

Prayer tool kit

Praying with the Bible

AIMS

To explore some ways of praying with the Bible

Let me tell you

On Monday morning most weeks of the year, I look up the lectionary readings for the following Sunday. These will usually form the basis of the worship I will lead. Very often I use the list in the prayer handbook but if I can't find that then I'll look them up on line. I will read each one through carefully pausing in between. I will ask God to help me discern how to use these readings in the preparation of the worship. In due course I will try to explore what the readings are about and I might look some background stuff up in other books or on the web. But whatever I do I will keep returning to these passages during the week at different times, trying to get into them and get them into me and allowing God to direct my thoughts about them.

INTRODUCTION

There are many ways of reading the Bible prayerfully. This happens when we open the Bible, find a safe space that suits our mood, and consider the words in a reflective, prayerful way. Depending on our mood or on the themes that are pressing on our lives at a particular moment, these times of prayer can be very lively or deeply peaceful.

There is no right or wrong way to pray with the Bible. Here are two of the many approaches that have been practiced and adapted for centuries.

Lectio Divina (divine or sacred reading)

This is a way of reading the scriptures prayerfully in a sequence of four movements. Having read a passage from scripture, you ponder or reflect on the reading, respond to God in prayer and finally contemplate or pray in God's presence.

To begin this practice, take a familiar text such as Psalm 23, the opening of John's gospel, or one of your favourite parables. Offer a short prayer that you will be receptive, pure hearted and able to be enlightened by God. For example:

'O God, open my mind and heart to these words and let me listen to you'

Then read the passage carefully with an open, silent, searching and longing heart. It may help to think of the risen Jesus alongside you as you read and try to have your heart fixed on him.

Keep reading carefully until a sentence or a passage seems to speak to you. This could be a few words, a phrase or a sentence that puzzles you or connects with something recent in your life, or it could be the compulsion to read the whole passage again anew, or it could be a more dramatic sense of 'see it in a fresh light'.

Give time for your thoughts and reflections to take hold in your mind and follow them through.

As you think and pray about what you're reading, let the text feed you. Don't try to analyse the text so much. Rather let yourself day-dream the text. If you find yourself distracted unhelpfully, then return to the text gently, reading it again but without feeling guilty.

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When it's time to move on, your heart will grow restless. Trust God to prompt your heart, for God is in charge of the operation, not you. You may choose to read the whole text again or just a part of it.

At this point you may want to note down some key words or phrases that come to you, or draw a picture that represents your reflections. It's good to do this in a notebook or your journal, keeping a record of the text and the date so you can look back on it later.

Don't worry if there are increasing numbers of days when there is nothing to write or draw. Sometimes a person is more content with silence and there is less to write. Other people find the drawing or writing helpful.

Finally, turn your attention towards God, naming your thoughts or reflections in prayer. Allow your prayer to deepen, as you listen for promptings from the Holy Spirit on the meaning of this passage for you today. Note down any words or phrases that come to you.

Initially, try spending 10 minutes in this way. Gradually see if you want to increase the time you spend on this. It will help if you can do it regularly: daily or weekly perhaps. Choose a length of time which is possible without making your life too hectic. If it is new to you find a prayer partner who either does this already or who also want to try it as it can be helpful and supportive to know someone else who is on the journey with you, even if you do it alone at different times. Make an opportunity to talk about your experiences to each other if this seems appropriate in a way that is open and accepting.

You might work your way through a particular book, or theme in the Bible. Notice the stages on your journey and try to apply what you have learned from the text to your own life: your relationships, work and responsibilities.

Guided Meditation

Choose a story or passage from scripture, either from the weekly readings in the lectionary or from your own selection. Find a safe space that suits your mood: sitting outdoors, by a fire or in front of a candle.

Spend a minute or two quietening yourself as you become aware of your surroundings, your body and the sounds around you.

Read the passage once and then read it a second time.

Ask 'I wonder' questions as you go over the passage a third time in your mind's eye – 'I wonder what it would be like to be that character in the story', 'I wonder how the crowd felt at that moment', 'I wonder what another meaning of that word could be.'

Spend some minutes in prayer and silence. Allow images and questions from your reading and reflection to join you in your prayer. Read the passage one final time. Rest.

Prayer

God of the Word, bless my reading of the Bible

God beyond words, bless my meditation.

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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 items from the toolkit please revisit the website. You will also find seasonal material on the website reflecting different ways of praying linked to different times of the year.