



Read the Archbishop's first Holy Week 2015 lecture at Canterbury Cathedral.

I was tempted to call this talk 'Why not to pray', but I thought that might attract too much attention, from the daily newspapers among others, who would leave out the rest of it, and therefore I resisted the urge and called it 'the risk of prayer'. But it is, in a sense, 'why not to pray', because not praying is a guarantee of a quiet life. It may be an unpleasant life, it may be a very tedious life, it may be an exceptionally depressing life, it may be a despairing life – but it will at least be a quiet life, if you like that kind of thing.

Because there has never been a renewal of the spiritual life of the church – which means all Christians, you and me – without a renewal of prayer. Without prayer, nothing happens. The church in England, as well as the Church of England, is in many ways facing huge challenges, we know that – it's nothing new, we always have done, we always will do. But these are different as they are in each generation, but they are particularly different because they are not challenges from enemies. Even during the Enlightenment, there was not the widespread resistance to all institutions, which there is now, or commitment to forms of life based on an overarching story about why we exist that there is in many places today. At the same time there is more diversity in religion than we have ever faced in one place at one time, at any time in history. Other faiths are visibly present in a way that is new and that is to be welcomed. Potential material well-being (note I say 'potential'), and confidence in human solutions to all problems is almost infinite, albeit unequal and often selfish. Basically our society has bought into Frank Sinatra's motto: we do it our way. The church's own past failings, of sin and its persecution of others, of arrogance and self-satisfaction, have also come back to haunt us. Every day when I'm in London and I walk out of Lambeth Palace, I walk past the most marvellous fig tree. It was planted in 1556 by Cardinal Pole, the last Roman Catholic Archbishop, it is said to celebrate the burning of his predecessor – not something I wish to imitate! It came as a cutting from the Vatican, and it was with a slightly perverse sense of humour that I took a cutting back to the Vatican last summer [laughter].

Yet, for all the apathy, indifference, turning away, self-satisfaction of our philosophical and material and economic systems, as *The Economist* put it some years ago: God is back. A significantly, religiously and theologically illiterate age in Western society is having to deal with a revival of radicalised religious feeling. And we don't know how to do it. In the same way that intellectual intelligence is needed to solve most problems, and emotional intelligence required to relate well to other people, so religious intelligence is required to deal with diversity of faith and no faith. To get into the shoes of those who believe something passionately because it is about God, and religious intelligence is in short supply.

What do we do in such circumstances? The Church of England has three goals that have been agreed by the General Synod (I wasn't on General Synod at the time – blame the Dean!) [laughter]: the spiritual and numerical growth of the church; the re-imagination of how churches exist and act' and the Common Good of our society. Given that those are what, as a Church of England, that we have decided that we are called by God to do – and I accept that and agree with that – when I came in to this office I prayed and thought about how to respond to those aims. And that has led to three priorities, about which I shall be speaking this week. First, a renewal of prayer and religious community; secondly, reconciliation – the church as reconciled reconcilers in a world where the imminence and 'in-your-faceness' of diversity and the other is accelerated and exaggerated

by electronic media and where we cope less and less well with the stresses it causes; and lastly the natural reaction to the outreaching, spreading and extravagant love of Jesus that we receive, being his witness and evangelists in a world of bad news and self-protection. And at its heart, all three of these lectures have the common theme of identity: how do we find identity? How do we protect identity? And how do we share identity? It's like one of those menus that sits on my iPad in front of me: do you want to share this file?

There are libraries full of books on prayer, and rooms full of people who can speak better than I can on the subject. So I'm going to focus on why we should pray, with only an occasional nod to how. I apologise in advance to those who expected something else, but perhaps there may be an opportunity to remedy the omission in due course. Prayer is one of the most intimate and beautiful activities in which the human being can engage, whether alone or with others. Prayer is how we establish our true identity, as individuals and as the church. In prayer our identity is changed, to be more aligned with the identity of God, the identity that in love we are called towards. Mother Teresa said: "Prayer enlarges the heart until it is capable of containing God's gift of himself."

And moreover, in prayer we participate in the most dramatic partnership of creation and recreation. The partnership with God that involves gazing on his creation, on the events of the world he has made, and seeking that they be conformed to his likeness and image. We are changed, and the world is changed, as God allows us, through prayer, to share in his making of the world. We are his partners in making the world, in prayer. Jean Vanier, who founded the L'Arche communities, said: "To pray is essentially to come to Jesus and to drink." Prayer begins with an encounter with a person, an opening of ourselves to be with the person who is three persons in one: God, who comes to be with us, through Jesus by his Spirit, and being with us changes us.

