

Resting in the Goodness of God

By Pete Greig

I hope you're enjoying your journey through *How to Pray* and finding it helpful, even – and especially – in this very challenging time.

The closing chapters of the book have turned out to be, I think, some of the more prescient with regard to our current crises. First of all, let's talk about chapter 10 ('Confession and Reconciliation') which I wrote long before the murder of George Floyd and the ensuing combustion of the Black Lives Matter movement around the world. I am ashamed to admit that I nearly skipped writing this chapter altogether.

An embarrassing confession

The book was getting longer than I had intended, my deadline with the publisher was looming and, frankly, the complex issues surrounding broken relationships and societal reconciliation (about which I do care deeply) seemed a little tangential from the immediacies of helping normal people to simply practice prayer. Couldn't I just leap adroitly over 'forgive us as we forgive others' and land with 'deliver us from the evil one'? Would people notice? Would anyone really mind?

Of course, the answer turned out to be a big, fat, resounding 'Yes!' Millions of people protesting injustice on the streets and elsewhere online, would indeed have minded – quite rightly – if I'd ignored the essential connection between social reconciliation and personal piety in prayer. (It probably reveals something about my own subconscious bias and privilege that I even considered this embarrassing omission.) When I look at the open wounds of division in America and the evidence of institutional racism at work, when I talk to African and Caribbean members of my own church here in the UK, when I consider the fact that many of our great Stately Homes in England (think Downton Abbey) were built with the proceeds of the transatlantic slave trade, I am deeply stirred to repent and to be reconciled. This is not peripheral to prayer. It is utterly integral.

And, of course, it wouldn't just have been the crowds in contemporary society that might have minded if I had missed reconciliation out of a book on Christian prayer, it would also have been Jesus himself. At the heart of his creed there is a blood-red line linking the vertical axis of our Father's forgiveness towards us, with the horizontal axis of our forgiveness towards other people. As the evangelist John says unequivocally in his first epistle: "Whoever claims to love God yet hates a brother or sister is a liar. For whoever does not love their brother and sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen. And he has given us this command: anyone who loves God must also love their brother and sister." (1 John 4:20-21)

Contemplation

Surveys reveal that millions of people have turned to prayer in response to the pandemic. Demand for resources from my organisation, 24-7 Prayer, has certainly grown exponentially. Many people are, no doubt, simply praying 'Help!' and 'Make it go away!' But

others are asking much deeper questions, particularly about contemplative prayer (chapter 8). In interviews, this is almost always a topic for intense discussion and contemplative prayer has certainly been one of the greatest and most life-giving discoveries in my own prayer life over recent years. I don't know if you can tell that this was a chapter I especially enjoyed writing, even though I knew it would be controversial (there are still people out there trying to ban my books on the basis that I apparently teach 'New Age' techniques).

I grew up in an evangelical tradition that taught me to see prayer a bit like an Amazon Wishlist (not that we had Amazon back then). We would add requests to this list continually; browse it daily, and then, every now and then an item from the list would appear miraculously at the door, and we would thank the great algorithm in the sky sincerely!

I hope this doesn't sound cynical. I am truly very grateful for these spiritual roots. After all, 'prayer is,' as Karl Barth says, 'primarily a kind of asking'. I continue to believe that particularity and perseverance are essential in effective petition and intercession – as you've seen from the earlier chapters. My parents prayed for me daily in a very detailed, diligent and deliberate way and for that I am eternally grateful. Anyway, Jesus explicitly told us to ask and he modelled many miracles. We mustn't settle for this super-spiritual idea that the only thing that changes when we pray is ourselves. It's simply not biblical. Not true. Items from my Amazon Wishlist undoubtedly do sometimes arrive at my door!

But these days, as my prayer list grows ever longer, I increasingly intercede silently, without words (and we don't talk about this way of praying nearly enough). The contemplatives have a great deal to teach us, not just about contemplative prayer but also about the intercessory variety.

Practicing Contemplative Intercession

To pray in this way, I hold the person before the Lord, picturing them and quietly naming them in his presence. Becoming aware of the Father's love for them, I breathe in and out slowly, enveloping the person in the arms of prevenient kindness, silently entrusting the complexities of their predicament to His unfathomable wisdom. I barely use words.

Now, if I only ever prayed in this rather subjective way for people, I think I would be failing to pray for them fully. (Pentecostals and Evangelicals still have a great deal to teach contemplatives about the dynamics of intercessory prayer). After all, Jesus asked Bartimaeus a question that was quite particular: "What do you want me to do for you?" and it wasn't until Bartimaeus articulated a specific response - "Master, I want to see" - that he received a miracle.

But if my approach to prayer is only about lists and words and deals I need done, if I am constantly ramming my Amazon cart loaded down with desires and demands and bible verses into the shins of the Almighty, if I never lean into his love like John the Beloved, if I never weep my prayers like Mary, if I never groan with the Spirit, if I never draw in the dust like Jesus, then I am also failing to pray fully.

Pray with me

Contemplation and intercession when combined can become a deep well of prayer. In Gethsemane Jesus asked his three best friends to 'sit here... stay here and keep watch while I pray' (Mk 14:32,34). He didn't say 'pray for me'. He said 'you sit, you wait, you watch while I pray'. Sometimes - especially when the night is dark - our job is not so much to pray but rather to wait and watch while Jesus himself does the praying.

I was reading Julian of Norwich this morning. She devoted herself to prayer as an anchorite nun in the city of Norwich, England in the 15th century. Her book Revelations of Divine Love was the first written by a woman in the English language. I can think of no better way of concluding this final essay than to share one of Julian's insights regarding the marriage of contemplation and intercession and the supremacy of love:

"The way we often pray came into my mind and how, through lack of knowing and understanding of the ways of love we make use of intercessors. Then I saw truly that it gives more praise to God and more delight if we pray steadfast in love, trusting his goodness, clinging to him by grace, than if we ask for everything our thoughts can name. All our petitions fall short of God and are too small to be worthy of him, and his goodness encompasses all that we can think to ask. The best prayer is to rest in the goodness of God, knowing that that goodness can reach right down to our lowest depths of need."

Amen