



Rhythms of Grace

40 Christian Practices for Everyday Life

Jo Whitehead



Introduction

I am discovering that a spiritual journey is a lot like a poem. You don't merely recite a poem or analyse it intellectually. You dance it, sing it, cry it, feel it on your skin and in your bones. You move with it and feel its caress. It falls on you like a teardrop or wraps around you like a smile. It lives in the heart and the body as well as the spirit and the head. (Sue Monk Kidd)

When we decided to do a summer series of talks on Christian Practices, the aim was to reflect on activities which help us grow as followers of Jesus. Our relationship with God is fundamental and foundational to our Christian faith and it's important to consider how we might nurture and sustain it. Like any relationship, there is no set formula or programme. We explore, discover, take time and gradually grow in our understanding, knowledge and intimacy with the other person. In our relationship with God, different practices can help us on this journey. They can be thought of as 'holy habits' and like any habit, they take time to develop and establish. Very simply, they are, 'activities which, when woven together, create a way of living faithfully and prayerfully. They draw on ancient wisdom but can reflect our present-day needs and priorities' (Bass 1997:xi).



This little booklet is designed to accompany our series of talks, recognising that people are not always able to be there on a Sunday. Sometimes we can end up having a narrow view of ways to connect with God. I have chosen forty practices to emphasise the breadth and possibilities of ways of developing relationship with him. These are all practices I have found helpful but they are not the only ones! I haven't touched on areas such as mission, sharing faith, icons, praying the rosary and

many more. Whole books have been written about each of the practices I have touched on, so this booklet allows only the briefest description, along with simple suggestions of how to try it out for yourself (indicated with ➤).

Many of you will already be incorporating these practices in your lives. Each person's relationship with God is uniquely theirs, reflecting their personality, season of life, situation and context. While it can be useful to learn from others, comparison can often be unhelpful. Wherever you are on your

Christian journey, I would encourage you to have a prayerful look at some of these practices and consider how they might work for you.

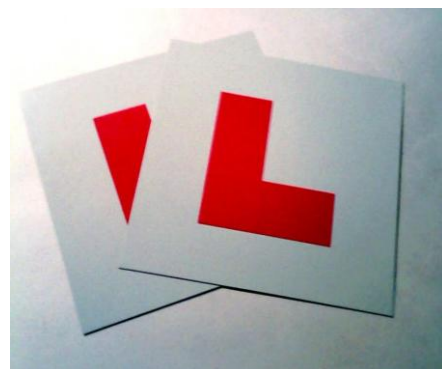
. You may find it helpful to:

- Dip in and out of the booklet. Don't feel you have to read it all the way through from beginning to end. Read the bits you are interested in.
- Try and set a bit of time aside every day or a couple of times a week to practice some of the ideas. Choose ones which appeal to you. Start small.
- Consider using a notebook to jot down, doodle or record things that you find helpful or unhelpful or to reflect on your experiences.
- Don't get weighed down by unhelpful 'oughts' and 'shoulds'. Be playful in your approach. Try new things. Be gentle with yourself.
- Try and connect with others to talk with about your spiritual journey.

It may be helpful to remember that we relate to God through grace and by the Holy Spirit, who leads and guides us as we seek him. We are whole people – body, mind and spirit – and relate to God with the whole of who we are. Our relationship with God can be multi-sensory and multi-dimensional. I love Eugene Petersen's translation of Matthew 11:29-30:

Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you'll recover your life. I'll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won't lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you'll learn to live freely and lightly. (Matt. 11:29-30)

I invite you over these coming weeks to put on your 'L' plates and walk with Jesus: listen to him, learn from him and let him reveal new rhythms of grace to you.



Apps for prayer or Bible reading

Several useful apps have emerged over recent years to resource regular prayer and Bible reflection. A wide range are available, but I have found the following helpful. They are all free to download on android or i-phone.



Daily Prayer App

Morning, evening, night prayer and prayer of the day from the Church of England. This is available as an app or a podcast, as well as online on a computer or tablet.



Lectio 365 – a free daily devotional app that ‘helps you pray the Bible every day’ – morning and evening prayer from the 24-7 prayer movement.



Pray as you go – a prayer session every weekday and one for the weekend. It is designed to be a framework for prayer, founded in Ignatian Spirituality and using the imagination to help engage more fully with Bible stories and encounters with Jesus.

Art and creativity

If we don't regard ourselves as being particularly 'arty', it can be tempting to dismiss practices that involve art or creativity, but when we undertake these kinds of activities, we engage the right side of the brain, which is thought to activate creativity, intuition and emotion. Colouring, drawing, collage, sewing, crafts, gardening, photography or any creative activity can also be a way of carving out reflective space, can focus our attention and help us reflect on God.

Creative or Art journalling has been part of my spiritual practice for many years, and I've found it particularly useful when I've felt stuck or have struggled to find head-space. It has been important for me not to let perfectionism or the desire to 'produce' something get in the way. It is the process, rather than the result, that is important here. A search online or on Instagram can provide inspiration or starting points. You could also:

- Take some time to play with colour – use paint, crayons, coloured pencils, paper, materials or anything else that you have to hand.

Choose a colour that appeals to you or that reflects your feelings or mood. Begin to doodle, draw or cut out shapes or patterns. See what emerges. Consider adding words as they come to mind.

- Try some visual mapping. Take a word or phrase (e.g. a name of God; peace, hope, love; where I am now) and write it in the centre of a piece of paper. Begin to map around it, using colour, symbols, little pictures, jottings etc and follow the different trains of thought that emerge as you do.

Bible reading

Your Word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path (Ps. 119:105)

However long or short a time we've had a faith, Scripture can always bring new insights. Finding ways to engage with the Bible isn't always easy. I've certainly had times when I've struggled to find a pattern of reading or study that works for me.

I've discovered different approaches to reading, for example: doing the Bible in a Year (available on paper, digitally or on an app), using study notes, reading from a different part of Scripture each day of the week, reading a chapter of Proverbs and five Psalms each day (this fits well into a month!). The key is to find ways of engaging with Scripture that work for you.



- Try using Bible study notes. Scripture Union produce free daily notes <https://content.scriptureunion.org.uk/wordlive> and other organisations like the Bible Reading Fellowship (BRF) publish notes on paper.
- Listen to the Bible on Audible or access Scripture readings via a platform such as YouTube. For example, David Suchet has read the books of John and Mark in Westminster Abbey and St Pauls. These are available online at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PKiAXVxOm6o> and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JjOgcMQXvSc>.

Celebration

In Bible times, celebration was an important part of family and community life. God's people commemorated significant events in their life and history with feast days becoming markers to remember what God had done and



how he had impacted and changed their lives. In our culture, celebration is often connected with birthdays, anniversaries or achievements of some kind. Finding ways to reflect on God's goodness as part of our celebration – intentionally and actively – can transform this into a spiritual practice.

As well as 'significant' celebrations, it is important to celebrate the small stuff. So often we can be preoccupied and distracted, but discovering God's presence where we are, simply enjoying his presence, noticing the things that he does for us and finding ways to acknowledge and celebrate these can be incredibly powerful. Why not...

- Celebrate something that you would not normally think to celebrate. Send a card or note to someone to mark an achievement or a milestone.
- Notice things in your ordinary life to celebrate. Actively pause today to notice the beauty in the ordinary. Celebrate the first snowdrop, the beauty of the morning dew on a spider's web, the skill of a craftsperson, the kindness of someone you meet.
- Explore ways of bringing God into a normal celebration. For example, a birthday is a wonderful time to show appreciation for someone. Take the time to write a message of thanks for who they are and what they mean to you or write a prayer or blessing for them.

Church

Church should be a place where we encounter God and share friendship and fellowship with like-minded people. Meeting with others in church can be life-giving and important part of our connecting with God.



