



Once we settle to pray, it is good to become aware of our regular and gentle breathing becoming for us a kind of rhythm, allowing focus and drawing ourselves back once distractions come. Remember that the book of Genesis tells us that God breathed over the chaos to create the world, and the Gospel of St John tells us that Jesus breathed over the apostles at Pentecost to give them the gift of the Holy Spirit. There are also significant health benefits to be gained from a period of slow deep breathing, including lowering of the pulse rate and blood pressure, reduction of stress and increased lung capacity.

It is hard work to “Be still and know that I am God”; but with a bit of effort and a few practical considerations we can offer ourselves a good chance of encountering the Lord. It might not be by the lakeside, but we will find him and, like Peter, there will be the opportunity for us to confess our faith in him.

Paul Maddison is a priest of the Diocese of East Anglia and a fellow traveller on the road of Christian perfection. He has recently set up an online spiritual direction service, which can be found at www.divinethread.org

Mass text

ENTRANCE ANTIPHON

**Cry out with joy to God, all the earth;
O sing to the glory of his name.
O render him glorious praise, alleluia.**

FIRST READING **Acts 5:27-32. 40-41**

PSALM **Psalms 29**

RESPONSE **I will praise you, Lord,
you have rescued me.**

Or **Alleluia!**

1. I will praise you, Lord, you have rescued me and have not let my enemies rejoice over me.
O Lord, you have raised my soul from the dead, restored me to life from those who sink into the grave. **R.**
2. Sing psalms to the Lord, you who love him, give thanks to his holy name.
His anger lasts but a moment; his favour through life.
At night there are tears, but joy comes with dawn. **R.**

3. The Lord listened and had pity.
The Lord came to my help.
For me you have changed my mourning into dancing;
O Lord my God, I will thank you for ever. **R.**

SECOND READING **Apocalypse 5:11-14**

GOSPEL ACCLAMATION

**Alleluia, alleluia!
Lord Jesus, explain the scriptures to us.
Make our hearts burn within us
as you talk to us.
Alleluia!**

GOSPEL **John 21:1-19**

COMMUNION ANTIPHON

**Jesus said to his disciples: Come and eat.
And he took bread and gave it to them,
alleluia.**

Next Sunday's Readings:

Acts 13:14. 43-52
Apocalypse 7:9. 14-17
John 10:27-30

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THE PLACE OF PRAYER

While we can pray at all times and in all places, if we wish to cultivate the habit of spending time in deep prayer, one of the first things we have to admit is our weakness. Distractions of any kind, sometimes inspired by the devil, can attempt to pull us away in so many different directions. To help overcome the disruptions there are a few things we can do.

One of the first is to acknowledge that the physical space in which we pray is important: it is one of the reasons we have churches and chapels. However, when we want to settle to serious prayer in our own homes it is important to identify a place where we pray and to return to this place much like a bird to the nest. Very few of us can find ourselves in the prayerful atmosphere of dawn by the lakeside, as in today's Gospel. It might be that we have a spare bedroom we can use; or maybe, if everyone else is out of the house, we can use the sitting room – what is important is to find a place that is not filled with too many distractions and where we know we will not be disturbed.

Once that place has been identified some people like to have an icon, statue or picture providing a means of focus. There is no right or wrong way to pray – we are all unique and so is our prayer. The golden rule is: if it helps you to pray, use it. If you want to use a candle, make sure it is safe and never leave it unattended.

Our posture, too, is vital if we are to pray without the interruption of being uncomfortable. If you were to ask, I might suggest that sitting is normally the best position to adopt for prayer; kneeling is usually reserved for adoration. A chair that is not too comfortable, risking us falling asleep, a dining room or kitchen chair with a straight back support is usually best. Sit in the chair so that the back is supported and with feet placed flat on the floor. The secret is to feel comfortable enough not to be distracted by your body but not too comfortable so that you drift off! In Italy, there's a very consoling phrase: If you fall asleep saying your prayers, worry not – the angels finish them off for you. Many people are not sure what to do with their hands; the best advice is either to place them palms down above your knees, or to lay them in your lap.

