

## Sacred Space

August 2019

What is prayer? What are we doing when we pray to God our heavenly Father? Of course, there isn't just one definition of what prayer is nor is there just one model of how to do it. Someone very wise once said: "Pray as you can, not as you can't". However, one thing that it is good to have in mind is that relationship lies at the heart of prayer; prayer in fact is the way in which we come into relationship with God.

The way we pray is a way of expressing our deepest selves in relation to God and finding that still point within ourselves where, in his Holy Spirit, God is ever-present, praying with "sighs too deep for words". (*Romans 8.26*) Sometimes it is absolutely right that we simply bring to God in prayer what is uppermost in our minds: the everyday concerns that we have for ourselves and for those whose needs we keep in mind. God wants us to be aware of the needs of all his children and the creation of which we are all a part. We can't pray about everything all the time but, all around the world, prayers are offered for countless people and situations and, of course, there is nothing of which God is unaware. It's important to remember that our prayer is never about us trying to change God's mind - about us, about the world, about something he may or may not have decided to do or seems to have forgotten about completely. If we think that then we're making a serious mistake about the nature of God. In fact, that means we're imagining God as just a slightly more omnipotent version of ourselves (don't laugh – we do it all the time!).

No, prayer is all about God changing us - changing our minds, making us less self-centred, more aware of the needs of others and helping us to find ways of making a difference. For this kind of intercessory prayer we are, of course, mainly using the conscious part of our mind. We know that we ordinarily only make use of a very small part of our mind's capacity and that beyond the level of self-conscious thought, there is a huge amount going on of which we are not ordinarily aware - call it our "deep mind". It seems to me that it is in the "deep mind" that what the Orthodox call "prayer of the heart" takes place - that place where we draw the mind into the heart and dwell in the place where the Holy Spirit prays constantly at the core of our being. We're talking about the prayer of silence, the spirituality of stillness.

I think that making space for the spirituality of stillness, quiet and contemplation is of absolutely central importance and I'm well aware that in saying that, I'm going against the grain because it seems to me that creating opportunities for stillness is something that is almost completely absent from modern church life. We seem to be afraid of silence; the western rational mind seems to be happier to bombard God with torrents of words. Yet other traditions, particularly those that remind us that Christianity is in origin an Eastern faith, value stillness and silence far more. What I hear from those outside the faith is that many in our society are seeking just such a spirituality but are not looking to the Christian churches to help them explore more deeply what God is desperate to do in their lives.

So, how do we go about intentionally creating that opportunity?

When I was granted a period of sabbatical study leave three years ago, I spent a wonderful few days with the Community of Hopeweavers in Southampton. You probably won't have heard of them and that is part of their distinctive charism, wishing to remain locally based. Hopeweavers have developed a ministry of stillness over more than a decade and they are drawn on across the dioceses of Winchester and Portsmouth where they offer monthly quiet days and afternoons, now extended to evenings in community members' homes. This is not something exotic or strange - just ordinary Christian people who have discovered something of the infinite richness of prayer that is still and silent.

Hopeweavers' aims are simply expressed:

- to offer sanctuary space and resources for individuals and groups who seek silence and stillness as part of a Christian faith journey

- to create places away from our everyday lives where we can be refreshed and experience peace and quiet; safe places where we can dream dreams and receive from God in stillness and calm
- to be a place to share silence with others, to learn more about prayer and to make ourselves available to God and to listen
- to encourage and value creativity as a way of responding to God
- to welcome Christians and people of all faiths or none, of all ages, in small groups, teams, as individuals, in family groups.

I was deeply impressed and very moved by what has been going on in Southampton and at the ways in which the Community of Hopeweavers has supported individuals and local churches in their growth in faith through prayer and stillness, commitment and creativity. In my previous parish of St Neots, I set up a pattern of monthly quiet afternoons (called "Sacred Space"), similarly beginning in a small and simple way. This has now become a regular pattern and I am delighted to know that it is continuing now I have left, led by two of those who joined me at the beginning.

I hope that here at St Peter's we can similarly move towards offering a ministry of stillness and "resting in God" as a particular charism, a ministry that we are well placed to offer. Over the coming months, I will be exploring ways in which we can be a "Sacred Space" not just for other Christians in Ely but for anyone searching for a deeper spirituality for modern living. If anyone would like to join me on this journey of exploration, then please do get in touch.

Hopeweavers particularly value a prayer written by St Teresa of Calcutta:

*"God give me the gift of silence;  
silence that leads to prayer,  
prayer that leads to love,  
love that leads to service  
and service that is returned in silent praise."*

Yours ever in Christ,

Fr Paul

You can find out more about Hopeweavers at [www.hopeweavers.co.uk](http://www.hopeweavers.co.uk)