

Soul Spark



Approaches to prayer

Preparation

Archbishop Michael Ramsey once admitted in an interview that it took forty minutes of preparation to have about five minutes of prayer. This was not an admission of failure but a reminder that deep prayer is not something that can be entered into at the drop of a hat. To enter into deep prayer takes time. Preparation for focussed prayer time is important to help inner orientation towards God, to dispose oneself to be open to the Spirit and so to allow the Spirit to pray in us.

In this course, we use music, stilling and bodily relaxation to enable this preparation to pray. Preparation to pray, is in itself a prayer – for it is about seeking God, and is also about trusting God – particularly in the process of stopping, relaxing and becoming still – for it is a real way in which we let go of our control and attention to the aspects of life that occupy our minds, and so entrust them to God. It is taking the step of faith, letting go of your concerns into God's holding.

Becoming Still and Attentive

Fostering a still and yet attentive disposition is what leading this part of the sessions is about. Thus we begin each time of prayer with some form of personal engagement

'How are you?' starts to get people to be personally engaged with how they are at that moment – and therefore some personal awareness of themselves as they come to prayer.

This is followed by a stilling / relaxation exercise. The intention is to help people let go of inner tensions and anxieties, trusting themselves more fully to God and thus opening themselves up to the movement of the Spirit. The link between this inner attitude and bodily stress and tension means that bodily relaxation is a valuable way of enabling this.

Having helped a more relaxed body and still mind, using a gentle piece of music to help people remain in this attitude is very helpful. There is a huge range of possibilities that can be used, from short classic pieces, to some more modern reflective tunes. Generally it is best to avoid pieces that have significant connections for many people, so pieces that are used in adverts, well known songs (generally its better to avoid words – particularly in English), tunes and songs used in worship etc. This way people in this time are able to be wherever they are and wherever they find the music taking them, rather than be taken to the images of the advert, or reminded of the memory a particular song holds.

Enabling this stilling and relaxed attentiveness well, means being slow and gentle in the way this is led – and yet, clear and audible. Its one of the challenges of this process and why watching the group size and the environment of the room is important.

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Ways of helping stillness and bodily relaxation

Inner tensions and distractions are two significant issues as people prepare to pray.

It is helpful to remind people that distractions are normal and to be expected. To suggest that a gentle response is needed to them – thus if one becomes aware of being distracted by a thought, to notice this, and gently seek to return to the focus of being still and relaxing. It is never helpful to be harsh, towards the distraction or towards yourself for being distracted.

Inner tensions are usually held bodily in muscular tension and thus dealing with muscular tension can help ease inner tensions. There are a variety of relaxation exercises

- Breathing
- Attention to sounds – outside, in room, your own body
- Physical stretch and relax – moving through body from top to toe or just with some key areas – e.g. jaw, neck, shoulders, back, hands.

Offering a variety of ways, helps people discover which ways they find most helpful, and not get fixed on a particular method.

Methods of Prayer offered:

Using Scripture

There are two classic approaches to using scripture in contemplative prayer - Lectio Divina and Imaginative Contemplation. We find both are valuable to offer as they are ways of letting Scripture speak to a level within ourselves that is deeper than the head. They can be difficult for people who are used to engaging with scripture through bible study and intellectual grappling, to let go of this approach, the natural questions and attitudes adopted towards the scripture text and wait for something to emerge. Both approaches enable a profound connection between the words of scripture and the particularities of the prayer's life, thus bridging the divide between the word of scripture and life. So the Spirit brings the word to life in the prayer in a way that is directly relevant and personal.

Lectio Divina

This is a slow reading of a passage of scripture, with the intention of letting the words sink in, without working at their meaning, rather letting their meaning find you. This approach has a long Christian tradition held most strongly perhaps in the monastic tradition. This slow and gentle way of letting scripture speak opens up the dawning of new insights and the power of imagery that speaks deep into hearts. A helpful way of introducing people to this method is to invite people to listen quietly to the words – as if spoken personally to them,

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and to simply notice what strikes them as they listen. To stay with what strikes them, to let the impact of the word or phrase deepen and develop further. This is not about taking every word in from the passage, but a matter of being attentive to the particular words that, as it were, are for them.

