Trying to define prayer is like trying to define eating. Whatever we say about it does not begin to describe the myriad experiences which come under the umbrella of the word 'prayer'.

The young man with the shaven head and finger cymbals who chants the mind-deadening Krishna mantras is praying just as surely as the old Jewish Rabbi wrapped in his prayer shawl while he rocks over the Torah. The Australian Aborigine repeatedly running his finger over the pattern worn in the stone, the housewife singing in tongues at a tent meeting, the Zen disciple puzzling over the sound of one hand clapping, the Tibetan hermit spinning his prayer wheel, the old Nun fingering her rosary; we could go on and on. All these people are praying.

To say that some of them are not praying because they are not Christian is like saying that they are not eating because they don't eat Italian food.

Prayer, like eating, comes naturally to all human beings. We are all children of the one God and we seem to have, built into us, the need and the ability to pray.

How we pray is a different matter. Just as there are good ways of eating and bad ways of eating so there are good ways of praying and bad ways of praying. And just as there are foods which are distinctively Chinese so too there is a type of prayer which is distinctively Christian.

Christian Prayer

As with all things Christian we start with Jesus and what he said about prayer.

Jesus said that prayer is much more than just 'saying prayers'. He said, 'And when you pray you must not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the Synagogues and in the streets, that they may be seen by men. Truly I say to you they have their reward. But when you pray go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father, who sees in secret, will reward you. And in praying do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think they will be heard for their many words. Do not be like them for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.' (Matthew 6:5ff)

Again, he said, 'Beware of the Scribes who like to go about in long robes, and to have salutations in the market places and the best seats in the synagogues and the places of honour at feasts, who devour widow's houses and for a pretence make long prayers.' (Mark 12:38f)

And again, 'Not every one who says to me, 'Lord, Lord', shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven'. (Matthew 7:21)

For Jesus, praying could not be separated from doing. He said that those who pray to God must carry their prayer into action and seek to love God in service to others.

There was nothing new in this emphasis on justice and love for others going hand in hand with prayer. Jesus was a Jew and he inherited the Jewish tradition of prayer. He was faithful in keeping the Jewish festivals, in attending the synagogue services, and in the daily blessings over food and drink. He prayed morning, afternoon and evening as did all good Jews. And, being a Jew, Jesus inherited the Jewish prophetic tradition.

The Prophetic Tradition

The Prophets were Israel's men of prayer. We belittle the prophets when we describe them as sooth-sayers; people who foretold the future. The Jewish prophets did not deal in foresight but in insight. They studied the
scriptures, they noted the signs of the times, then they proclaimed the inevitable consequences of human actions when men and women choose to ignore God’s laws.

So the Prophet Amos could say: ‘Thus says the Lord, ‘I hate, I despise your feasts, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and your cereal offerings, I will not accept them, and the peace offerings of your fatted beasts I will not look upon. Take away from me the noise of your songs; to the melody of your harps I will not listen. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever flowing stream’.’ (Amos 5:2ff)

And the Prophet Jeremiah could say: ‘Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, ‘Amend your ways and your doings, and I will let you dwell in this place. Do not trust in these deceptive words: ‘This is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord’. For if you truly amend your ways and your doings, if you truly execute justice one with another, if you do not oppress the alien, the fatherless or the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not go after other Gods for your own hurt, then I will let you dwell in this place, in the land that I gave of old to your fathers forever’.’ (Jeremiah 7:3ff)

For the Prophets, as for Jesus, prayer could not be separated from doing the will of God and that, in turn, could not be separated from an active love and concern for one’s neighbour. Thus, for Jesus, true prayer was prayer said in the context of love; love for God and love for one’s neighbour. And once we have grasped this basic truth about Christian prayer it matters little what method of prayer we use.

Methods of Prayer

Gourmets have always argued - and will always argue - about the relative merits of different styles and methods of cooking. And Christians have always argued - and will always argue - about the relative merits of different styles and methods of prayer. In the end it doesn’t matter, it’s all a matter of taste, and in the Anglican Church we are free to choose.

Some Anglicans pray in the structure of Liturgy, others pray in tongues. Some prefer a wordless meditation, others use mantras. Some need the discipline of a set of Spiritual Exercises while others can pray while walking the dog. Some find their home in one method of prayer, most of us use several different methods, depending on our mood. Every one of us is unique and different and it stands to reason that our prayer - our most intimate contact with our Father God - will therefore be unique and different.

The best way to learn to pray is by praying. As in most things, we learn best by doing. And the best way to find a method of prayer which will best suit you is to study the alternatives then to go to your room, shut the door, and experiment. Experiment with many methods until you find the one that fits best. Then stick with it, develop and refine it, until it becomes your own.

Think about it

We have really no right to place eating on a lower level than praying. Both are part and parcel of life. Nevertheless I still contend that Bibles and bread should be handled with particular care, for in the careless handling of either or both of these things, is betrayed a lack of imagination, as well as a sense of the sacredness of things.

Dean Chandler 1779 - 1859

I usually get up at 4am. It’s quiet and peaceful at that time, which I need to collect myself. It’s a time when I try to engage with God. It’s meditation. I try to centre myself on God so that He influences the rest of the day.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu

It is said that Lord Astley, on the morning of a Civil War battle, prayed thus: “Lord, I am going to be very busy this day. If I forget thee, forget not me”.

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