We all have encounters with people who have a profound effect on us. For example, I have met two or three people over my life where one meeting altered my perspective on what life should be about. Most of us would be able to think back to something similar. Two of those people were in one meeting and one time: my current spiritual director, Fr Nicolas Buttet, a Swiss Roman Catholic priest and monk; and a friend of his, who was head of the Department for Justice and Peace at the Vatican, Cardinal Van Thuan – he had spent thirteen years in solitary confinement in Vietnam after the Communists took over the south; he'd been Archbishop of what was then Saigon. What was most profound was that they spent the afternoon – with me listening more than speaking, for a change (it was some time ago) – speaking of prayer. Normally, when you get Christians, and especially clergy, together, they talk about church politics, about people. But for them it was simply Jesus. No one else was half as much interesting or half as passionately engaging, and merely to participate in that meeting was to share in prayer.

Rowan Williams, interviewed by Mark Tully, said this: "As a Christian, my understanding is that what I'm doing when I pray is allowing the life of Jesus to come alive in me with the Holy Spirit, which means that from the depth of my being as a believer there rises up a kind of welling up of life and love directed towards that mysterious source of Jesus' being, which we call God the Father." Too often, in the way that we all talk of prayer,

and especially in the way we teach about prayer, we become mechanical and manipulative. It is as though there is a technique that makes a difference: press the buttons in the right order and everything will work. Over the weekend, the IT people at Church House in London, which also runs the computer system at Lambeth Palace, decided to reset the entire system, and so we have a complex and lengthy booklet, telling us, in our spare time, how to reset our iPads and phones and computers. I tried this morning and got a message back saying it's not working. You will be relieved to know that that is not how prayer works. There is no series of correct steps that leads to making it work.

There was a book written in 1936 called *How to Make Friends and Influence People*, by Dale Carnegie. I read it once in an effort not to something else, a sort of diversion activity. It wasn't, says he slightly defensively, that I felt short of friends [laughter]. It contained much that was interesting and good common sense – be interested in people, listen to what they've got to say etc – but it was the 'how to' that left a slightly odd feeling with me. We cannot manoeuvre our way into friendships. It's the same with prayer: we can help one another with techniques we've found that help us to pray, it's useful to discuss prayer and learn from the experts and share ideas about prayer – but prayer has at its centre a relationship with God in Jesus Christ. But we are there not to placate or please God, but to relish and rejoice in God. Relationships are not built on process but on partnerships, sharing of all that one is, and in prayer we are called into partnership with God.

And so the good news, in one sense, is that you don't have to do something to get there. He doesn't say, 'press these buttons in the right order', qualified by living a suitably good life. He just says, 'come and be with me'. It's an invitation. Revelation chapter 3 verse 20, Jesus says to the church – the very, very dysfunctional church at Laodicea: "Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone opens the door I will come in and eat with them." And the word means sit down and have a long, leisurely, relaxed, enjoyable dinner together. Chatting over things, engaging one another, relishing each other's company.

In prayer we're called to partnership with God, a relishing. And Holy Week is full of partnerships, offered but aborted by presuppositions. There are very few genuine partnerships. When I sat down and thought about it, the first one that came to mind was the donkey, or donkeys if you go with Matthew, who sort of went with the flow. Didn't know who was on his back, or he might have done but we don't think so; just went along because he was led. But then you think of others, relationships. The thief who found hope; Simon of Cyrene who carries a cross and encounters God; a centurion who does his day's work and also bumps into God, incidentally; and, above all, the mother of Jesus who is uncomprehendingly faithful. Perhaps a few others. But the disciples are most obviously called to partnership at the Last Supper, and in Gethsemane: "Will you stay with me one hour? Pray with me, for an hour? Spend some time with me; we've spent three years, which I've been working for you. Please, please, I really need you with me now." And they go to sleep. They fail through pride and place-seeking at the Last Supper, and through exhaustion and fear in the garden. They run away.