Unfortunately, churches are made up of human beings who are flawed and often fall short. Although church should be the safest place to be, I've sometimes found it one of the hardest. When things go wrong or relationships break down, it feels particularly tough. We will never find a perfect church, but the Bible makes it clear that we are created for community and the Christian faith is a corporate rather than an individual journey (1 Cor. 12:12-20).

Including connection with others as part of the rhythm of our Christian life will enrich and broaden us. We will not necessarily find every church service life-changing and inspiring, but developing relationships with others can be as valuable as the content of the service itself. We grow in and through community as we meet and relate to others who are different in personality, perspective and theology to ourselves.

- Reflect on your feelings about church services. What do you find helpful or unhelpful? Are there ways you could contribute to worship that might also help you grow in your relationship with God? If you give out a lot in services, how might you ensure that you are also able to receive from God?
- It can be enriching to experience different kinds of churches. Consider visiting a church service with a worship or teaching style you particularly enjoy, or which has a very different tradition or style to what you are used to. Ask God to speak to you and connect with you there.

Communion

‘Whether in secret in concentration camps or publicly in the open air; around a simple kitchen table or in solemn ritual at the high altar; offered to the privileged rich and the destitute poor alike... this same meal of bread and wine – body and blood of Christ – has sustained and renewed the people of God throughout its history.’ (Runcorn, 2006:67)



Breaking bread informally in homes was a key practice of the early church and since then, communion, or the Eucharist, has been central for many Christians. When I was confirmed in the Anglican church, I learned that Communion was a sacrament – ‘an outward and visible sign of an inward invisible grace’. In other words, it is something we do outwardly, which has a much deeper but invisible meaning and significance. When we take communion, we remember what Jesus has done for us and the many ways we share in his death and resurrection life. It reminds us of our connectedness with him, each other and the church across the world.

- Read Luke 24:13-35 (the disciples on the road to Emmaus). Reflect on the way that the disciples recognise Jesus in the breaking of the bread. How might an understanding of this impact the way you prepare for and take communion?
- Think about how the idea of sacrament might impact your everyday meals. How might your approach to the food you eat at home or share with others reflect the goodness, grace and provision of God?

Compassion

... if you spend yourselves on behalf of the hungry
and satisfy the needs of the oppressed,
then your light will rise in the darkness,
and your night will become like the noonday. (Isaiah 58:10)

When we become part of God's family, we become part of something much bigger than ourselves. Part of this involves recognising God's heart for the poor, dispossessed and all those who suffer across our world. Historically, Christians have been at the heart of many movements towards justice and equity as they have sought to reflect God's love to others.

The constant stream of news today means that 'compassion fatigue' can set in. We can become so accustomed to images of struggle, starvation, violence and war, that we fail to be moved by them. Alternatively, the world's needs can feel so overwhelming that we struggle to know where to begin in our praying, serving and giving.

Compassion as a spiritual practice is about becoming people who have God's heart for his world and learning to love as he loves. It begins with prayer – asking him to replace our hearts of stone with hearts of flesh (Ez. 36:26). It may involve us getting involved in a particular area of ministry, mission or care or supporting



those who work for justice in some way. It may necessitate a lifestyle change – for example, thinking about the ethics around the things we buy or use.

- Pray the news. Buy a paper or access news online. As you read, bring the needs of the individuals and nations you encounter before God.

- Ask the Holy Spirit to show you an area of injustice to pray for. Seek God's heart for that situation. Be prepared to be part of the answer to your own prayers.
- Find out more about a Christian organisation that works for justice or on behalf of those who struggle. This could be a local charity such as the Canaan Trust (www.canaan-trust.org.uk) or Derby City Mission (www.derbycitymission.org.uk) or a national or international one, for example, Open Doors (www.opendoorsuk.org). Consider supporting their work in a financial or practical way.

Contemplation and meditation

I can still remember talking to a Christian friend at school, long before I came to faith, and asking her what prayer was. She described it as simply talking to God as a close friend. This really challenged me as I'd tended to imagine prayer as an activity needing special or 'right' words. Prayer is basically any intention to communicate with God and address God directly. This can be formal or informal, spoken or unspoken, using a set form of words or a simple turning of the heart and mind to God.



Contemplation or meditation finds its roots deep in the Christian tradition and is a way of praying which focuses our full attention on God and seeks to keep distracting thoughts at bay. There are many different approaches to this, but one common one is to use a repeated word or phrase to focus on God.

This might be a simple description of who God is – holy, love, our peace, Saviour, redeemer – or a phrase, for example, from the Psalms, which helps us remember God's presence with us. The idea is to immerse ourselves completely in God's presence, to enjoy him and simply rest in him. The aim is to take the practice into daily life and nurture a more constant awareness of God's presence.

- Try using the phrase common in monastic communities, along with focusing on your breathing. 'O God come to my assistance' as you breathe in, 'O Lord make haste to help me' as you breathe out (Jamison, 2006:57). This rhythm of repetition and breathing can help lift us out of ourselves and still noise in our heads. Spend time with this, remembering this kind of practice takes time to grow into.

- Choose an object that is meaningful to you or that reminds you of an aspect of God's character. Alternatively, light a candle. Ask the Holy Spirit to help you. Spend time in quiet looking at the object or candle. Reflect on a word or phrase that speaks to you from this and say it quietly to yourself as you slow your breathing in the silence.

Crafted prayer

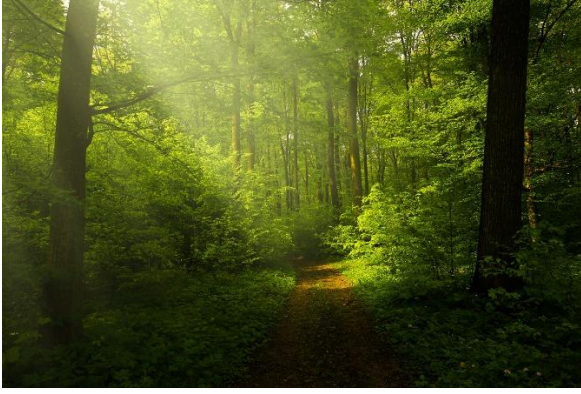
Every time we are part of a liturgical service, we are using prayers that have been crafted by others over many years and used in a whole range of settings. I find this investment of prayer and thought inspiring.

Sometimes, when I've faced long-term challenges, or when I've struggled to pray for an individual or situation, I've found it helpful to create a prayer that I can pray daily (or perhaps even more regularly). I start by praying to discern God's will and purposes in the situation, rather than my own opinions or priorities. This may mean including questions in my prayer. My prayers have been for individuals, situations or sometimes for a season of personal growth or challenge.



Graham Cooke coined the phrase 'crafted prayer' for this process (2003), and in a sense, it is a little like using liturgy or prayers written by others. I've found it particularly helpful when I am weary of praying for something, when I don't know what to pray or when I'm struggling to sense God's presence or purpose. Loads of 'crafted' prayers already exist – getting hold of a book of prayers, or finding prayers online is a way of doing this. We can combine the process with journalling, art journalling or creating a prayer notebook, where we collect prayers that we find particularly helpful.

- Start collecting prayers that resonate with you. Use a notebook, scrapbook, folder or journal. Include them as part of your prayer life
- Write a prayer for someone in need. Spend some time asking God what he wants you to pray. Jot down ideas, thoughts and any relevant Bible verses, before crafting a prayer that you are happy to pray regularly. Write or type this out and use it regularly.



Creation

I often feel closest to God when I am out in nature. Walking through a forest, along a shoreline or simply along a country path or lane, I never cease to be amazed by the beauty of God's creation. In my garden or allotment, I often find that God speaks to me in and through what he has made.

The Psalmist says that 'the heavens declare the glory of God' (Ps 19:1) and throughout history Christians have found that spending time outdoors and reflecting on nature can draw us close to God. Jesus himself used all kinds of examples, stories and images from the natural world to reveal and explain aspects of God's kingdom. In the Celtic tradition, Christians expected and sought to experience God's presence, voice and guidance in and through the created world.

