakes. You're good at this sort of thing, you must pray for us."

This will simply not do! If the church is to grow and be active in every local community it needs to be built of Christians who are confident and bold to pray their prayers for themselves as well as for the world around them.

It can really limit the extent of our relationship with God if we don't lose this, 'I can't pray, you do it!' hang-up. Confidence in our ability as a person who can pray is often low, especially when it comes to praying aloud, and even more so in public. Learning to pray claims every part of our faith as our own. As we grow confident in our ability to pray, we find that our willingness to offer to pray for others, even silently, increases. Confidence increases our faith (Hebrews 11:1) and our prayers become more adventurous. We may not yet have opened our mouths to pray in public yet, but our spirit understands what it means to be part of the people of God. We support each other, we pray for God's world, we pray for ourselves because belonging to Jesus means that we also belong to his people. To effectively function as God's church, we must push past the 'prayer by professionals' myth to reclaim every believer's rightful place in the great company of saints who pray.

My Grandad was an ace at prayer. He would pray for the preacher in the vestry before church service and his prayers were so full of Scripture with affirmations and petitions for the preacher, that the prayers were sometimes longer than the sermon. Likewise at mealtimes, he would launch into an epic prayer just as a hot meal was served up and ready to eat:

*"It is meet and right and our bounden duty always and everywhere to give thee thanks and praise ..."*

This was standard for all meals until one day it was punctuated, by a "Come on Ernie, the dinner's getting cold" from Grandma.

It wasn't long after that incident that we would take it in turns to head off the lengthy grace when eating out in public. Northern England isn't used to witnessing lengthy prayers in cafes, restaurants and pubs and the waiting staff have no protocol for dealing with such events, unlike in Texas where they will wait respectfully until the "Amen!" has been declared before serving the table. We soon learned that Grandad's articulate prayers, whilst beautiful and poetic would benefit from simplicity and brevity in the café.

Consequently, one other member of the family would offer to say grace; it had to be both long enough and audible enough for Grandad to deem it sufficiently a prayer, or he would add to it - loudly and at length, leaving us with cold food and an awkward waitress.

I tell this story to encourage all people who are to the point in their prayers not to feel substandard! There is great rejoicing over the sincerely meant word of Thanks to our Lord which doesn't result in cold food! Have confidence that your faith is sufficient to fuel a prayer that is suitable for any occasion, whether spoken or said silently - and don't worry about what other people may be thinking! My Grandad didn't, and whilst it made us squirm with embarrassment at the time, we were grudgingly impressed by the heartfelt sincerity and unabashed delight he took in giving thanks.

Learning to have confidence in our ability to pray can mean us moving past the form and language that other people use.

We can become tongue-tied by impossible expectations which we place on ourselves through hearing particular prayers or people praying in a manner which we would like to copy but feel we would never do it as well as they manage.

I am sure that we are not expected to pray like the people 400 years ago prayed, using only the specific words of the prayer book. Whilst it may have lent a sense of drama and state to a royal wedding such as that of Prince William and Catherine Middleton (April 29<sup>th</sup> 2011), it conveys nothing personal as we try to borrow language long fallen into disuse by all but the most die-hard of those who love Cranmer's prayer book and the perception of a Shakespearean golden age of the English language.

Watching any religious ceremony on TV, we are confronted by a high level of poetic and articulate people who pray on behalf of a huge group. The royal wedding seemed to warrant Shakespearean language as prayers and Christian contracts were made in ancient form, opting heavily for the proliferation of 'thee' and other archaisms which lent a drama to the state of the occasion but did little to engage the worldwide congregation in making a resounding 'Amen!' It's hard to give our assent to what we don't understand. Most of us are left, unable to say 'Amen', opting rather for the inarticulate but universally understood 'Huh?'

My native language is English, my accent and dialect reflect that I live in the North-East of England and that my husband is of Northumbrian/Geordie origins. I pronounce and arrange words to reflect this heritage. My friends from the South of England are puzzled that 'bath', 'grass' and 'castle' among others have hard vowel sounds, unlike the 'ah' which they are used to hearing. If I try to borrow their accent or use their dialect words, I just feel like an idiot; a scone will never be 'sc-ohne' to me, it doesn't fit. I laugh at my friends' ill-fitting attempts to use my words in my way, and they take great delight in teasing me about mine.

