

Welcome to worship. The theme of this service today is 'Prayer'. Where there are words in bold type for 2 of the prayers you are invited to pray those words.

Call to Worship: Psalm 34: O taste and see that the Lord is good; happy are they who take refuge in God.

Prayer of Thanksgiving

O taste and see how good God is!

We hunger to be in God's gracious presence.

Listen for God's promises to you.

We call out to our God, and we are heard: lives are made new, hope is restored.

Raise your hearts and voices in thanksgiving to God.

Glad songs of joy and praise will always be on our lips!

In the silence of chaos, you serenely stood, Almighty God.

Then, with that singular Word, craters were filled with water, meadows rippled with crops;
with your Breath exhaled, life flowed through all creation, the heavens sparkled with your hope. You sent Jesus into our lives.

So, with those who shout out your name,
and with those who whisper of your wonder,
with our sisters and brothers in every time and place,
we sing our praises to you.

STF 55 Immortal invisible <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zd0FyrzVUCM>

<p>1 Immortal, invisible, God only wise, in light inaccessible hid from our eyes, most blessèd, most glorious, the Ancient of Days, almighty, victorious, thy great name we praise.</p> <p>2 Unresting, unhasting, and silent as light, nor wanting, nor wasting, thou rulest in might — thy justice like mountains high soaring above thy clouds which are fountains of goodness and love.</p> <p>3 To all life thou givest, to both great and small ; in all life thou livest, the true life of all ; we blossom and flourish as leaves on the tree, and wither and perish ; but naught changeth thee.</p>	<p>4 Great Father of glory, pure Father of light, thine angels adore thee, all veiling their sight ; all praise we would render : O help us to see 'tis only the splendour of light hideth thee.</p> <p>5 Immortal, invisible, God only wise, in light inaccessible hid from our eyes, most blessèd, most glorious, the Ancient of Days, almighty, victorious, thy great name we praise.</p> <p>Walter Chalmers Smith (1824–1908)</p>
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We pray together the Prayer of confession: **Gracious and holy God, we admit that it is easier to have pain-causing words on our lips, than praise for another. Our foolishness often keeps us from seeing the deep hurts and hunger of the suffering who are around us. We stand by the side of the road, afraid to step forward in faith, afraid to trust that you are with us, afraid to cry out for healing and hope.**

We are not people who repent in ashes and dust, but we do know we need your mercy, and ask that you forgive our faithlessness, our fears, our hurts. Healer of all people, we lift our hearts and souls to you, that through Jesus Christ, our Lord and Saviour, we might find your grace, discover your love, and serve your people in your name.

Silence is kept

Take heart: God hears your prayers. See: God has healed your brokenness. Listen: God calls to you with hope, with forgiveness, with life.

Now, our eyes are opened and we can see; now, our ears are opened and we can hear; now, we can follow Christ into the kingdom. Thanks be to God, we are forgiven. Amen.

Luke 18: 1 – 8 Then Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up. He said: “In a certain town there was a judge who neither feared God nor cared what people thought. And there was a widow in that town who kept coming to him with the plea, ‘Grant me justice against my adversary.’ “For some time he refused. But finally he said to himself, ‘Even though I don’t fear God or care what people think, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will see that she gets justice, so that she won’t eventually come and attack me!’” And the Lord said, “Listen to what the unjust judge says. And will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off? I tell you, he will see that they get justice, and quickly. However, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?”

1 Thess 5: 16-19 Rejoice always, ¹⁷ pray continually, ¹⁸ give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus. ¹⁹ Do not quench the Spirit

STF 518 Father hear the prayer we offer <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CFoactKMJHQ>

<p>1 Father, hear the prayer we offer : not for ease that prayer shall be, but for strength that we may ever live our lives courageously.</p> <p>2 Not for ever in green pastures do we ask our way to be ; but the steep and rugged pathway may we tread rejoicingly.</p>	<p>3 Not for ever by still waters would we idly rest and stay ; but would strike the living fountains from the rocks along our way.</p> <p>4 Be our strength in hours of weakness, in our wanderings be our guide ; through endeavour, failure, danger, Father, be there at our side.</p> <p>Love Maria Willis (1824–1908)</p>
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Sermon: Paul in his letter to the believers at Thessalonica encourages us to Pray without ceasing (never stop praying) – how on earth do we do that?

Prayer is something most people find difficult, that doesn't always come naturally.

Most of us learn prayer through words; taught when we were little (now I lay me down to sleep I pray the lord my soul to keep; the Lord's Prayer). In church we learn to pray in words, through listening to the leading of the preacher.