- Use a natural object as a focus for prayer. This could be anything that appeals to you – a flower, a feather, a stone, even a picture of a landscape you like. Spend some time looking at this and reflecting on the opening words of Psalm 19 (above).
- Go for an 'awareness' walk with God. This doesn't have to be somewhere beautiful, but it may help. Walk slowly taking time to really look and be aware of what is around you. Ask God to speak to you through what you see. Really notice. If you are unable to walk outside, sit in the garden or open a window to look at what is around you and reflect.



Encouraging

In the early church, we are told of Barnabas, one of the disciples, whose name means 'son of encouragement' (Acts 4:36). It's not clear whether this was what he was named at birth or a name he was given because he encouraged the believers and built relational bridges (as he appears to do in Acts 9, for example). The Bible emphasises the importance of encouragement and building one another up (for example, 1 Thess. 5:11, Heb. 10:24-25). Encouraging others as a spiritual practice can help us grow ourselves. When we actively seek to encourage, we are led to pray for others,

learn to see them as God sees them and notice their strengths and qualities. Interestingly, encouragement is a key aspect of the gift of prophecy (1 Cor. 14:3) and if we are looking to grow in the prophetic, a vital starting point is to ask God for ways to encourage others.



- Write a card or note to someone to encourage them. Spend time praying for them first and allow God to lead you in what you write to them.
- For a day, actively seek to notice the good in every person you meet. Seek and find one thing in them that inspires you or that is positive.

Examen



The Examen is a form of reflective prayer which encourages us to identify moments of consolation (positive) or desolation (negative) in our lives. It has been used for centuries, often at the end of a day, sometimes to reflect on a longer period, season or situation. From

Ignatian spirituality, the Examen process basically asks, 'What am I most grateful for?' and 'What am I least grateful for?' It can be done simply and quickly or in more depth. Some people start by lighting a candle, some pray alone, some with others.

St Ignatius recommended that everyone be taught the examen, believing that God speaks through our deepest feelings and yearnings (Linn et al, 1995:19). Regularly practicing the examen can help us to notice patterns in our lives, our preferences, habits, strengths and weaknesses, the presence of God and his leading and guiding. Try this simple examen process:

- Take some time to quieten yourself before God. Find stillness. In the space relax your body, still your thoughts and invite the Spirit to lead you, to reveal God's heart to you and to show you what he wants you to see.
- As the Spirit leads you, reflect on your day. Think about things that have been positive, life-giving or have brought you joy. Thank God for

blessings – for people, things or situations that have brought enjoyment or encouragement.

- Think about things that have been more challenging or difficult. Bring to mind and lay before God anything that has worried or upset you. Ask for forgiveness for anything you have done wrong.
- Think about anything you've learnt that you want to take into this night or the days ahead.
- Receive God's love and peace. Rest in him.

Fasting

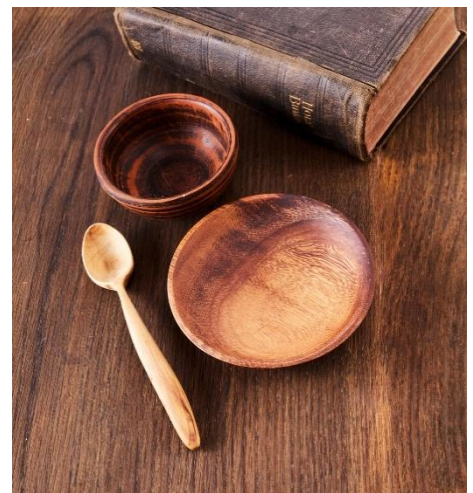
Fasting is a common practice across Christian tradition and other world religions. Although it not as commonly discussed in church circles today, Jesus clearly expected his disciples to fast (Matt. 6:16-18). He was not specific or prescriptive about this, however, mainly emphasising that fasting should be done in secret and not to showcase holiness or spirituality.

At its simplest, Christian fasting is abstaining from food, or something else for a period, to focus attention on God. Intermittent fasting for health reasons has gained in popularity over recent years, but fasting for spiritual purposes is not simply about abstinence.

As a spiritual practice, fasting should be 'God-initiated and God-ordained' (Foster, 1989:69). It is about drawing close to God, not to twist his arm about a particular problem or issue, but to seek his face, his perspective, his priorities and his purposes. Richard Foster helpfully describes some of the benefits of fasting for our own growth and discipleship:

...fasting reveals the things that control us... We cover up what is inside us with food and other good things, but in fasting these things surface. If pride controls us, it will be revealed almost immediately... Anger, bitterness, jealousy, strife, fear – if they are within us, they will surface during fasting. (1989:69)

Fasting can be helpful but needs to be approached with wisdom. Start slowly and gently. Those with health problems or food-related issues, should seek medical advice before fasting. Food may not always be the most



appropriate fast anyway. It can be challenging to consider fasting from television, social media, our mobile phone, alcohol, gossip or criticism.

- If you don't currently fast, try fasting from one or two meals on one day a week. If you already fast regularly, reflect on your current practice and ask God how you might develop this.
- Fast for a day (or longer) from something you feel you might be over-invested in. This will vary from person to person but could be anything at all – chocolate, social media, alcohol, television, news... Seek to replace it with something positive and God-centred.

Forgiveness

'Forgive us our sins,
As we forgive those who sin against us'
(Luke 11:4)

Forgiveness is one of the simplest and most complex of practices. An important biblical principle, Jesus spoke about the importance of forgiveness, emphasising it in the Lord's Prayer and in other teaching (eg. Matt. 18:21-35).



Because God has forgiven us, we can and should forgive those who hurt us. Importantly, forgiveness doesn't mean that the hurt done to us doesn't matter, nor that we should ignore inappropriate or hurtful behaviour. We can forgive and still put healthy, firm boundaries in place. When we forgive, we release ourselves from bitterness and grudges, trusting God's ultimate grace and justice.

Dr Elisabeth Kubler-Ross identified five stages of grief that dying patients appeared to pass through: denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance. Dennis and Matthew Linn and Sheila Fabricant Linn have applied these principles to forgiveness (1997:28) and this is helpful in recognising forgiveness as a process, which sometimes requires time and support to work through. Some issues may involve pain which is deep-rooted and far-reaching and rushing or over-simplifying the process may do more harm than good. To practice forgiveness:

Identify a person or institution that you are aware you feel hurt by. Talk to God about how you feel. Ask him how he wants you to respond in terms of forgiveness. If this is a deep-rooted wound, consider talking to someone you trust about the issue or seeking professional support.

Recognise that forgiveness is about receiving God's forgiveness as well as forgiving others. Reflect on areas where you still feel shame and need to forgive yourself and receive forgiveness from God.

Giving

Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. (2 Cor. 9:7)



Giving connects deeply to our internal attachment to our money and possessions and as part of our worship and relationship with God, it forms part of our spiritual practice. Modern ways of giving – through standing order or bank transfer for example – mean that we can become detached from our giving. Integrating our giving with prayer can help us to re-establish this connection and help us recognise the way our giving contributes towards God's purposes and God's kingdom.

Traditional teaching on giving often emphasises tithing and some Christians find this idea of giving a tenth of their income a helpful starting point. However, the ability to give is significantly influenced by family and personal context, and it is important for each individual to decide before God what is appropriate and possible for them. You may find it helpful to:

- Review what and how you give. Reflect on what God might be asking of you in this current or next season in terms of your giving.
- Choose an organisation or charity that you feel is doing good work. Consider making a donation to that organisation, but also read up about their work, pray for them and consider how you could support them in other ways.