Surely the same principles must apply to our prayers. We need to be ourselves in prayer, openly and honestly bringing our love, our hopes and our concerns to God. Our language in addressing God should be the same language that we use all the time - which is perhaps a challenge to those who forget themselves and lapse into language they wouldn't use in front of their parents, let alone their heavenly Father!

Why not use the same turns of phrase which you use in general conversation with your friends to share the thoughts of your heart with The Friend of Sinners - Jesus?

Why *not* copy the speech patterns of prayer in line with the patterns of your peer group?

The university student returns after a first term away from home and has developed the eternally cool way of praying;

*Yeah, Father God, we really just wanna thank you for the good things you've done here.*

*Yeah Lord, I just want to offer you this time and all our, yeah, hearts Father...*

And why not? It may not win any prizes for beauty in form and structure, but for me it wins prizes for intention and honesty. In this prayer, I see relationship, understanding of where God is working and commitment to remain in tune with God's heart. Surely it is better to have a willing believer praying in her native language than add to this present generation of prayer-mutes?

Why *not* get excited about the love of Jesus for you and shout ‘*Jesus, Jesus, Jesus!*’ either as a chant or as an exultant expression of praise of his Name? Youth worship events can find a wonderful place wherein the Spirit’s presence is tangible and Jesus’ love is uppermost in a community of shared experience. During this time of blessing, a small group of people will be unable to contain silence and with great vigour begin to proclaim His name: *Jesus! Jesus!* It begins as a question to the rest of the gathering who respond with further vigour: *Jesus! Jesus!* The Name becomes a statement, a proclamation, an anthem and can continue for a number of minutes, rising and falling in volume as silence falls on some and voice is given to the faith of others.

Why shouldn’t this chorus of ‘Jesus’ beat out a tattoo of worship and love from the hearts of a multitude of gathered teenagers? Surely this is preferable to the echoes of emptiness heard in so many of our churches which populate the western world. And just maybe, there is a Biblical echo here too, as we recall the crowds proclaiming the arrival of Jesus into Jerusalem in Mark 11: 8-10; or the antithesis to the crowd’s response in Luke 23:18-21 as they cry out to have Barabbas released and Jesus crucified?

Liturgy, or the group expression of prayer, should belong to the people, express the common heart and extol the Living God. It may not be deep, but it certainly is passionate. We learn to pray when we genuinely have something to say to God, and I believe that the first step to learning to pray is in discovering who Jesus is.

Of course, anyone can say a prayer, or read a prayer, or learn a prayer. It is good to hear the Lord’s Prayer recited by schoolchildren and congregations of jubilant or grieving adults at wedding or funeral. Prayer has a soothing quality as we address the God who loves us, but for those without relationship with Jesus, it is more like asking a stranger on the street for directions than it is about building relationship and understanding the mind of the One who loves us. The stranger will give directions, and we follow them to the best of our ability, but once we’re sorted out with our problem, we forget about the one who showed us the way and so we carry on with our lives without a second thought for the direction-giver.

The loved and long remembered prayers of long-ago which we bring with us from the family home or our Sunday School or youth organisation may fall into this category, prayers such as:

*When I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep;  
Matthew, Mark, Luke & John, bless the bed that I lie on.*

*Day by day dear Lord, of thee, three things I pray:  
To see thee more clearly  
To love thee more dearly  
To follow thee more nearly  
Day by day. (Richard of Chichester)*

*Teach me good Lord to serve you as you deserve:  
To give and not to count the cost  
To fight and not to heed the wounds  
To labour and not to ask for any reward save that of knowing that I do your will. (Ignatius Loyola)*

Although the idea of praying has been established in the use of these prayers, if it never moves past them to explore new themes or understandings of God, it remains undeveloped and never reaches its potential.

When I am given roses, especially around Christmas or Valentine's Day, the potential of luscious blooms is more than hinted at in the just-opening buds that are lovingly placed into the vase. However, it is a continual source of disappointment to me, the recipient of the potentially wonderful flowers, that so often they remain in bud- lacking the energy, the will or ability to form the beautiful blooms for which they were intended.

When our prayers remain the same in their form and structure their potential, which is the beginning of the relationship with God, remains undeveloped. This is often the case for non-believers who are seeking God's help in times of desperation and hardship. The will and decision to pray could be the beginning of discovering well-spring of hope for which they are really searching, but what they feel they need is the answer to some immediate crisis.

Generally, people believe that prayer is a good thing and it is not unusual for people of no or little faith to ask their Christian friends to 'say one for me'. This is of course a wonderful opportunity of permission to intercede or bring the friend or neighbour before God at their own request. This almost flippant regard to prayer is often as limited in its potential to truly find God as my rose buds are limited, dying on the stem out of season and without reaching full bloom.