Imaginative Contemplation

By taking a gospel passage and seeking to imagine the scene, and be part of it, interacting with the characters, encountering Jesus is an approach to prayer that again has a long history. Taken by Ignatius of Loyola and used extensively in his Spiritual Exercises has resulted in this method being described as Ignatian Prayer. Ignatius uses the approach because it enables deep personal engagement in prayer with Christ. Again as it involves more of our being than simply our thought, it can be powerfully transforming deep inner spiritual orientations. Many can find this a daunting way of prayer to approach because in early years were told they had no imagination, or because they have come to distrust their imaginations. This can be helped by: gentle encouragement to have a go, reassurance that their ability to picture rooms in their house means they have the necessary abilities, and to ask the Holy Spirit to use their imagination for good.

Reflective Exercises

Reflective exercises that invite people to look at aspects of themselves and their lives and be open to new awarenesses are another way in which the Spirit reveals truth, very personally and helpfully. The two exercises we use in the course are, gentle and yet very helpful. By encouraging people to put onto paper the things that emerge, these exercises help people to look at themselves in a more detached way, and so they are able to be more open to insights that all too often are the wood that can't be seen for the trees. Sometimes the effects of these exercises is very subtle, like having quiet feeling of having been engaged with something important, that felt positive and life-giving, without any particular 'insight' or awareness standing out. This is particularly true with the 'Flower of Me' exercise. This sort of reaction is important to affirm, acknowledging that being personally engaged before God brings spiritual consolation.

Flower of Me

This exercise invites people to explore various kinds of life experiences and to look at them with an eye to noticing the movement of God in life. The handout describes the process people are invited to follow as they reflect on their lives and experiences. Insights and awarenesses that emerge can be significant and can be painful. I remember one person sharing of years of faith, that she realised that she had never felt the unconditional love of God in her life. This is not an uncommon experience, but can open up pain and longing. Honouring people's awarenesses when shared is very important, as is encouraging people to recognise their inner longing for God and find ways of giving time and attention to this.

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Looking at my life

This is a discerning exercise that owes a great deal to Gerard Hughes' exercise at the end of Chapter 5 of *God of Surprises*. It expands a little to help the process in a group context, but has the same intention – to develop a discerning awareness of life – and so of where God's call may be discovered in the facts of life and the inner effect that the different aspects of life has upon us.

The exercise though can be incredibly helpful in enabling people to recognise where they are being drawn, what they may be being called to let go of in life, and what they may be being invited to find a new attitude towards. It is important to affirm the awarenesses that emerge and encouraging exploring what the call within these awarenesses may be for each person.

Creativity

Human creativity is often a powerful expression of an individual search that speaks to others in their searching. The wealth of possibilities that are around that could be used are plenteous, but we have chosen a painting, a prayer and a poem. These are there because they speak to the theme of the evening and demonstrate the wealth of the genre of creativity they represent.

Using Paintings

Rembrandt's 'Return of the Prodigal Son' is a painting that speaks powerfully of the nature of God's loving forgiving acceptance. Henri Nouwen spent a week gazing at the picture, all we offer is twenty minutes, with some simple prompts of things to focus or reflect on. As in all these exercises, the intention is to let God speak through the medium, rather than telling people what God is saying through the medium. So space needs to be given, with the offering of some simple prompts for focus and reflection.

Prayers

Thomas Merton's powerful prayer of humble awareness of human limitation, mystery of life and faith and desire provides an effective springboard into the last session – a way of expressing of desire and feeling that many may never have dared express. The power is in this expression and yet the power of the faith and desire for God that is not disturbed by the unknown.

Poetry

Charles Peguy's poem 'I will dream a dream within you' provides an excellent way into exploring where God may be calling each of us in our lives. It encourages awareness of the deep longings within which the clues to the dream can be found. Gerard Hughes in his recent book 'God in All Things' explores the importance of desire in the spiritual journey and includes this poem. Reading it to the group is effective and then giving out the text and inviting reflecting on the part that seemed most significant is very effective.