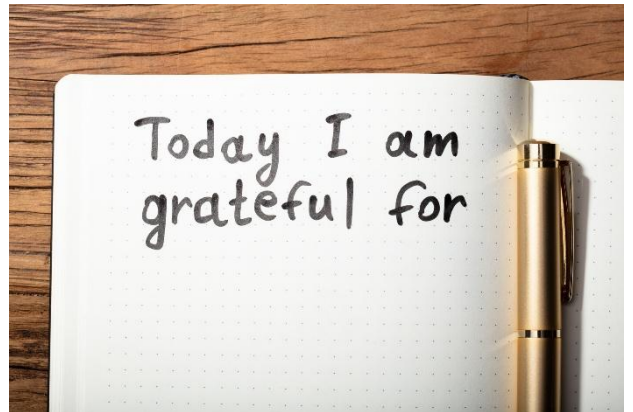
Gratitude

And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.
(Colossians 3:17)

Gratitude has been proven to be good for us and is now often included in wellbeing advice. It's perhaps not surprising that something so fundamental to our faith is so important for our emotional and mental health.

Gratitude involves remembering the good things in our lives, the gifts that God has given us and being grateful for these. When we are thankful, we focus on the positive, count our blessings and are more content with what we have.

- Keep a daily or weekly Gratitude journal either on paper or on your phone. Consciously notice things that are blessings in your life – small things and bigger things. – daily or weekly.
- Get hold of some stones and build a cairn in your home or garden (these can be small or larger stones depending on the space you have). As you place each stone, thank God for a person who has been or is an important part of your journey.
- Write a thank you letter or card to someone in your life you are grateful for, expressing what you like and appreciate about them.



Hospitality

Hospitality was also a crucial practice among the early Christians. One New Testament word incorporates a profound truth: *xenos*, the word that means “stranger” in Greek, also means ‘guest’ and ‘host.’ This one word signals the essential mutuality that is at the heart of hospitality. No one is strange except in relation to someone else; we make one another guests and hosts by how we treat one another. (Bass, 1997:33)

The concepts of ‘home’ and ‘welcome’ are powerful ones in our faith. It is an incredible truth that God welcomes each of us into his family and to his table. This is something we can emulate in our own lives. Early in my faith journey, being invited to Christian homes and spending time with Christian

families was a crucial part of my learning and growing. In the quote above, I love the way Dorothy Bass understands hospitality to be mutual, rather than something that is 'done to' others. Hospitality in the New Testament is not just about spending time with close friends but extending welcome and fellowship to anyone we are called to connect with. Inevitably, our personal circumstances will affect how we practice hospitality, and it may look very different for different ones of us.



- Think of someone you could invite for a meal or a drink. Try to go beyond people that you would normally invite. If your circumstances don't allow hospitality at home, think of other creative ways you could practice this.
- Reflect on the implications of the quote above in a wider context, particularly in relation to those who are dispossessed, asylum seekers and those in need. What might God be saying to you about your attitudes, your prayers, your involvement here?

Intercessory prayer



Throughout Scripture we see individual believers coming to God and praying on behalf of others, for cities (Gen. 20:18-33), peace (Ps. 122:6-8), God's mercy and presence (Is. 64) and many other needs. We are encouraged in the New Testament to pray for the needs of others (see, for example, Eph. 6:18-20 and 1 Tim. 2:1-4) and to bring our own needs before God (Phil. 4:6).

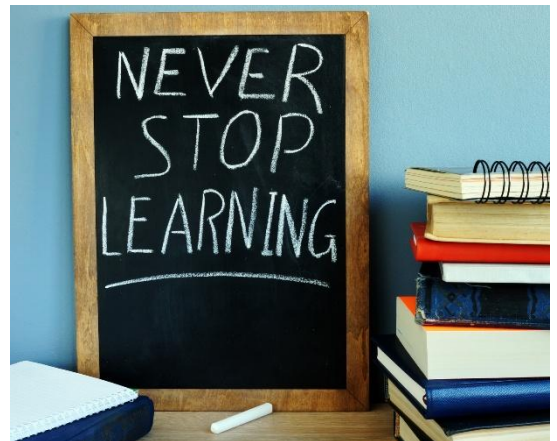
There are many kinds of intercession. You may find it helpful to use your imagination to visualise people or situations or to use the phrase from the Lord's prayer 'your kingdom come, your will be done' (Simpson, 2005:131). A notebook or prayer journal can be helpful. In St Michael's we have a small book at the back of church where prayer needs can be written down and we have a prayer network on WhatsApp across the Benefice to highlight needs and provide prayer support. Jesus made it clear in his teaching that we don't

need special words or lengthy prayers. God hears us when we come to him (Matt. 6:5-13). It's helpful to remember that we are in a spiritual battle. Reflecting on Ephesians 6:10-17 can be a useful starting point here.

- Write down the names of five people or situations you feel really need God's help, healing or breakthrough. Commit to praying for them every day for a week.
- Get hold of a world, national or local map. Spend some time looking at the map and notice where your eyes are drawn to. Pray for those areas.

Learning

We are created to learn. From our earliest moments, we grow through our experiences of the world and the people we encounter. Learning is sometimes reduced to the worlds of study, books and formal education and negative experiences here can significantly hinder our openness to learn. Learning is so much more than these formal contexts though. As Christians, we are called to a



lifetime of learning about God, ourselves and the world we live in. We learn in a multitude of ways: through our experiences and reflection on these, through our relationships and encounters with others, through our observations of the world we live in and through more attentive focus or study. Jesus called his disciples into relationship with him, to be apprenticed to him and learn from him, through watching and participating in his ministry (see, for example, Luke 9:1-11). As disciples ourselves, learning (in the broadest sense) should form a foundational part of our spiritual life.

We may have different preferences about how we learn, but openness, curiosity, a willingness to reflect and a desire to grow are all helpful values to embrace. Learning is good for our wellbeing and for our emotional and spiritual health. As well as being life-long, I understand learning to be life-wide, reaching into every aspect of who we are.

- Talk to someone you know who skill or expertise in a certain area (life, ministry, hobbies). Ask to spend some time learning from them.

- Read a book that is very different to one you would normally read or use a commentary to help you engage more deeply with a book of the Bible.
- Listen to a podcast or watch a YouTube video on something you are interested in.



Lectio divina

Lectio divina literally means ‘divine reading’ but can be more accurately understood as meditative reading. Usually of the Bible, it involves slowing down, receiving the text as a gift (rather than something to be analysed) and approaching it prayerfully and with

humility (Jamison, 2006). In *lectio divina*, we allow the Spirit to work in our hearts and lives through the scriptures, to touch, challenge and change us. It is normally a four-stage process of: reading, meditating, prayer and contemplation. Choose a simple story about Jesus (e.g. Luke 7:1-10, Luke 8:22-25), find somewhere quiet to sit comfortably and try the following process:

- Read the passage slowly and carefully, inviting God to speak to you as you do. You may wish to read the passage through more than once. Notice any words or phrases that particularly resonate with you.
- Meditate on what you have read, thinking about those words and phrases that stand out to you. Reflect on the meaning of the passage and allow the Holy Spirit to speak to you about its relevance to your life or situation.
- Pray about what are noticing, talking to God about what you think or feel. Thank him. Hand over any concerns or questions to him. Ask him to lead or guide you. Think about any changes or actions which emerge.
- Contemplate – simply rest in God’s presence. Allow him to work in whatever way he wants. Receive his love and his peace

Listening to God

Throughout the Bible, we see God communicating to people in different ways. He uses a rainbow as a visual sign of his promise to Noah (Gen. 9:12-16); speaks face-to-face with Moses (Ex. 34:29-35); speaks through a donkey and an angel to Balaam (Num. 22: 22-35) and attracts Elijah’s attention with wind, earthquake and fire before communicating in a gentle

whisper (1 Kings 19). There are many other examples, but recognising these diverse ways of communicating are key when it comes to listening to God. This practice emphasises the importance of prayer as a two-way conversation. It challenges our busyness and our desire to fill silence with words. Prayer is not about coming to God with a shopping list (although lists



may have their place) but about creating space to grow our relationship with God. This may involve solitude, walking or silence. It challenges our busyness and our desire to talk. Recognising God's voices is not always easy. It may come in creative ways like those above, through Scripture, nature, others people or an impression or 'sense' that we have.