Divine Thread



We continue this Easter series on prayer with Fr Paul Maddison.



1 MAY 2022

3RD SUNDAY OF EASTER

YEAR C

DIVINE OFFICE WEEK III

be too hard on ourselves; we gently bring ourselves back from things drawing us away from our primary purpose which is to “be still and know that I am God”.



REGULARITY

Regularity is the most important thing when trying to pray. Even if we find our prayer time has been filled with distraction and disappointment, we should be consoled that we have given that time – along with our honest desire to pray – to the Lord. The offering we have made to the Lord does not have to measure up to our standards; the Lord sees what is in our hearts. Make a commitment and try to stick to it. Yes, there will be days when all does not go quite to plan, but there will be other days when we find ourselves in a wonderfully enriching time of communing with the Divine.

Many spiritual writers talk about developing a habit of prayer; making the effort to develop such a routine will be well worth it.

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Mass text

ENTRANCE ANTIPHON

The merciful love of the Lord fills the earth; by the word of the Lord the heavens were made, alleluia.

FIRST READING Acts 13:14. 43-52

PSALM Psalm 99

RESPONSE We are his people, the sheep of his flock.

Or **Alleluia!**

- 1. Cry out with joy to the Lord, all the earth. Serve the Lord with gladness. Come before him, singing for joy. R.**
- 2. Know that he, the Lord, is God. He made us, we belong to him, we are his people, the sheep of his flock. R.**
- 3. Indeed, how good is the Lord, eternal his merciful love. He is faithful from age to age. R.**

SECOND READING **Apocalypse 7:9. 14-17**

GOSPEL ACCLAMATION

**Alleluia, alleluia!
I am the good shepherd, says the Lord;
I know my own sheep and my own know me.
Alleluia!**

GOSPEL **John 10:27-30**

COMMUNION ANTIPHON

**The Good Shepherd has risen,
who laid down his life for his sheep
and willingly died for his flock, alleluia.**

Next Sunday's Readings:

Acts 14:21-27
Apocalypse 21:1-5
John 13:31-35

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AN ATTITUDE OF PRAYER

Admitting our weakness and humanity is a prerequisite for prayer. To overcome this fragility it is valuable to commit to regularity in prayer, even down to trying to pray at the same time each day – try using the alarm on your phone. The devil will help us to find all sorts of reasons and excuses not to pray, but to get into the habit of praying is a great opportunity to kick that distraction into touch. If we truly want to follow the Lord, we do need to give ourselves space in which we can hear his voice. Many people find that first thing in the morning works for them, maybe before anyone else is up and about, and before the bustle of the day begins. Some people find that last thing at night works for them. Choose the most appropriate time for you and try to stick to it: if the time you initially choose proves to be difficult, then change to a different time; prayer should not become a burden or task.

A common question is the length of time we should spend in prayer. Again, there are no hard and fast rules here, it depends on what works for each of us. Sometimes we use the excuse of being busy to shorten our prayer time; Charles Wesley, the great Methodist preacher, knowing his day would be particularly busy, would get up an hour earlier and pray for a longer period than usual to support his busy day. Praying is not an exam, a race, or an endurance test; the regularity and depth of our prayer should be our focus. Much like an athlete in training, the benefits come from the consistency and power of our prayer, not the length of time spent on the exercise. We should be gentle on ourselves at first but stick to our commitment. Delia Smith, the cook and spiritual writer, started out by praying for ten minutes each day and used an egg timer to alert her when the time was up, so she did not have to keep peeping at her watch.

As in any important task we undertake, focus is important when we are trying to pray. Distractions will come, but if there is something to draw us gently back to what we are doing, it can be extremely helpful. Use a word or phrase repeated with each breath, a picture, an object, even something in the hand; accept that it will be a while until we are able to completely still ourselves. St Augustine reminds us that the desire to pray is itself a prayer. Some find that a piece of gentle music can be extremely valuable in helping them to pray. When we get sidetracked, we should not

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8 MAY 2022

4TH SUNDAY OF EASTER

YEAR C

DIVINE OFFICE WEEK IV



God's love appears to slip momentarily behind a cloud. Again, ask what that more difficult element of this recollection is drawing us to focus on.