Mark speaks of his early experiences of prayer with a smile. Like so many people from a Christian background, having a little knowledge of what to pray collided with the expectations that he would pray and had interesting results:

*I remember growing up and saying your "prayers" before you went to bed ... saying a couple of graces that you knew and the Lord's Prayer. You said prayers that you knew, even though thanking God for food just before you went to sleep wasn't really right...<sup>5</sup>*

I suspect that the heartfelt prayers of a small boy often revolve around food and its provision. However, in those early days of knowing that prayer is necessary but not trusting the formation of your own ideas to be acceptable can be limiting. If all you have known is the standardised prayer of a prayer book, how can you express your joy for the game of football, the cinema or the fear about tomorrow's test at school or trip to the doctor's? Mark has since successfully found a way through the minefield of using the prayers he has learnt, but a certain amount of discomfort and anxiety remains:

*Sometimes when I'm coming to pray, I don't know what I'm doing that much. Like when you're in a social situation and you're not quite sure how to respond, or you feel a bit uncomfortable ... a lot of times when I'm praying, it's like that - I know what I want to say, so I just splurge it out without being 'intentional' about it.<sup>6</sup>*

A myth has sprung up around prayer: that God needs the clever and precise words of an educated, knowledgeable and articulate voice. This myth needs to be dismissed from many hearts and minds as it presents a trap which would cause us to stay distant from God and never grow beyond the learnt familiarity of the childhood prayers we know from long ago. We can carry long-formed hang ups about our ability to pray well into our adulthood.

---

<sup>5</sup> Mark McKnight: Jonah & Remembered Prayers

<sup>6</sup> Mark McKnight: Teaching me to Pray

*Splurging* our prayers gives God our rawness about feelings and situations and reveals our passion for him and the world around us. A waterfall of words, tumbling into the ear of our heavenly Father shows how much we need him. He creates order out of chaos, so the jumble of thoughts, pain, ideas, hopes and love pouring from the mouth of one of his Children is not going to be a problem for him to work out. The splurging should lead to a sense of peace, of knowing that we are loved and held by God and that he is with us, lending his strength to our faith and giving us the courage we need for each eventuality. It's not fully-formed prayer which leads to a good and well-formed relationship, but it is well on the way. God is interested in whatever we are doing and is patient to let the fullness of prayer develop from these beginnings, guiding us patiently to pause and take notice of him and teaching us the promise of a good relationship with him through his gracious answers and the people he puts around us.

When prayer becomes properly rooted in relationship with God, we learn about his love and care over the whole of our lives as we spend more and more time in his presence. Learning to pray involves our hearts and our wills as we choose to spend time getting to know Jesus and the will of our Father in Heaven. Through prayer, we discover the power of the Holy Spirit who gives power and confidence to our faith and who will challenge us about the state of our heart and the lifestyle we have chosen.

As we grow in our understanding of God, we find that our prayers are still in our 'native tongue', and we use our own ways of speaking, but our prayers take on a new dimension as they begin to be peppered with phrases and images from Scripture. Our love for God necessitates a love for his Word, the Bible, and that Word takes root within our heart and becomes a beautiful and natural part of our language of love for God. This use of images and phrases from the Bible fits in and around our own descriptions and our manner of talking to God. We also borrow from the wealth of description of God and his saving love through Jesus that has travelled down the centuries, loved and used by the people of God who have sought God's heart for their lives. We also borrow from the spiritual songs and hymns that we have accumulated in our heart's library over the years of our faith. These statements and descriptions of faith, love and commitment which we have learned and absorbed all inform our praying.

Every time I pray in public, I offer my own prayer on behalf of all who are gathered. It may be halting and rough around the edges or deep, rich and poetic; but it is authentic prayer which gathers up my love for God and the people and represents our love Godwards as well as reminding all present of God's great love towards us. The prayer below is an example of a typical prayer in my own words which has 'borrowed' heavily from the Bible and songs or hymns in contemporary use. I firstly offer it as a prayer on our behalf and then we will look at how it is a mosaic of many influences... Let us pray:

*Glory and thanks be given to you, loving God our heavenly Lord.  
You are great and gracious - wonderful beyond our imagination;  
Seated high above the heavens, reigning in majesty and power.  
You call all things into being and the whole of creation responds to your creative Word.*