- Think of a time God you felt God was speaking to you. What were you doing? What was happening? What might help you to find space to listen to God without distractions?
- This week, seek to listen to God. Note down anything you feel God might be saying to you, however small or strange and at the end of the week read through these. Think about what action you might want to take as a result of what you have heard

Memorising Scripture

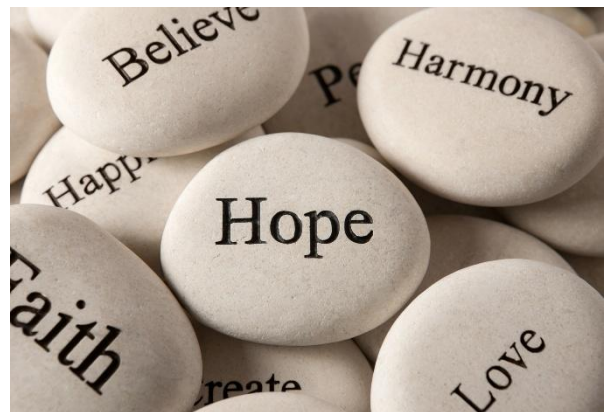
Before printing presses were invented, memorising Scripture was the only way for ordinary people to access it every day. The Celtic saints would commonly memorise the book of Psalms and the gospel of John to sustain their devotional life. When we think about memorising scripture, we might be reminded of memory verses, which were a 'thing' for children, when I was a relatively new Christian. I love the idea of 'learning by heart' – in its fullest sense. It encourages me to recognise that memorising is not just learning by rote but seeking to engage with Bible in a deeper and more meaningful way. As I consider the meaning and implications of the verses to help me remember them, they impact and challenge my thinking and my life. If I'm struggling to sleep or in a difficult situation, it is helpful to be able to bring to mind a Psalm or reassuring verse. At times, I've set myself unrealistic targets with this practice, but I'm trying to learn key Psalms as part of my regular rhythm of prayer. Why not try one of the following:

- Memorising a short memory verse every day or every week
- Choosing a favourite piece of Scripture and memorising it. I find it helpful to write it out (sometimes several times) and have it with me. Take it out and read it through every day.
- Finding songs that draw on the Bible as a helpful starting point.

Mezzuzah

In Jewish tradition a *mezuzah* is a case normally made of wood, metal or ceramics, which contains a small piece of parchment and is nailed to the right side of the doorpost. On the parchment is written the *Shema*, the foundational prayer of the Jewish faith, which focuses on loving God with the whole of who we are and obeying his commands. This reminder to reflect on God when entering or leaving the home is a wonderful example of the way in which symbol and imagery can powerfully prompt our prayer, worship or reflection on God.

Leonard Sweet suggests ways of using modern *mezuzahs* to punctuate our lives, homes and workplaces with reminders of who God is and what he means to us (2000:17). For me, this practice includes certain pieces of jewellery that I wear to remind me of aspects of God's character or things God has called me to. Objects, pictures and words around our home and garden are pointers to my relationship with God. Some people find it helpful



to create a specific space in the home or garden for prayer, for others, it might be pictures or Bible verses in a purse or wallet, on the fridge or elsewhere. In practice, you could:

- Create a prayer space in your home or garden, with objects, images, quotes or verses that help you connect with God. This doesn't have to be complex – it might be a corner of a room, a shelf, a desk or a small table – whatever works for you. Seek to spend some time there in the coming week.
- Choose a small object or write (or print) out a Bible verse that feels significant for you at the moment in terms of your relationship with God. Carry it with you today. Take it out at times during the day to look at, read or reflect on.

Pilgrimage



The idea of pilgrimage is an ancient one and one that is common across many Christian traditions and other faiths. Pilgrimage involves undertaking a journey to a place of spiritual significance as a way of drawing closer to God and deepening our faith. There are all kinds of places of pilgrimage and pilgrim routes across our nation and the

world, with modern modes of transport making these much more accessible. One key aspect of pilgrimage is that it is not simply about making a physical journey, but more about the inner journey made as part of the process. Why not try:

- Visiting a local place of pilgrimage – a churches, cathedral, ‘thin’ place or somewhere that has special significance to your faith or life journey.
- Walking the Peak Pilgrimage or the Hope Pilgrimage, which are local and can be done over several consecutive days or as odd days here and there. Visit <https://www.peakpilgrimage.org.uk> for more information.

Play

On one retreat on Holy Island, I decided to simply walk with God around the island without agendas or expectations. Instead, I played. I built cairns. I created random pictures on a deserted beach using seaweed, driftwood, pebbles, shells and found objects. I wrote in the sand and watched the sea wash the words away. I paddled. I sang loudly. I completely lost track of time. I relaxed. And as I did so I found that many of the problems and issues I had been wrestling with, settled themselves quite naturally in my heart and mind.

When children play, they sometimes become completely absorbed in their activities, yet without being tense or edgy. They are caught up in concentration, yet do not jump when spoken to. During that day on I rediscovered that child-like place of relaxed absorption. I often find the practice of play helps free me from stuck-ness, from the fear



of others' opinions and from the desire to 'get it right' in my spiritual life (Whitehead 2014:8). Why not try one of the following:

- Think of things you enjoyed as a child. Make a list of these. How might you be able to integrate these into your spiritual life? Experiment with one or two ideas this week.
- Spend time with a child or children. Chat to them about what they enjoy doing. Seek to bring some of what you notice into your spiritual life.
- Get hold of a tub of bubbles and use them to pray. As you blow the bubbles, think of people that you want to pray for and imagine the bubbles as prayers going out into the air towards God.



Prayer with others

Praying with others can be beneficial in all kinds of ways. Regular meetings with others in a two, a three or a small group encourages us to be faithful in prayer and learning and can help us appreciate different approaches to prayer and the Christian life.



In larger settings, it is not always easy to build deep relationships or explore faith, Scripture or experience in a personal way. Small groups such as home groups give a space where this can happen more effectively and purposefully. Meeting regularly with a smaller group of people can help us to deepen our relationships, share on a more personal level, pray and learn together. There is often time and space to explore Scripture, ask questions, discuss, share experiences of God and grow in our understanding of who God is and how he works. Prayer can be more personal and there is opportunity to support one another, not just in the meetings themselves but in the whole of life.

There are challenges around getting started in a small group or prayer triplet or partnership. It can take time to establish trust and build relationships. The dynamics of the group need to work if we are to feel comfortable in a smaller, more personal setting and it may not even be immediately obvious

who we might pray or meet with. It is worth working through these challenges though. If we find it hard to pray out loud, we may agree to spend time praying silently together. God is still present. Text, phone or WhatsApp give opportunity to stay in touch and support each other between meetings.

- Talk to a friend about praying together as a one-off or regularly. If you can't immediately identify someone this might work with, ask God to highlight someone or speak to someone on the Leadership Team.
- Set up a text or WhatsApp connection with someone to support each other in prayer



Praying in the Spirit

Romans Chapter 8 talks in detail about living by the Spirit of God and describes how the Spirit enables us to experience what it means to be God's children (Rom. 8:16). It is the Spirit who enlivens our faith and makes God real to us. Praying in the Spirit means allowing the Holy Spirit

to lead and direct our prayers. This may not always be in words:

In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans. (Romans 8:26 NIV)

Praying in the Spirit may also involve praying in tongues. Andy Thornton describes how using this gift has helped him in prayer:

When I [pray in tongues] I encounter quite a different part of myself. I cannot do this without moving from my head to my heart or 'source' as it feels. In this place of more controlled quietness, I encounter a truer version of myself and am able both to talk quietly in a conscious way as well as to feel deeply. I am then able to bring issues, situation or people into this place of consciousness and deal with them more intensely and satisfyingly. (Thornton in Harvey, 1999:22).

Whatever praying in the Spirit might look like for you, these are a couple of things to try:

- Whenever you pray in the next few days, consciously invite the Holy Spirit to lead and guide you in your praying. Allow space to listen to and respond to what you feel the Spirit might be saying.
- If you use the gift of tongues, spend some time praying in tongues. If this isn't something you are familiar with or comfortable with, talk to someone who has received this gift about their experience of this.