Still in silence and stillness, give an opportunity for God to speak: maybe God is whispering an invitation to do something; perhaps God is providing the power of support, maybe offering understanding; perhaps God is silent, waiting for another moment in which to respond. Gently returning to the present moment it is always good to conclude with a short period of thanks and gratitude.

Experiencing the power of God's love, working unexpectedly in the lives of each us, can be a powerful way of learning that we are loved and have capacity to love others. Prayer plays a significant role in helping us to see how powerful the love of God in our poor earthenware vessels is; it also helps to sustain us when the going is tough and empower us for the challenge of loving others as we ourselves are loved by God.

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Mass text

ENTRANCE ANTIPHON

O sing a new song to the Lord, for he has worked wonders; in the sight of the nations he has shown his deliverance, alleluia.

FIRST READING Acts 14:21-27

PSALM Psalm 144

RESPONSE I will bless your name for ever, O God my King.

Or Alleluia!

- 1. The Lord is kind and full of compassion, slow to anger, abounding in love. How good is the Lord to all, compassionate to all his creatures. R.**
- 2. All your creatures shall thank you, O Lord, and your friends shall repeat their blessing. They shall speak of the glory of your reign and declare your might, O God, to make known to men your mighty deeds and the glorious splendour of your reign. R.**

3. Yours is an everlasting kingdom; your rule lasts from age to age. R.

SECOND READING Apocalypse 21:1-5

GOSPEL ACCLAMATION

Alleluia, alleluia!
Jesus said: "I give you a new commandment: love one another, just as I have loved you."
Alleluia!

GOSPEL John 13:31-35

COMMUNION ANTIPHON

I am the true vine and you are the branches, says the Lord. Whoever remains in me, and I in him, bears fruit in plenty, alleluia.

Next Sunday's Readings:
 Acts 15:1-2. 22-29
 Apocalypse 21:10-14. 22-23
 John 14:23-29

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FOCUS IN PRAYER

Loving one another is both a characteristic and an objective of fulfilling our Christian vocation. The "new commandment" of love requires us to come to terms with all that stands in the way of love in our lives: our prejudices, our pride, our pain. Any attempt to love others will struggle unless we bring to prayer both the times God's love has been evident in our lives and the times when we have felt its absence.

We can labour under the illusion that prayer is a warm, fluffy experience where peace and contentment abound. Often prayer is not only hard work, but can also invite us to address areas of our lives where we are in need: of healing, strengthening or challenging. It takes courage to bring to our prayer episodes in our lives where we have felt far from content or satisfied. Honest prayer is not for the faint-hearted but can be useful as a way of allowing the love of God to penetrate the darker corners of our lives and transform us into more effective vessels of God's love. We can also use moments of significant joy and beauty to encourage us; recalling moments in our lives where we have felt the presence of God's power, such moments often show us that we are loved and are truly capable of loving others.

A good focus in prayer is to ask the Spirit to help in remembering a significant moment in our life in order that we might see, hear, feel and taste that moment again in our mind and body. Always choose the experience to return to with care: it does not have to be a warm and beautiful one; it could be an experience that left us feeling sad or angry, but remember that experiences of trauma are best returned to in the company of appropriate professionals who can provide support through the process.

Sitting comfortably and quietly, it is good to become present to ourselves and to the gift of the Spirit. Looking back at the moment we have chosen, we allow our mind to relive that time, as if we were watching a video. Sometimes it is good to run through the event a few times in our mind, then identify a particular moment during the event where the love of God gave a sense of being really alive; remember what was going on, who else was there; experience the moment again with all the power of memory. Ask what that particular memory is teaching us now, anew.

It can be useful, if one feels strong enough, to repeat the exercise and focus on a particular moment during the event where we felt least alive. Again remember how it felt when the love of God was not at the forefront of our mind; it can be painful to recall such moments but we know that Jesus has experienced betrayal and abandonment before us, and these moments are only where

Divine Thread



We continue this Easter series on prayer with Fr Paul Maddison.