Partnership with Jesus Christ in prayer is risky because it is deeply costly. As when we accept the invitation of Jesus to be with him, it will mean

putting ourselves in places that are tough and pushing ourselves to limits that are very demanding. So prayer is apparently, looking at it from outside, a fearful thing, and deeply risky. The reality, of course, is the risk is nothing, is a zero. To cast oneself into the hands of one who loves immeasurably and perfectly with infallible knowledge is fairly obviously not much of a risk. Not to do so is really the risk, because it's so stupid. But it feels like a risk because in prayer that is partnership with God everything is on the table – we hold nothing back. We can't do that, at least maybe some of you can but I can't. And Cardinal Van Thuan, when he was arrested, an Archbishop – I was about to say a real one, I don't quite mean that [laughter]; sorry, I'm channeling my inner impostor syndrome. Cardinal Van Thuan as Archbishop of Saigon was an important figure, and he went out one day to have a cup of coffee, a car drew up at the pavement, pulled him into it and he was next seen thirteen years later. And he was taken to the prison, they stripped him and tattooed a number on his arm and that was his name for thirteen years. And they took off all his clothes. As he stood there, he said that he remembered calling out to God and God said: "Now you have nothing but me. Now you have nothing but me."

Well that's where prayer takes us, though I would suspect most of us would hope and pray that we don't have to do it that literally. But we do put everything on the table accidentally, coincidentally, as a collateral effect of prayer. The more we're involved in God the more it's just there because it doesn't seem worth holding on to. Prayer causes huge collateral damage to all our vanity and our ambition and our hopes of self-advancement and self-centeredness. Partnership with God reveals us to ourselves in our true identity. Not the bad things that many of us feel about ourselves, but the sheer beauty that is what God feels about us because of what he did on the cross. And it reveals God to us in his true identity, and we can never be the same again afterwards. The risk of prayer is the risk of saying to God, as Peter did: "Though all become deserters because of you, I will never desert you." Peter said it twice in Matthew and failed dismally. The risk of prayer is only partly of God taking us at our word. The risk is of the overwhelming of when we fail and we find we are restored.

From Palm Sunday to Good Friday we see all sorts of prayer, and we recognise that this partnership with God to which you and I are called, irrespective of who we are, that this partnership is not about restricting us, frightening us, controlling us, but enabling us to be what we should and could be. To realise the dreams of fulfilment that lie at the heart of all the illusions of self-realisation peddled by our age. On Palm Sunday itself there is the celebration, the Hosanna, the acclamation, which is surely the best starting point of our prayers, because it acknowledges the worth and wonder of God. The crowd are drawn up in the realisation that the longings of the Old Testament for a Messiah are being fulfilled before their very eyes. And they get carried away: the sun is shining, there's a festival atmosphere, and the moment is loaded with meaning and significance and the presence of God before their very eyes. Oh, full of errors, of course, they misunderstood the whole thing from beginning to end, but that didn't really matter that much – they got the heart of it.

Do not mistrust the moments of ecstatic joy. They're few and far enough between. If we mistrust them and turn away, we're missing out. In one of

my favourite sentences in all of his writing, Professor David Ford at Cambridge, in an admittedly extraordinarily dense book called *Self and Salvation*, published in 1999 (there's a more accessible version called *The Shape of Living*, published in 2012), writing about what it is to feast on God, he suddenly breaks off, in the middle of a complex paragraph, and in between dashes says: "Who cannot be overwhelmed by the love of God!" It's nothing to do with his argument, it's just he's sort of caught up by this wonder. It's very David.

Prayer is not for pain alone. I know that sounds obvious, but so many of us treat prayer as a form of penance. You know, I've done something wrong so I'd better pray. I've got problems, so I'd better pray. It's all good reasons, but that's not the only reason. It's for meeting God and meetings with love are extraordinary. Think of the times you've seen someone you love waiting at an airport, or coming to meet you and your heart bounds with the joy of meeting. Gregor of Nyssa: "Prayer is the delight of the joyful as well as the solace of the afflicted. It is the enjoyment of things present and the substance of things to come." You can't create such moments; they come as a rich dish of food, but as with all unfamiliar dishes, we can relish and receive – and after 37 trips round the Anglican Communion in the last two years I know about unusual food [laughter] – or you can get some things that you sort of push around the plate and try and make it look as though you've tasted it. But to find the moments where the dish of rich food is to be enjoyed takes us back to Revelation 3:20, to time, to relishing. Fish and chips is 20 minutes to go and get it and wait and come home; Michelin, Rosette meals are not best eaten on the run.