Praying the hours

The liturgy of the hours is practiced across many Christian traditions. Also known as the 'daily office', it involves setting regular times aside to pray. All monastic traditions have set times for prayer and many Christians find it helpful to follow a pattern of morning, midday, evening and/or night prayer. Lots of resources exist to help with this. As well as the apps mentioned earlier in this booklet, many denominations and organisations produce resources for daily prayer, which can be found easily online or in Christian bookshops.



Use some form of daily prayer at a set time each day. If you already do this, perhaps experiment with a different time or resource. During one Lent season, I used the Anglican Compline liturgy every night and found it helpful and inspiring.

Experiment with some prayers from a different tradition to your own, for example, Celtic, contemporary, Catholic, Ignatian. There are suggestions of resources at the back of this booklet.

Praying the Psalms

The Psalms are a rich resource for prayer, praise and worship. Reflecting a range of people's relationships with God many years ago, they echo down the ages to resonate with emotional and life experiences today. The Psalms were written for various purposes including personal prayer, corporate worship and family and religious festivals (Wansbrough, 2014:7). Some declare praise and gratitude to God, others reflect deep human need, crying out for God's presence, help, justice or protection.

Praying, rather than simply reading the Psalms can support our growth in prayer and broaden our understanding of God. We may also find it helpful to pray Psalms which particularly resonate with our feelings or needs at a particular time, for example:

- When you are hungry for God – Psalm 42
- When the world seems in turmoil – Psalm 46
- When life seems unfair – Psalm 73
- When you need of God's protection – Psalm 91, Psalm 121
- A prompt to praise – Psalm 100
- To be reassured that God knows and loves you – Psalm 139

To get started in praying the Psalms:

- Read and pray a Psalm each day this week. Read aloud if possible and seek to connect with the words as you say and pray them. If you find a particular verse helpful, write it down and pray it again during your day.
- Find a Psalm that reflects or speaks to how you are feeling now. Rewrite it in your own words. Don't worry about getting it 'right,' simply express your own thoughts, feelings, hopes and prayers to God

Retreat

The first time I went on retreat on Holy Island, I went with great expectations of how I might grow spiritually (and with a car full of books, resources and a mental list of all the things I needed to pray about). When I met with the warden of the retreat house on the first evening, I was surprised when she suggested that I put aside my resources and my expectations. She suggested that instead I should simply be open to what God did.



This was a helpful lesson for me. What I needed most was to rest and meet God. A retreat is most importantly a time taken out of everyday life to spend with him – a time for renewal and refreshment. It can be planned and structured or open and self-guided. A retreat is often taken away from home and normal responsibilities, but some

people do retreats at home or close to home. Others find Quiet Days helpful. The priority is finding time and space to be with God without distractions.

- It may not be possible to take a full retreat but try to find a day or an afternoon to spend with God. Think about how this might work practically, where you might go and what will help you to engage with God most fully. If home is not the best place to do this, consider spending time in the open air (see for example, the Quiet Garden Movement www.quietgarden.org), a church, a library or anywhere you are likely to feel close to God.

Sabbath

Sabbath honours the necessary wisdom of dormancy. If certain plant species, for example, do not lie dormant for winter, they will not bear fruit in the spring... We too must have a period in which we lie fallow, and restore our souls. In Sabbath time we remember to celebrate what is beautiful and sacred...It is a time to let our work, our lands, our animals lie fallow, to be nourished and refreshed. (Muller, 1999:7)

The importance of rest is highlighted right from the start of Genesis. On the seventh day, God completes his work, rests and blesses the day as holy (Gen. 2:2-3). Muller (above) emphasises the importance of rest for spiritual health and fruitfulness. In a culture where busyness and productivity are seen as marks of a life-well-lived, Sabbath is counter-cultural, reminding us of our limitations and that the world will keep turning if we take a day off.



Those who find it hard to rest, or whose circumstances make it difficult can find this practice challenging, but rediscovering Sabbath can be invaluable for our spiritual, emotional and physical health. Jesus criticised the Pharisees for squeezing joy and freedom out of Sabbath by adopting a legalistic and inflexible approach. As you explore what Sabbath means to you, see it as a gift from God rather than another thing on the 'to do' list.

- Set aside a whole or part day Sabbath to explore what Sabbath might mean for you. If you have family commitments, make it something everyone can join in with.
- Making a list of things that you find restorative and life-giving. Use this list to plan a Sabbath day (or part day).

Secrecy

Be careful not to practice your righteousness in front of others to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven. (Matthew 6:1)

I loved being a Brownie! I particularly loved badges – tangible marks of achievement for tasks completed. *The Brownie Handbook* (which I read avidly from cover to cover) told the story of the Brownies – little beings (Pixies, Elves, Sprites - I was an Imp!) who undertook household chores in secret, while everyone was asleep. This was a model of how the ‘ideal’ Brownie should behave. I loved this idea but wasn’t so good at the secrecy part – if I was going to do chores I wanted to be noticed!

Wanting to be acknowledged or thanked is a normal human response, but Jesus valued secrecy in relation to giving, prayer and fasting (Matt. 6:1-18). This invitation to secrecy can be challenging in a culture in which when many people live their lives in very ‘visible’ ways, through social media. You might want to:

- Notice areas in life where you are seeking some kind of reward for things you do for others (thanks, praise, acknowledgement...). Consider how it might feel to put aside the desire for recognition and act in secret.
- Do something for someone else secretly – serving or giving – without them knowing.



Silence

Our world has become crowded out with noise. Modern technology provides immediate, 24-hour access to our choice of music, social media, streamed entertainment, gaming, television and film. For those whose lives are accompanied by a soundtrack

of noise of some kind, silence may feel difficult and even quite vulnerable. Habits of checking phones or social media can become a kind of addiction and a ‘go to’ at all times of day (and even night). A friend who became aware of her own tendency to over-check her phone now has a policy of ‘Bible first’ in the morning, to try and start the day with a focus on God.

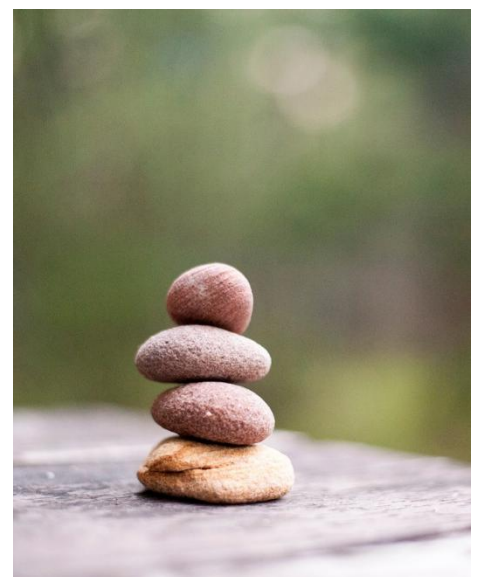
The benefits of silence to our spiritual lives have been embraced by many from a range of Christian traditions. The monastic life cultivates silence as a background norm, rather than as something special, recognising the importance of carving out stillness in a busy world. Silence creates space for listening – to God, to our own souls. I am aware that for me, simply switching off the external noise is not enough. So often my internal clamouring, racing thoughts and over-thinking can still be very present. From a spiritual perspective then, silence is more than an absence of noise, it is a quality of inner stillness that takes time and space to develop. To practice this:

- Intentionally seek silence. If you normally listen to something when walking, exercising or sitting at home, choose to have more silence around you instead. As a starting point, perhaps try to sit in silence for five minutes a day and build up from there. If you find your thoughts are still busy, consider having a notebook nearby to jot things down, or simply notice the thoughts, acknowledge them and let them go.
- Notice how you use words. Many of us find it hard to leave space in conversations. Spend a day being conscious of what you say and how you speak. Actively choose to be silent sometimes rather than jumping in to fill spaces. Seek to listen more attentively to others and to God.