15 MAY 2022

5TH SUNDAY OF EASTER

YEAR C

DIVINE OFFICE WEEK I



laborious or artificial, but with time it will become second nature and a refuge from the chattering of the mind. The third element to calming can be our breathing. It is no accident that the gift of peace bestowed in the Gospel is intimately linked with the breath of Jesus Christ. As we begin to pray, allow that awareness of breathing to combine with the chosen word or phrase – the aim is to “breathe” the prayer word, letting it rhythmically come into and out of our body. When distractions come, again just gently return to the breathing and the prayer word. What is being cultivated is a gentle return to the present moment, away from the distractions and interruptions; with practice this will bring a stillness and a peace that will quieten our mind and heart.

Initially in any form of prayer there is some uncomfortable self-consciousness; while we might feel a little awkward, this is common and will soon disappear with practice. Discovering the wisdom of breath can be a great refuge and source of mental calm and there are acknowledged benefits of abdominal breathing that contribute to health and wholeness. Involving our whole body and being in prayer is worth persevering with even if, at the start, it seems artificial or contrived. We can start by giving ourselves plenty of time to develop the habit, maybe fifteen to twenty minutes to start with; then, once we feel confident, lengthen the amount of time to suit us and our lifestyle.

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Mass text

ENTRANCE ANTIPHON

Proclaim a joyful sound and let it be heard; proclaim to the ends of the earth: The Lord has freed his people, alleluia.

FIRST READING **Acts 15:1-2. 22-29**

PSALM **Psalm 66**

RESPONSE **Let the peoples praise you, O God; let all the peoples praise you.**

Or **Alleluia!**

- 1. O God, be gracious and bless us and let your face shed its light upon us. So will your ways be known upon earth and all nations learn your saving help. R.**
- 2. Let the nations be glad and exult for you rule the world with justice. With fairness you rule the peoples, you guide the nations on earth. R.**
- 3. Let the peoples praise you, O God; let all the peoples praise you. May God still give us his blessing till the ends of the earth revere him. R.**

SECOND READING **Apocalypse 21:10-14. 22-23**

GOSPEL ACCLAMATION

Alleluia, alleluia!
Jesus said: “If anyone loves me he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we shall come to him.”
Alleluia!

GOSPEL **John 14:23-29**

COMMUNION ANTIPHON

If you love me, keep my commandments, says the Lord, and I will ask the Father and he will send you another Paraclete, to abide with you for ever, alleluia.

Next Sunday's Readings:

Acts 7:55-60
 Apocalypse 22:12-14. 16-17. 20
 John 17:20-26

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DEPTH OF PRAYER

It is easy to forget that prayer is not a “technique”, something to be learned or adopted; it is a loving relationship with the living God. In prayer we discover that we are already immersed in the love that we seek and that the door at which we push is already opened for us. *The Cloud of Unknowing*, written by an unknown author in medieval times, sums up well the aim of our prayer, which is not to attempt definition or dogma, but to commune with the God who is unknowable.

A couple celebrating many years of marriage might well say that they know and love each other at a deep and profound level but are still surprised by the other and there are still more depths of beauty and understanding to be explored. Love never ends, it continues to grow and develop the more it is explored: so it is with God.

Any relationship risks breakdown when communication ceases and with time spent apart it becomes more and more difficult to engage in a meaningful connection. Prayer is a way of gazing into the love that is God and allowing a kind of osmosis where that love pours into our own soul and being.

Three key elements can help us to open ourselves to the grace of God's love in prayer: stillness, focus and breathing. On one level they are obvious and natural but, if used well, they can plough the ground of our being, preparing it for the sowing of the seed that is the love of God. The physical stillness of the body makes a significant contribution to the stillness of the mind. Adopting a posture of prayer that is both comfortable and restful removes the temptation to fidget – and to use that as an excuse to give up. Once our bodies are at peace, we need to attend to our ever-busy minds. Often they can be like a multi-screen cinema with all the films playing at once. At other times they can be limp and uninspiring.

