

ST NINIAN'S POLLOKSHIELDS
TIME TO PRAY
WK 1: WHAT IS PRAYER?

As a kind of starter for ten for our series of sermons on prayer over the next six weeks or so, I'm going to try to answer, as simply and straightforwardly as I can, the question: *what is prayer?*

So, what *is* prayer? *Prayer is the exploration of a relationship.* That's my answer – *prayer is the exploration of a relationship.*

The first thing I want to say about this answer, which might be a somewhat surprising answer at first sight, is this: prayer is about exploring a relationship we already have. So, something happens before prayer, something *has* happened before prayer. What? God has entered into a relationship with us, with the whole human race in fact. This God has done in Jesus Christ, this God continues to do by giving himself to us in baptism, confirmation and holy communion. This is something so basic for Christians, that you could call it a “fact of life”, the greatest “fact of life”. It is wonderfully summed up in the First Letter of St John in these words: *in this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins* (1 John 4.10). So, prayer is the exploration of the relationship we already have with God because God loves us so much. God gives us His love, prayer responds to that love, delights in it, explores it.

The second thing I want to say about my answer is this: prayer seen in this way, as the exploration of an existing relationship, becomes an entirely natural way of spending time with someone who loves us. This is very easy for us to understand – we always want to spend time with people who love us, for it is integral to our chances of happiness. Prayer is a great way of spending time

with God because spending time with God is indispensable for our deepest well-being and ultimate blessedness. Prayer is, in fact, about *desire*, desire to be with the One whose love for us means more than anything else. God's love for us, if we are aware of it and believe that it is so, evokes a desire to be with God, to explore God's love, to rest in that love, to love in return, to share ourselves with God as God shares with us.

And the third thing I want to say about my answer draws on what we know it is like to be with someone we love. It is a rich experience. Sometimes we are quite happy just to be with the person – nothing need be said. Sometimes we seek the person's help and have things to ask. Sometimes we want to be with the loved one to say thank you. At other times, of course, we need to be with them to say sorry about some hurt or misunderstanding.

All of these experiences are part of prayer too, part of exploring and responding to the love God has for us. So, there will be a place for silence; there will be a place for saying thank you – last Thursday morning I spent half an hour just saying thank you for 20 years as a priest and it was hardly any time at all and not nearly enough time really; there will be a place for asking God's help for ourselves and other people; there will certainly be a place for saying sorry and seeking forgiveness.

You cannot undertake an exploration like this unless you give *time* to it. The coloured insert that came with your pewsheet this morning suggests three ways of taking time to explore the theme of this sermon - *prayer is the exploration of a relationship*. They are *looking back on your life; what sustains your relationship with God; time for God*. Please take it home with you and take some time to go through what it suggests.

Next week, we will look at praying with the church.

TIME TO PRAY

WEEK 1: WHAT IS PRAYER?

Prayer is about our relationship with God. This relationship starts with God's love, and God's gift of himself for us in Jesus Christ. We respond to God's love and God's gift by choosing to enter into relation with God, by loving him, and nurturing our desire for God. For a relationship to grow, we must give it time.

This week we will do two things:
first, we will consider our relationship with God over the years.
Second, we will think about what we might do to help that relationship grow.

There are three 'tasks' for this week. Do all of them if you can, but if that's not possible, choose the one that looks most promising for you.

Plan to give 15 – 30 minutes for each task, and offer that time to God.

1. Looking back

Human relationships are often built on shared memories and experience. The same is true of our relationship with God. Spend some time looking back at your life – what were the key turning points, important relationships, highs and lows? Were there times when you felt particularly close to God, or that God seemed far away?

Either:

Draw a time line, marking in key points, and your changing awareness of God

or:

Draw a picture that represents your journey so far – a road that twists and turns (where did it come from? where is it going? how often does it change direction?) or perhaps a river (what is its source? what are the obstacles in its way? where was the flow smooth, where rough?).

Begin by setting this time aside for God, and end by giving thanks for what God has done for you so far.

2. What sustains your relationship with God?

Using your time line or picture as a starting point, ask God to help you see the pattern of things that nurture your relationship and sustain life, and things that threaten it and get in the way.

Make a list of a things that sustain, and things that threaten. How is the balance? Do you feel that there are lots of things that sustain and a few that threaten, or vice versa? Spend a few minutes praying about the patterns you see – be honest with God about how you feel, and commit yourself to the choices that bring life.

3. Time for God

Look over the list of things that sustain you. Choose one thing, and make time for it this week. Maybe you will read the bible or go for a walk. Perhaps you will meet with a friend who encourages you. Make time for this, and offer the time prayerfully to God.