*Lord Jesus - you reign in power and call each of us by name  
to kneel before your throne of grace and mercy.*

*You are holy, King of Love and we respond to your kindness as we bow in worship.  
Drawn into your presence, none can stand in our sinfulness.  
We come, saved by the gift and sacrifice of your cross of shame and glory.*

*Jesus, we confess our sin, we repent of our wrongdoing  
and ask that you would take our sins from us and cast them into the deep-most part  
of the ocean.*

*Jesus, we listen to your precious words speaking to each of our hearts saying:  
“My precious child - I love you - your sins are forgiven.”*

*And so, Lord God, we rejoice in our salvation, brought to us  
by the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord and Risen Saviour.  
May your name be lifted high in our praises as we rejoice in your love.  
Our Lord - Our God - Forever. Amen*

I like this prayer. I tried to be honest as I wrote it down, so that it was a natural and as spontaneous as I could make it. There were no long hours searching for the right images or Scriptural references. The repetition is what happens when we pray with a thought in our mind, and I think this is ok. We do not pray in order to gain earthly awards for artistry, we pray with the accompaniment of the influences of our peers, our present situation and our love of God's Word: the Bible. In examining the prayer above, there will be many allusions to song and Scripture and some expression of the way I was feeling when I first prayed this prayer.

*Glory and thanks be given to you* *Liturgy for Holy Communion*, *loving God our heavenly Lord.*

*Matthew 11:25*

*You are great and gracious - wonderful beyond our imagination;* *See Psalm 86 & Ephesians 3:20*

*Seated high above the heavens* *Psalm 108:4*, *reigning in majesty and power* *Psalm 93, Jude 1:25.*

*You call all things into being and the whole of creation*

*responds to your creative Word* *Colossians 1:16 & 17.*

*Lord Jesus - you reign in power and call each of us by name* *Isaiah 43:1*

*to kneel before your throne of grace and mercy.* *Hebrews 4:16*

*You are holy* *Hillsong, Revelation 15:4*, *King of Love* *Henry W Baker (Psalm 23)*

*and we respond to your kindness* *Jeremiah 31:3* *as we bow in worship.* *Psalm 95:6*

*Drawn into your presence, none can stand in our sinfulness.* *Ezra 9:15*

*We come, saved by the gift* *Acts 4: 12* *and sacrifice of your cross of shame* *Hebrews 12:2&3*  
*and glory.*

*Jesus, we confess our sin*<sup>1</sup> *John 1:9*, *we repent* *Acts 2:38* *of our wrongdoing*

*and ask that you would take our sins from us and cast them into the deep-most part  
of the ocean.* *Micah 7:18-20*

*Jesus, we listen to your precious words speaking to each of our hearts saying;  
 “My precious child<sup>From ‘Footprints’</sup> - I love you - your sins are forgiven.” Luke 7:48(For example)  
 And so, Lord God, we rejoice in our salvation<sup>Psalm 40:16</sup>, brought to us  
 by the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord<sup>Romans 8:39</sup> and Risen Saviour.  
 May your name be lifted high in our praises<sup>Nehemiah 9:5</sup> as we rejoice in your love<sup>Psalm  
 31:7</sup>.  
 Our Lord - Our God - Forever. Amen <sup>Jude 25</sup>*

Our worship is inspired by a combination of Scripture and experience, backed up by the historic patterns of the church which is what yesterday’s Christians spoke and experienced as their vehicle for expressing faith. We re-configure ancient hymns, liturgies and words of Scripture to make sense of God through our own eyes and with our own mouth. We take what we can from the sources that influence our lives, but we really watch our prayer life start to flourish when we claim the words as our own and use them to speak of how we see God.

I have spent much time in various vestries prior to the start of a service. In the British Methodist tradition, a Steward, or Church Elder will take responsibility for praying with the preacher before letting us loose on the congregation. I have witnessed a variety of prayers, which are on a continuum from leaving me feeling galvanised and competent for the task ahead of me, through to those which have left me confused and unconfident about the proposed act of worship. I always enjoy the heartfelt and somewhat directive prayers of one of my current Stewards, John who always begins his vestry prayer by using some portion of a crucifixion hymn from the 18<sup>th</sup> century for context and concludes with; “And we pray for our preacher, Catherine who as ever will bring us the good news that Jesus died to save sinners.”

I appreciate each one of Colin’s words of faith, not easily brought to voice in the vestry, among worship leaders, musician and the minister. I hear the courage of faith in his words which lift me to do what God has asked of me that day.