BREATHING

A tried and trusted way of calming the mind has been to give it something to do. A word or short phrase to repeat and focus on slowly brings quiet and stillness, a peace that the world – and all its cares – cannot give. At the start this skill might seem slightly

Divine Thread



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22 MAY 2022

6TH SUNDAY OF EASTER

YEAR C

DIVINE OFFICE WEEK II



also imagine yourself to be someone or something that is not actually mentioned in the story but that you suspect might have been there. Take time to consider what you are doing, thinking, feeling, or what is being done to you or with you if you are an inanimate object. Be aware of the sounds, smells and other details that might not be mentioned in the text. Be aware of the emotions and nuances that come to your mind.

Finally, read the passage for a fourth time, but now experiencing it as the person or object you have chosen. Allow the story to unfold within you, using your imagination, your heart and your mind to open up as the person or object you are. Let your whole being “wander”, as it were, around the scene of the story, soaking up a sense of the atmosphere and the role of the object or person your focus is upon. When ready, allow some time of silence and stillness to draw the experience to a close, remembering to thank God for the experience of this time of prayer. It can be helpful to make a few notes of the experience in a spiritual diary for personal benefit or to share with a spiritual director.

Jesus prayed that as he and the Father are one, we might be one with him. Through the prayerful reading of the scriptures, we can give ourselves the opportunity to become one both with Jesus and with our fellow believers.

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Mass text

ENTRANCE ANTIPHON

O Lord, hear my voice, for I have called to you; of you my heart has spoken: Seek his face; hide not your face from me, alleluia.

FIRST READING **Acts 7:55-60**

PSALM **Psalms 96**

RESPONSE **The Lord is king, most high above all the earth.**

Or **Alleluia!**

1. **The Lord is king, let earth rejoice, the many coastlands be glad. His throne is justice and right. R.**
2. **The skies proclaim his justice; all peoples see his glory. All you spirits, worship him. R.**
3. **For you indeed are the Lord most high above all the earth exalted far above all spirits. R.**

SECOND READING

Apocalypse 22:12-14. 16-17. 20

GOSPEL ACCLAMATION

Alleluia, alleluia!
I will not leave you orphans, says the Lord;
I will come back to you, and your hearts will be full of joy.
Alleluia!

GOSPEL **John 17:20-26**

COMMUNION ANTIPHON

Father, I pray that they may be one as we also are one, alleluia.

Next Sunday's Readings:

Acts 2:1-11
 Romans 8:8-17
 John 14:15-16. 23-26



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METHOD IN PRAYER

St Ignatius of Loyola, who died in 1556, is regarded as one of the most influential players in what became known as the Counter-Reformation. As a founder of the Jesuit order, he gathered round him a group of like-minded intellectuals who saw the need for a reasoned and articulate response to the sometimes-inaccurate claims being levelled at the Catholic Church of the time. What is less well known is that underpinning this work was a scripturally based prayer that helped Ignatius and his followers to become inspired by reflecting on the life of Christ.

Throughout the Gospels we hear Jesus conveying his message through parable, story and sayings; if we think about it, so much of our conversation is based on the telling of a story. What has become known as the Ignatian way of prayer invites us to participate in a scripture story with all our sense and imagination. As we become a participant in the narrative, the story continues in the heart, mind, imagination, spirit and body, even after the telling of the story has ended.

It is important to allow the Holy Spirit to guide the prayer, not forcing anything to happen but allowing the prayer to occur to us, within us, around us. We may well return to the same story for several days in a row before we feel that God has communicated with us and we have come to terms with what that might mean for us.

Firstly, choose a story from scripture to reflect on; while it does not have to come from the Gospels, they are a good place to start. Read the story slowly and reflectively, making a mental note of the outline of what has been read – where and when it took place, who was there, what was happening – allowing a pondering of these questions and reflection on the answers.

Read the passage again, noticing more detail this time, like who else is there and what they are doing; how the characters in the story interact; what is the setting, mood, time of day? As before, try to pause and reflect on your deeper discoveries in the text.

Read the story for a third time, but this time as if you were present in the story; you might choose to be an individual or an object, an animal or part of the scenery. As you read, notice more detail through the individual or item you have chosen to be. You might

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29 MAY 2022

7TH SUNDAY OF EASTER

YEAR C

DIVINE OFFICE WEEK III