Simplicity

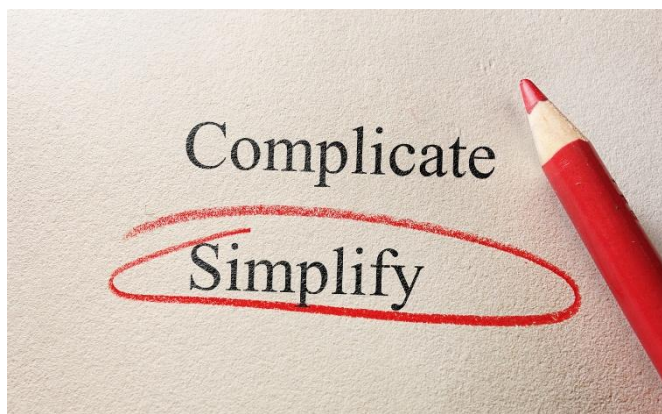
Give me an undivided heart, that I may fear your name. (Ps. 86:11 NIV)

Jesus spoke often about issues of money and possessions, recognising, even in a comparatively simple society, the hold that wealth and the desire for wealth can have on people. The emphasis of his teaching wasn't that material things were wrong, but that our hearts should not be set on them and that we should seek God's kingdom first (Matt. 6:33). His simple command to love God and to love others underlines that simplicity is an inner as well as an outward discipline.



Many monastic orders have simplicity as a key value – whether in its own right or framed in the idea of poverty. ‘Living simply so that others might simply live’ is a phrase attributed to Mahatma Ghandi, but one that is often used by Christians and other people of faith to reflect on our attitudes

towards consumption. Romans 12:3 encourages, 'Don't become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking' (*The Message*) and it is important for us to consider how our lifestyle impacts our planet and others living in it.



Our approach to simplicity is likely to be shaped by our preferences. In our homes, for example, some will prefer an uncluttered look, others lean towards a more 'maximalist' style in their homes and lives. Simplicity is not necessarily about tidiness or lack of possessions, we can have homes that

are simple and uncluttered but, still have lives and minds that are busy, full and muddled with pressures, competing demands and preoccupations.

- This section opened with words from Psalm 86: 'Give me an undivided heart...' What might this mean for you? What competing pressures and complexities do you face. How could you simplify your inner and from there, your outer life?
- Try decluttering an area of your life or home. Set realistic goals for this. Consider giving some things away to charity or to friends. Do consult with other household members where appropriate to avoid difficulties and misunderstandings!

Slowing – making space

Above all, trust in the slow work of God (Pierre Teilhard de Chardin)

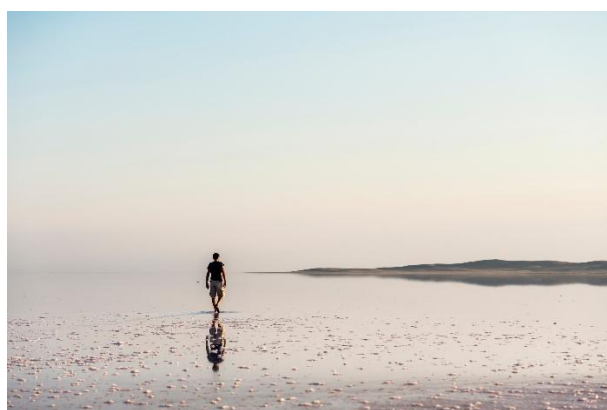
A number of years ago, I kept chickens. I'd wanted to do this for ages and even did a chicken-keeping course in preparation. Before my chickens arrived, I cleared space in my garden for my Eglu (chicken house) and a run. The chosen space had several large shrubs in it, as well as rocks and old tree roots. I enthusiastically started clearing and levelling the ground. It was much harder than I'd expected. The roots of the shrubs were deep and intertwined with rocks and tree roots. At one point, covered in dirt, scratched to bits and tugging at a particularly stubborn (and spiky) shrub, I wondered if it was worth the effort. It struck me then that making space for something worthwhile can be costly.

In our spiritual lives, slowing down to make space and making space is actually a practice in itself. Slowing requires patience, trust and a yielding to what God is doing. For me, slowing helps me recognise and relinquish my desire to control and manage every aspect of my life. It enables me to recognise my own tendency to leap in and work 'for' God, rather than resting in being 'with' God. Another benefit of slowing is described by Mike Yaconelli as savouring:



‘Savouring is the lost art of cherishing, appreciating, relishing... If we truly want to hear God, if we truly want to hear Him speak, then we need to take the time to savour him... Prayer is savouring God. Savouring is immersing ourselves in His presence, hearing Him with all of our senses. (Yaconnelli:87-88, Anglicised)

- Slow down for a day. Punctuate tasks with plenty of space. Do things more slowly. Spend more time listening to others and noticing what is around you. Cultivate awareness of God’s presence with you in the spaces. Notice and reflect on your own response to this process.
- Try savouring. Eat something very slowly and become aware of the sensations in your mouth. Reflect on what it might feel like to savour God.



Solitude

Solitude, along with silence, has long been regarded as a cornerstone of the spiritual life and the two are seen as intrinsically connected (Foster 123). Because we are all different, our personalities will influence our attitude towards solitude. Some of us need time

alone to recharge and refresh. For others, too much time alone drains and depletes us. In different life seasons we may find we have too little or too much solitude in our everyday lives.

Time alone and/or in silence may well feel challenging if we are not used to it. In solitude we will sometimes find ourselves struggling with negative or

difficult emotions. We will not necessarily immediately be aware of the presence of God – in fact, God might seem a long way away. Part of growing in maturity is to trust that God is present whether we feel and experience his presence or not.

- If life feels busy and pressured, take advantage of some mini moments of solitude, for example, early mornings or late nights or when you are alone in the car (Foster, 1989:31). Spend some time during the week seeking out these mini moments.
- I am aware that my desires to please people and be seen to be productive can be a barrier to resting alone in God. I have found that God has encouraged me to ‘practice containment’ sometimes – sharing things with him, rather than seeking the help and support of others. Take time to reflect on any practical or personal barriers or resistance you have when it comes to solitude.

Spiritual direction or soul friendship

As a Christian, I have found it invaluable to have people to talk to about my spiritual life and journey. These have sometimes been close friends, who have encouraged, prayed and walked with me. At other times, I’ve had more ‘formal’ relationships with a spiritual director or soul friend. Spiritual direction takes



many forms, but contrary to what the title suggests, it is not about being told what to do by an expert. It normally describes someone who prayerfully supports and encourages us to develop a deeper relationship with God, ourself and others and to apply faith to daily life (Pickering, 2008:3).

The psychologists Cloud and Townsend talk about the importance of finding ‘safe people’ in our lives, people who draw us closer to God, closer to others and help us become the real people God has created us to be (1995:143). Whether we see a spiritual director in a formal sense or not, it is helpful to consider who supports us on our spiritual journey. You might want to consider the following:

- If you don’t have a soul friend or spiritual director, prayerfully ask God if there is someone who could or would be this for you. Take some time

to think about the qualities that would be important for you in this kind of relationship. Consider what a 'safe person' would look like for you.

- Meet with a friend or with someone you would like to develop a friendship with. Find out about their spiritual journey and share something of your own journey with them, at whatever level it feels safe and appropriate to do so.

Walking

The health benefits of walking to our bodies, brains and emotional wellbeing have been well documented (www.bhf.org). We've already considered the benefits of being outside, but there are numerous ways in which walking can be a beneficial spiritual practice.



Walking is used in Scripture as a metaphor for our relationship with God. For example, the prophet Micah talks of the call to 'act justly, love mercy and walk humbly with God' (Micah 6:8) and the apostle Paul encourages us to 'walk in the way of love, just as Christ loved us...' (Eph.5:2). Of course, in Bible times,

people walked a lot more because they didn't have any alternative. Even so, I love the image of the disciples walking with Jesus, talking on their many journeys and learning from him on the way. Walking can give 'head space' to connect with God and can be particularly helpful for those of us who find it harder to pray sitting quietly in one space.