As you have travelled your own Christian Journey you will have learnt that Prayer is much more than words; if I can put it this way..... if you are serious about wanting to pray it can become a new language, one without a dependence on words, encompassing a way of living and of being in closeness with God. A language of the heart, a language of love; a language of blessing.

And like learning any new language, new way of communication, it doesn't happen overnight, it takes practise; As Brother Lawrence put it "practising the presence of God".

A healthy prayer life is less about understanding with your mind and more about experiencing God with your heart. This morning I want us to consider prayer and how to live it; how to get closer to St Pauls' words "Pray without ceasing". And to do that I am going to look at the Practicalities - to look at what Prayer is **Not Just**, in order to discover what prayer **IS**:

1. **NOT just** words Certainly we need words when we are with other people, so that we can all be praying the same thing, and of course we use the prayer that Jesus taught us, being aware of the challenge in those words: God's kingdom come, God's will be done.... We forgive those who sin against us. But prayer is More than words. We need silences too. We may need utterances from God's Holy Spirit.

2. Prayer is **Not just** going off into a room by ourselves, as Jesus says we should. And it is not **Not just** praying in church.

Unfortunately our culture has a heritage of being one thing on a Sunday in church and another in the outside world. Perhaps the ideal of who have been the best "pray-ers" are those monks who in medieval days spent much time in prayer but who also were also at the centre of the economy, running farms, being at the heart of education and health. Monks were good Pray-ers because they were deeply connected to their culture, to the needs of the people around them.

Perhaps I should use a more modern example. The community of Iona is steeped in quietness and prayer, and through that prayer they also have a ministry of hospitality and healing.

So though Jesus does say in Matthew's gospel "pray in private in your rooms" Jesus also says that people should pray together to "Our Father" ... a communal prayer - "our" not "my". Our Father, Our life, our community. Prayer, including The Lord's Prayer, involves living what we say, involves justice and charity; putting words into action.

3. Prayer is **NOT** causing God to change by our requests. That's a hard one to think about. Prayer is not designed to tell God what to do, or to change God's mind. It's not a quick-fix pill. But through Jesus Christ and his sacrifice and resurrection we are in a covenant relationship with God and that

covenantal relationship means that neither God nor humanity can reach their goal without the other. For God's Kingdom to come on earth, we have our part to do; through prayer to discern God's will.

I heard a fictional story about a man who took over a cottage that had been left abandoned for 8 years and the garden was overgrown, thistles 5 feet high. This man cleared out all the weeds, dug it over, planted vegetables and flowers and it was beautiful. The local vicar walked by one day, leant over the fence and said "How amazing it is to see how we can work together with God to produce such beauty". And the man replied, "God didn't make much of it on his own". Cheeky tale. But it does highlight the need for us to work **with** God.

4. And of course you all know that Prayer is **Not just** a one-way conversation... with us doing all the talking to God. But so often we use prayer like a shopping list don't we. We all do it. I am reminded of a silly story of 2 young brothers who went to stay with grandma and come bedtime one of the brothers was saying his prayers: "Please God send me a bicycle and a pair of roller skates". His brother said: "Not so loud, God isn't deaf", to which the reply came: "Yes I know God isn't deaf, but Grandma is!" Prayer is a 2-way conversation. God wanting to talk to us, God wanting us to listen. To Listen. An Anagram of LISTEN is SILENT. Keeping silent before God is often hard... but perhaps we have learnt to do it more during the Covid experience.
5. Last point: prayer is **Not Just** an exceptional, mystical experience for the elite, for the saints. Some people do of course have mystical experiences, but that's not the whole of prayer. That's like saying that football is sports. Yes, football is a part of sports, but it's not all sports. So mystical experiences and exceptional experiences are not the sum total of prayer, but just one small aspect of it. Prayer is for everyone... it's not just a special thing for some.

That was a précis of 5 things that prayer is 'not just'. There is so much to prayer. Prayer can be all these things put together, but mainly prayer is part of living and being.

1. Prayer is not just words, but a way of living out those words in love in charity
2. Prayer is not just something we do in a room by ourselves but which involves being part of the community
3. Prayer is not telling God what to do but of opening ourselves up to God's will
4. ...is listening rather than talking too much
5. So that prayer becomes not an exceptional mystical experience but prayer becomes a way of being with God, of communicating with God.

Prayer in its variety of forms requires practise. Like learning a new language, a new way of communication, we need to practise it for it to become instinctive and more natural to us. In the Thessalonians passage, although Paul encouraged us to 'Pray Without Ceasing', I invite you in my next video to practice a prayer that will only take 4 minutes! But first we shall sing again.....

