

Prayer toolkit

Daily prayer

AIMS

To explore patterns of daily prayer.

Let me tell you....

The meeting came, at last, to its conclusion. The Grace was said rather mutedly and the friction and aftermath of a walk out by a disaffected member still hung in the air. Then I noticed that Rachel was there, waiting for her lift. My heart sank. On a good day her pessimism and stubbornness could seem quite funny, and she could certainly take a joke at her own expense. But, please God, not tonight! Duty prevailed and we drove across town towards her flat. 'I'm sorry you had to put up with all that', she said. 'It's not the first time there's been that sort of trouble - but you coped with it well. I'll remember you and your family in my prayers - I always do, every day.' Then she got out, thanked me for the lift and went indoors. With eyes moistened by this unexpected gift I asked God to bless funny, awkward, faithful Rachel, knowing that through the simple discipline of her prayers the weight of the evening has already lifted from my shoulders.

INTRODUCTION

Offering daily prayer following a set pattern, or 'praying the Daily Office' as some Christians call it, may be unfamiliar to some of us. People who pray in this way often say they find a freedom within it, beyond the words they repeat daily.

However, for some people, daily prayer is a more haphazard occupation. For them the notion of organised daily prayer, with its set pattern and familiar words at a certain time of day may just not work. Indeed the very thought may bring out a sense of guilt and defensiveness. So it is important to recognise that it is also alright not to have a set routine or pattern. Although this resource is about encouraging people to explore and try out some form of daily prayer it should not be seen as mandating any specific prayer practice. Try it if you would like to. Try not to impose it on others. When working together encourage and support each other rather than discourage and undermine others for whom this may seem a daunting prospect or one that does not engage with their spirituality.

Praying the office first became important in Christianity with the rise of monasticism. A daily pattern developed where monks alternated periods of prayer with time for study and manual labour. These prayers, or 'offices', take place during the night (Matins), at dawn (Lauds), and every three hours during the day (Prime, Terce, Sext, None and Vespers) finishing with Compline at night. They draw heavily on the psalms, with other readings and hymns.

At the Reformation, when the new Church of England's closed monasteries, the focus shifted to morning and evening prayer. Today, a variety of forms of morning and evening prayer are used – in local congregations, religious houses and newer bodies like the Iona Community. These forms are intended for daily use by small groups or people on their own.

Freedom comes when the prayer starts to be so familiar that it's possible to relax into it. There's often a liberating sense of returning to a well known place with God each time the prayer happens. That familiarity can be a lifeline at times when prayer feels difficult.

Having set readings also helps. Sometimes these coincide with our mood but they may not. At its best, this helps to draw us into a deeper place, recognising that God is not confined to where we are on our journey.

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People who regularly pray a particular office often find that it deepens their sense of connection with others who also use it. To borrow a form of daily prayer from another denomination can be a positive piece of ecumenism. You could also use the 'Daily Worship' service, with prayers and readings based on the Lord's Prayer, in 'Worship: from the United Reformed Church' (URC: 2003) or the simple form of daily prayer on the Vision4life website. Many other daily prayer resources are available. Like any other form of prayer, the daily prayer can become unhealthy if it becomes rigid, or is seen as the only way to pray. But if you have not tried it before now is a good time to begin.

Think about...

Think about the story at the beginning of this document, either alone or discuss it in a small group.

What did it feel like to be the story-teller?

What do we learn about Rachel and her experience of prayer?

Is this the experience you have of daily prayer?

Let me tell you another...

I'm not very good at clearing space in the day for prayer. I know I ought to but I just get caught up in other things. Sitting down at the computer first thing in the morning to pick up emails is the way I get caught. Before I know it, the only quite space in the day when the 'phone is not likely to ring has gone.

That's why I've developed this habit of imagining Jesus with me in the car when I'm driving to work. He sits by me in the passenger seat and I can talk to him about what happened yesterday, what's due to happen today, how I'm feeling and what's bugging me or making me buzz with excitement. I expect it sounds a bit odd, but ever since I did a prayer exercise some years ago in which we had to imagine a conversation with Jesus, I've found it quite easy to picture him with me here and now if I put my mind to it and so this is how I do my daily prayer these days.

A few months ago, I was in the middle of the drive to work and I was really deep in thought. I had Jesus sitting there by me, in my imagination, as the car approached a blind bend. It felt as though Jesus was warning me to concentrate on the road. Whatever the reason, I slowed down though there was nothing in the way that I could see.

A few seconds later my car rounded the bend and I was faced with a couple of sheep standing in the middle of the road – a ewe and her lamb. Coincidence or Godincidence? You decide.

Think about...

Think about this story. How does this storyteller feel about daily prayer?

How do you relate to the idea of 'talking to Jesus as if he's sitting in the passenger seat'?

Do you think the story is a co-incidence or a God-incidence? Why?

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PRAYER CHALLENGE

Perhaps you already pray daily in this way. You may want to take this opportunity to review your daily prayer and change or add something to your usual way of praying.

For those of you who would like to commence a pattern of daily prayer begin by committing yourself to praying daily for one month. Choose a time and pattern that you think you will be able to sustain for that time.

If you have not done so before it may help to find someone else who either already does this or also wants to try as a supporter and see if you can help each other by sharing your experiences. You might find that keeping a prayer journal is another way of encouraging persistence with a pattern of daily prayer (see booklet for suggestions about this).

Prayer

A simple pattern of daily prayer is available on the accompanying document "A Simple Pattern"

EVALUATION

Please try to answer these questions for yourself and for others who will use this material:

1. What was the most helpful thing?
2. What was the least helpful thing?
3. What would you like to try now?

THE NEXT STEP

If you want more toolkit items please revisit the website. Seasonal items are also available there.

Acknowledgements

This piece of prayer toolkit has been contributed to by several people: thanks to them for their efforts.