However, some of these prayers have made me a little sad, as maybe the Steward takes out the church’s own book version of ‘Vestry Prayers for all Occasions’ and flicks through to find some bland and uninspiring words to utter into the awkward silence. Sadder still are the times when the Steward has thumbed through the book and closed it again in resignation;

“There’s not much in here, Catherine ... I don’t want to say any of these ... will you just pray for both of us?” And so I pray.

Whether our words are borrowed from liturgical traditions, or quotes from hymns old or contemporary, as they rise in our minds and are offered in today’s context, they reveal a little of our own faith and circumstance. At the heart of John’s faith is the crucifixion of his Saviour and he prays his passion for Jesus as a kind of mandate for the service - which can be a bit worrying when the service prepared is not majoring on that angle of the Christian message. The heart of Jimmy’s faith is his love for his Lord as he tends his vegetables and milks his cows - he has no fine words to pray with a preacher. The heart of Colin’s faith is in his unshakable conviction of God’s love for him and for everyone. All these angles are revealed through praying.



In so many cases, we discover what we truly believe when we speak about it. We discover our passion for God, our need for the Holy Spirit's presence and power, our close communion with Jesus when we express it. Prayer teaches us much about ourselves and our relationship with God and others as it places us into God's presence to ask his blessing on the things that affect our hearts. It is through learning to pray that we grow as people, filling the emptiness of our spirit with the life-giving relationship of the real and living presence of Jesus. Learning to pray can transform your life and give a whole new and exciting dimension to your faith.

### Chapter 3 Praying with Your Bible Open

It was a New Year's party, and the friends had gathered together in a large front room to share some post-Christmas treats, and some time with each other. There may have been wine, but certainly not in the copious amounts which would generally accompany the New Year celebrations. This occasion sticks with me because it is one of the most fascinating evenings I have spent in listening to the shared stories of a group I was part of and which dated back to 'before my time'. The 'Do you remember when's ... ' which can so often exclude the newcomer were instead engaging stories of prophecy and hope; about seeking and helping the lost and broken to find safety and salvation. There were tales of high drama and of ordinary, gentle blessing. The stories outlined the journey of these people of God and of God's faithfulness in their lives of obedience.

One story would lead into another and the buzz of excitement was contagious as faces lit up with further recollections of God's grace and his miracles! We went home exhausted, excited and a little bemused. Whatever we had expected from a New Year's celebration over the remains of Christmas cake and festive cheese, it was not this glimpse into the great joy of serving God.

Hearing and sharing stories is a great way to get to know the heart and character of a person or a group. Their stories take you into the moment of revelation or drama and pick out the best bits for you to enjoy with them. The young people at Church would ask me to tell newcomers to our youth group about the 'time you exorcised the caravan with the dodgy toilet' and smile and nod in encouragement, filling in details which they felt would help the person to properly see the event in all its intriguing and delightful oddness!

At another level, my son will ask me to tell him again about the time when he ate so much spaghetti in the restaurant when he was a tiny boy, that having heard reports from the waiting staff about the joy he was taking in the food, the chef came out from the kitchen to look at him covered in the spaghetti sauce, which was liberally spread over all him.

Stories are important because they tell of our roots, our discoveries and our triumphs over adversity.

I love finding out about people in this way. There is something exciting about beginning to build a friendship, especially in listening to the stories they tell of their own adventures and the people they have met. I love to join up dots between incident and attitude and begin to piece together why this person responds to situations or certain personality types in a particular way.

Putting the effort into thoroughly knowing someone can help us to appreciate the efforts they go to on our behalf to find the perfect lipstick, or to understand why they simply can't go camping for a bank holiday weekend. The better you get to know a person, the more likely you are to be able to trust them with what matters to you. I have friends for whom I have driven the length of the country, because they needed my help. Time and again, I have received generous offers of help from friends when faced with my own intolerable situations. I have happily watched others demonstrate the same level of care to each other and have been excited to see generosity of care born of friendship reciprocated by friends of friends.

When we get to know Jesus, it begins with stories we may hear from other people, whether in our early days at church, in a form of 'Sunday School' or from our Christian friends. This basic Bible knowledge, even if it is as simple as just knowing about Jesus' birth, miracles, death and resurrection, is then consolidated by a personal encounter which we have with Jesus; a point at which we choose to accept him and to love and follow him. This forms a connectivity which links us to his heart of Love. From this point,