As we move through Holy Week, there are the encounters of complaint and anger as well as joy and hosanna. There is the questioning of God in Christ that comes from both friends and enemies. God is with them and they are fearful, because it all seems out of control. By the time we get to Maundy Thursday, alarm has become frenetic. There is nothing wrong with frenetic prayer, any more than there is with joyful, ecstatic prayer. There's nothing wrong with frantic prayer, because if we are to bring all of ourselves into the presence of God with prayer, there will be times when we are frenetic and frantic. Peter, consumed with uncertainty and indecision, flaps about when Jesus seeks to wash his feet. Prayer does not have to be measured and contained and correct to be a real encounter, but it does have to express who we are and what we are. We cannot have our identity shaped if we don't bring our identity with us.

Peter, in his two expostulations before Jesus – "Lord, not just my feet but my hands and my head" – expresses his confusion with absolute integrity, albeit unintentionally. In one sense it doesn't matter what we pray, so long as we do it, reorienting ourselves to God all the time. Mother Teresa said: "If you want to pray better you must pray more." Or as Nike put it: "Just do it." Later on, Peter denies Jesus. That is the moment when he is close geographically but there is no prayer because he's not with him. He may be near him, but there's no personal, emotional sense of being with. Prayer is being with. Jesus with me and me with Jesus. There will be the dark night when we don't know of the 'with', but the 'with' is always present.

And the problem with so much of our prayer is not that it's too little or even that it lacks transparency and integrity, because those are demands

that many of us can't meet at many times, but that it is too narrow in its range of emotions. At Lambeth Palace, as here, in the daily offices we use Cranmer's pattern of saying the Psalms, which takes you all through the whole Psalter, all 150, every month. Dietrich Bonhoeffer refers to the Psalms as the Prayer Book of the Bible, and explores their impact in a small book he wrote in the '30s; it's worth reading.

We're good at formal petition as one mood, in cathedrals and other places of prayer. Many people spend time in silence and contemplation. Informal petition brings the offer of what I was brought up to call 'arrow prayers', as at the end of Nehemiah chapter 1, when having to ask the king for a great favour, Nehemiah lifts his heart to God and says: "Lord, give me favour with this man." We manage these even if we get down to the rather less sophisticated, 'Oh God, help!' Such prayers were part of our lives when Caroline and I smuggled Bibles into the then Communist-dominated Central and Eastern Europe: Czechoslovakia one year, Romania the following. They were holidays where we had a camper van with a false floor and a thousand Bibles between the two bits of floor; you slipped back a panel with an electric motor in a bit in the wall where you stuck a hair pin. But every day we saw coincidences to the 'Oh God, help!' prayers. Going to a large town, all the maps being memorised in our head – and anyone who knows my direction finding would realise that that's not wise – to find a Pentecostal pastor and deliver 400 Bibles, and having slightly forgotten, totally forgotten, quite where we were going; and it's a bit odd, when you're the only foreign vehicle in the town, asking for directions – we were stopped at a road block (we'd prayed earlier for help in finding this place), the road block policeman said: "This policeman is a secret policeman." Well he wasn't very secret at that point [laughter]. Securitate, for those of you who will remember those days. "You will take him into town." So we said: "Yes, of course, we're absolutely delighted." So he sat down between us on the front seat, with a very large promotion roughly six inches from his back end. And we drove him to the town. And on the way in he said: "I must show you my town." He was very proud of it. He took us to the exact street we needed to go to the following day. Coincidence? Perhaps. Perhaps not.

Arrow prayers, another brand of prayer, but in the Psalms they are all there. We find every emotion there is, and that's not just good to read but good to pray. It is very often the habit to turn away from the Psalms that curse and express fury, and I used to be more hesitant about them than I am. But in 2002, working with clergy in Kaduna in northern Nigeria, very shortly after terrible riots with more than 2000 deaths, I saw afresh the meaning of the Psalms that curse, complain, lament, express rage and a desire for revenge. Listening to the deep anger of those who'd suffered so much, there was a need for a language of rage in genuine prayer. We used the Psalms and the Book of Jonah, rewritten by those clergy – they rewrote the Psalms in their own context – I still have those prayers. They healed rage in the integrity of expressing it. Prayer takes us into the presence of God and conforms us to what we should be, not merely what we feel. That's the risk. Rage and revenge were not where the prayer ended, but where it had to begin if there was to be a genuine partnership in which we come face to face with God and God comes face to face with each of us as we are. Then change happens.