Prayer walking can be a powerful way of grounding our prayers in a certain area, helping us to focus and discern what God might be saying or doing. It is helpful to note ways that the Bible emphasises the importance of walking when it comes to taking ground both physically and spiritually (for example, read Genesis 13:14-17, Joshua 1:1-3 and Joshua 6).

Many Christians have found it helpful to walk a labyrinth. A Christian labyrinth looks a little bit like a maze, but rather than having dead ends and choices, it is a simple, winding path, leading to a centre point and then back out again. It symbolises our journey of faith and walking with God. As we walk a labyrinth, we are encouraged to reflect on our walk with God.

- Prayer walk your neighbourhood. As you walk, spend time listening to God and asking him what he wants to do and how he is working in your area. If it's helpful, imagine Jesus walking beside you.
- Walk a labyrinth. Try www.labyrinthlocator.org to find one locally. If you are not able to get to one or have restricted mobility, try a finger labyrinth(can be downloaded from the resources on www.worldlabyrinthday.org).



Worship and praise

Praise and worship comes in many forms. We are perhaps most familiar with singing songs or hymns, but a reading of Psalm 150 encourages us to think more widely to dancing, drums and trumpets and we are told in Romans



12:1 that offering our bodies to God daily is our spiritual act of worship. Focusing on who God is, praising him for what he has done and worshipping him in his holiness and glory is a fundamental part of our Christian faith. Praise and worship – in whatever form – helps us to focus on God, reminds us of his centrality in our lives and his sovereignty in our world.

- Find some time and space to listen to some worship music – in whatever style you enjoy most. Focus on the words and allow yourself to get lost in it. Sing along (or not), dance (if you want to) or simply listen and express your love to God that way.
- Write your own song/psalm/poem of praise. Don't worry about the style, spelling or your writing skills. Simply focus on God's greatness and what he means to you.

Writing

For many years, writing has been core to my spiritual journey. My daily writing practice was inspired by the author and creative Julia Cameron, who advocates ‘morning pages’ – three pages of longhand writing every morning – as a way of supporting wellbeing and nurturing creativity (Cameron, 1992). For me, writing helps me connect with God as virtually the first thing I do every morning (I do grab a cuppa first). In a notebook, I pour out everything that is going on in my life and my mind. These pages are for no-one but me. I suspect they’re a rather mundane stream of consciousness, but I often find that God speaks to me in and through the writing. Though I usually don’t reread them, I find that patterns of thinking, ideas and themes emerge over time, which help me discern what God is saying.



Other kinds of writing can also be helpful as part of spiritual practice. Journalling has been recognised as an effective tool in nurturing wellbeing and can support us as we explore our experiences and thoughts by writing about them. Writing poetry, letters, blogs, stories, articles or virtually anything can help us put unspoken and perhaps even unacknowledged feelings into words. It can provide space to reflect on our relationship with God, areas of challenge and growth, guidance, Bible insight and many other areas.

- Have a go at morning pages. Take time to write one to three pages longhand. Don’t overthink or edit as you go. Simply write whatever comes to mind. For more information see www.juliacameronlive.com.
- Think of a situation you are in right now – it could be positive, exciting, negative or challenging. Using some or all of the following questions, write about the situation: What is happening? How does it affect me or others? How do I feel about it? What would I like the outcome to be? What might God be saying about it? Write by hand or digitally, whichever suits you best and write in whatever way you want – prose, notes, poetry. Don’t write for anyone else but yourself. When you’ve written for a while, reread and see what insights emerge.

And finally...

This booklet began with a quotation comparing the spiritual life to a poem and to finish, I'd like you to consider another metaphor - weaving fabric. If we consider the practices we've looked at as individual strands, they can be woven together to form a rhythm of life, which can sustain us in our relationship with God.

Many Christians through the centuries have used this idea of a rhythm or rule of life. In monastic orders, a shared rule of life holds the community together, as they worship, serve, pray and live in their context. Modern monastic communities, such as the Northumbria Community, which have members across the world, tend to have shared values and a common rule, which is adopted by individuals in ways that suit their lifestyle and the season of life they are in.



I find the structure of a rule or rhythm helpful in meaningfully weaving together a pattern of spiritual practice that nurtures, sustains and grows my relationship with God. Some practices have stood the test of time, served me for many years and become integrated into who I am as holy habits, forming the fabric of my life with God. To this fabric I

add and flex other practices as I need them. Usually, when I have experienced a major life change (particularly changes in job, family or ministry circumstances), I've found that I've needed to adapt and adjust my rhythms of life accordingly.

Whatever season you are in, spend time reflecting on those practices that you want to integrate more fully into your own distinctive fabric of faith. Bear in mind that your fabric will differ from anyone else's. As you weave these practices in your own time and in your own way, the strands of your faith will bring colour, texture and pattern to your everyday life reflecting the beauty, holiness and love of God.

References and Further Reading

- Sarah Bessey (ed.). 2020. *A Rhythm of Prayer*. SPCK.
- Julia Cameron. 1992. *The Artist's Way*. Tarcher/Penguin
- Henry Cloud & John Townsend. 1995. *Safe People*. Zondervan
- Richard Foster. 1989. *Celebration of Discipline*. Hodder and Stoughton.
- Ruth Haley Barton. 2006. *Sacred Rhythms*. IVP.
- Marianne Hieb. 2005. *Inner Journeying Through Art Journalling*. Jessica Kingsley.
- Christopher Jamison. 2006. *Finding Sanctuary*. Weidenfeld & Nicolson.
- Ron Klug. 2002. *How to Keep a Spiritual Journal*. Augsburg.
- Dennis Linn, Sheila Fabricant Linn & Matthew Linn. 1995. *Sleeping with Bread*. Paulist Press.
- Dennis Linn, Sheila Fabricant Linn & Matthew Linn. 1997. *Don't Forgive Too Soon*. Paulist Press.
- Brian McClaren. 2008. *Finding Our Way Again*. Thomas Nelson.
- Sally Nash. 2006. *Sustaining Your Spirituality*. Cambridge: Grove Y2.
- Sue Monk Kidd. 1990. *When the Heart Waits*. Harper Collins.
- Sally Nash & Jo Whitehead (eds). 2014. *Christian Youth Work in Theory and Practice*. London: SCM.
- John Ortberg. 2014. *Soul Keeping*. Zondervan.
- Sue Pickering. 2008. *Spiritual Direction*. Canterbury Press.
- Cole Arthur Riley. 2024. *Black Liturgies*. Hodder & Stoughton.
- David Runcorn. 2006. *Spirituality Workbook*. SPCK.
- Ray Simpson. 2003. *Prayer Rhythms*, Vol.1. Kevin Mayhew.
- Ray Simpson. 2005. *A Pilgrim Way*. Kevin Mayhew.
- Ray Simpson. 2005. *Prayer Rhythms for Busy People*. Kevin Mayhew.
- Leonard Sweet. 2000. *Learn to Dance the Soul Salsa*. Zondervan.
- Andy Thornton 'Moments of Tussle and Illumination' in Ruth Harvey (ed.) (1999) *Wrestling and Resting*. CTBI pp.19-23.
- Henry Wansbrough. 2014. *The Psalms*. Bible Reading Fellowship.
- Jo Whitehead. 2014. *Reflection "on the Slant": Creativity, Imagination and Integration*. University of Birmingham. Unpublished DPT Assignment.
- www.24-7prayer.com
- www.anamchara.com
- www.centeringprayer.com
- www.churchofengland.org/prayer-and-worship
- www.laybenedictines.org
- www.northumbriacommunity.org
- www.sacredspace.ie



© Jo Whitehead 2025
Produced for St Michael's, Breaston and St Mary's, Draycott.