STF 675 Because the Saviour prayed that we be one

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<p>1 Because the Saviour prayed that we be one and taught his friends to say, 'Your will be done,' we sense God's call as in God's sight we dare commit ourselves in answer to Christ's prayer.</p> <p>2 Our narrow loyalties have had their day — these separate ways, demeaning Christ the Way ; we own the sorry scars that paved the past, yet gladly seek the road God made to last.</p> <p>3 We are our Saviour's body, Christ the head, first born of God, first risen from the dead. Dismembered, we debase his holy will ; united, his intention we fulfil.</p>	<p>4 So guide us, Lord, and take us by the hand, and show us how to love and understand ; reveal, within the differences we share, the pattern of your glory, grace and care.</p> <p>5 And when our journey here has reached its end and strangers are the pilgrims you intend, may we, with gratitude for all you've given, enjoy you in the harmony of heaven.</p> <p>John L. Bell (<i>b.</i> 1949)</p>
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Sermon part 2.

I am going to lead you in a prayer which should only take about 4 minutes, and each minute is broken down in a particular way... and it is a prayer which you can do anytime / anywhere on your own.

So let us pray...

For the first minute of these 4 minutes consider this

“Nobody stands looking at the view from the edge of the Grand Canyon or at the Niagara or the Victoria Falls and says ‘Aren’t I something’”

Nobody stands at a place of overwhelming beauty and says: “Aren’t I special”

Close your eyes and think of a place or time in your life when you saw something that transported you to realise the awesomeness of God; for you it could have been an experience of art or music, of the wonderful outdoors.... Take yourself back there and abandon yourself to God’s awesomeness and Holiness...in your imagination putting yourself in that place which creates awe/wonder/peace in you and just spend a minute being there in your imagination.

2nd minute: Let us move on and admit to God just how you feel today: be honest with God. Don’t try to be holy, but be real in order to have a real relationship with God. In this second minute tell God how you feel.

3rd minute: Don’t ask anything of God yet. Wait. God may bring something into your mind. It may be something you need forgiving. It may be some action for you to take. It may be someone you need to offer love to. It may simply be a message of love from God to you.

4th minute: Continue being in God's presence and wait, stay within God's loving. Possibly there is something you wish to ask God or say to God in your mind.... Do that now and see how God answers you.

And now hear my words and join in with them in your hearts: *Lord God thank you that you love each one of us totally and unconditionally. Help us to continue to journey with you through our lives, to remember to spend time in prayer with you as we wait upon your personal guidance, and finally touch our hearts with your love, joy and peace. AMEN*

Let us pray together the words from hymn 719 below:

PRAYER OF INTERCESSION = STF 719

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<p>1 We pray for peace, but not the easy peace built on complacency and not the truth of God. We pray for real peace, the peace God's love alone can seal.</p> <p>2 We pray for peace, but not the cruel peace leaving God's poor bereft and dying in distress ; we pray for real peace, enriching all the human race.</p> <p>3 We pray for peace, and not the evil peace defending unjust laws and nursing prejudice, but for the real peace of justice, mercy, truth and love.</p>	<p>4 We pray for peace : holy communion with Christ our risen Lord and every living thing ; God's will fulfilled on earth and all creation reconciled.</p> <p>5 We pray for peace, and, for the sake of peace, look to the risen Christ, who gives the grace we need to serve the cause of peace and make our own self-sacrifice.</p> <p>6 God, give us peace ; if you withdraw your love there is no peace for us, nor any hope of it. With you to lead us on, through death or tumult, peace will come.</p> <p>Alan Gaunt (b. 1935)</p>
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And we join together to pray the prayer taught by Jesus - *Our Father who art in heaven.....*

STF 610 Best of All

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<p>1 Best of all is God is with us, God will hold and never fail. Keep that truth when storms are raging, God remains though faith is frail.</p> <p>2 Best of all is God is with us, life goes on and needs are met, God is strongest in our weakness. Love renews, will not forget.</p> <p>3 Best of all is God is with us, hearts are challenged, strangely warmed, faith is deepened, courage strengthened, grace received and hope reformed.</p>	<p>4 Best of all is God is with us, in our joy and through our pain, till that final acclamation : 'life is Christ, and death is gain.'</p> <p>5 Best of all is God is with us as we scale eternal heights, love grows stronger, undiminished ; earth grows dim by heaven's lights.</p> <p>Andrew Pratt (b. 1948) Based on John Wesley's final words.</p>
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BLESSING: Gregory of Nazianus 4th century *God beyond all speech, above all thought and surpassing all imagination; when you speak, may we listen; when you draw near, may we rejoice in our presence; when you reveal yourself may we bow in adoration. Amen*