The vast majority of prayer throughout history has been collective. There again it is partnership, but now the partnership has a new and different

impact. When we pray together, as opposed to by ourselves – and we can pray by ourselves in a big crowd – when we pray together we are in partnership with God as his church and in partnership with each other, in order to be in partnership with God. That adds the horizontal to the vertical. All of a sudden we have responsibilities that constrain and change us. Prayer is risky. The disciples had to sit and watch each other having their feet washed. They fell asleep together and failed to support each other. Prayer together is not formal, it is dynamic. We cannot pray together and emerge the same. And it's very varied. It may be formal, as in the daily offices here, which I love; it may be part of an informal, petitionary prayer meeting. In the late 1970s I was part of a prayer meeting at Cambridge, the foundation of preparing a weekend meeting, by someone called Jackie Pullinger, a missionary in what was then a particularly dark part of Hong Kong. We met each evening for about six weeks at 9pm, for an hour or so, until she came for a weekend. We met for about an hour and they were remarkable hours of thoughtful and quiet prayer that united us and prepared our hearts. And on the evening she arrived we found ourselves expectant and open to a most wonderful meeting with God. Some of those who were met by Jesus that weekend found their lives turned upside down and are still living in the joy of that. Our prayer together was of collective listening and sharing, what we sensed God was saying by his Spirit through scripture and inspiration. The risk was in expecting to meet God. The reality was an overwhelming of love. We were shaped by prayer as God called us to shape the weekend of prayer.

Partnerships are complicated, because we never quite know what's going on with each other, but in prayer it is revealed. One Abbott of a Benedictine monastery says he knows the state of the mood in the monastery by the way the monks say the Psalms. I have been ever more nervous about saying the Psalms at Lambeth since he said that to me [laughter]. I try and say it meaningfully, I don't think it fools anyone.

St Benedict, in his Rule, says that in the Oratory we are to be considerate of each other. That there should be no more than two or three prayers by the person leading the prayers, so as not to weary others. Yes, I can tell one or two go to churches where, by gum, they pray don't they! [laughter]. DL Moody, the great 19th century evangelist, starting one meeting when someone was praying on and on and on at the beginning of the meeting, stood up and said: "Shall we sing while our brother prays?" [laughter]

Collective prayer is seen most clearly in many forms in religious communities, which are schools for prayer, not homes for experts. For that reason a church without religious community will in the end lack prayer and then life. Religious communities come in many forms, from Benedictine and other traditional orders such as founded this cathedral, through to modern movements like 24/7. The common characteristic is an element of community and a rule of prayer. We have one such community at Lambeth Palace, a five-person fraternity from a Catholic order called Chemin Neuf, a few of them are here this evening. They are ecumenical, men and women, married or single. In September they'll be joined for 12 months by up to 16 residents and up to 40 non-residents, called the Community of St Anselm. For a year that group will live together with us all, drawing on the riches of Christian spirituality, praying together as Benedict taught, serving with the poor as Francis showed, and learning

and developing in self-understanding in Ignatian style. Centred in the Bible and in prayer – the two are inseparable, but that’s another lecture – from all over the world, the aim is that they return to whatever they will be doing, equipped to do it as faithful disciples of Jesus Christ because they have found afresh who they really are, their true identity, through that year.

Let me say one or two very brief words to conclude. There are all sorts of things I haven’t touched on, that I’ve skipped over. Things about what happens when prayers aren’t answered – I would recommend, if you are concerned about that, a wonderful book by a man called Pete Greig called *God on Mute* (Kingsway, 2007), absolutely formidably good book. But skipping over that for the moment, for the sake of time, a couple of final things to say. First, when praying, don’t try and be clever. Praying together may use formal prayers in a church service, and it is also really good from time to time to get together with someone you trust, whether a partner or a friend or in a home group or Bible study group – churchmanship is irrelevant – and learn to pray with the Bible. Try this, we use to do it in my parish. Half an hour: read a passage of the Bible and talk about it for ten minutes; apply it, thinking about what it says to you in your life, and talking about what’s happening in your life to the person you’re with. For the next ten minutes, say how you are, what are the issues you’re facing. For the third ten minutes, pray about the things that have struck you. And then stop, before you weary each other.

Or before a meal as a family, say one thing that is on your heart that you want to say to God, in a short sentence. In the church pray for each other in a group at some point, perhaps before Easter Day. Have a group that meets to pray for the service before it begins, for about ten or fifteen minutes.

The renewal of prayer is my highest priority, in myself constantly and in the church, because it is the only way in which we are conformed to the likeness of God and united with one another. Pray together and it’s harder to divide. Pray and it’s harder to despair. A church that prays will find renewal because it finds the reality of God, however badly it prays, because God is good. The method is neither here nor there. The reality is the way in which we find the identities and identity together to which we are called.

Thank you.

24 min read

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