

'God ... commands us to pray. Thus it is not possible for us to say, "I shall pray", or "I shall not pray", as if it were an act according to our good pleasure. To be a Christian and to pray are one and the same thing; it is a matter that cannot be left to our caprice. It is a need, a breathing necessary to life.'¹

John Humphries, the television newsreader and self-titled 'failed atheist', writes with great poignancy about the paradoxical place of prayer in his personal life. As a young newspaper reporter in the Welsh Valleys, Humphries stopped attending church because it all seemed meaningless: 'I was bored by the ritualised responses, by priests who seemed to have nothing to say, by my own failure to be genuinely moved by any of it. Yet,' he admits, 'I continued to pray. I prayed every single night without fail for half a century.' As a foreign correspondent he witnessed horrors that provoked him to doubt the existence of God, but still he continued to pray. 'The problem,' he says, and here we have the poignancy, 'was that I had absolutely no notion of the God to whom I was supposed to be praying nor, for that matter, why I was praying.'²

John Humphries is not alone. A recent survey suggested that as many as twenty million people in the UK pray regularly outside of religious contexts and that one person in every six takes time to pray every single day.³ Belief in prayer currently appears undiminished by the decline in Church attendance, and amongst churchgoers we are witnessing a revived commitment to prayer in all its forms. I am forced to this conclusion, in part, by my own involvement in an organisation which began 'accidentally' when a church in Chichester held a month-long prayer vigil in 1999. Many people – especially young people – volunteered to spend one-hour shifts in a dedicated prayer room which ran night-and-day. It was a wonderful experience, but we were very surprised when the idea caught on and the model started to spread. By June 2007 the prayer room in Chichester had been reproduced in 63 nations and many denominations.

RULES OF LIFE

Many praying people would undoubtedly identify with Humphries' agnosticism about prayer, but others are actively seeking answers to the deep questions of 'why' and 'how' to pray. Particularly surprising, perhaps, is the growing number of people from non-liturgical or even non-religious backgrounds who are seeking to deepen their prayer lives by developing a set of principles and practices similar to a simple monastic Rule. Such Rules of Life are increasingly recognised by individuals, communities and even secular programs for personal development, as an effective means of fostering intentional change and growth.



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In 2005 a television series about 21 celibate men living prayerfully according to the Benedictine Rule attracted more than three million viewers and more than 40,000 visitors to Worth Abbey in a single month. Five laymen agreed to spend 40 days with the monks and one of them – Tony Burke, a man who had no religious background – returned home to swap his lucrative work in the pornographic industry for a more ethical job. Perhaps more significantly, he also felt inspired to develop his own equivalent of the Benedictine *ora et labora* – a fixed rhythm of work and prayer – that could fit around his new job in advertising.⁴

Other people are collaborating to develop corporate Rules of prayer. The members of the dispersed Northumbria Community promise to observe the values of availability and vulnerability in the context of a daily prayer-rhythm.⁵ My own Rule of Life is rooted in the eighteenth century Order of the Mustard Seed, which vows to live authentically, relationally and missionally for Christ.⁶ Last year I was invited to visit an intentional community near Leipzig, where 18 people have taken up residence in a semi-derelict school building so as to pray five times a day in the neighbouring Lutheran Church. Inspired by Protestant, Catholic and Celtic monastic traditions, they study the *Lausung* (Daily Text) of the Moravian Church and pray their way systematically through the psalms every month while reaching out to their neighbours.

The founder of this community, Markus Lägél, grew up in the former GDR during the great prayer rallies in Leipzig which gathered up to 300,000 people to intercede for an end to communism in their nation. He remembers tanks patrolling the streets and snipers poised on the rooftops in case the prayer meetings should spark riots. When the Berlin Wall finally came down, one official told a journalist that they had been prepared for any eventuality, 'but not for prayers and not for candles'. Lägél's formative teenage years granted him a regard for prayer as a transformational dynamic in society. 'We are not seeking to be devout in the narrowly pietistic sense of the word,' he says, 'but rather to be radically authentic within the Christian tradition.'

PRAYER IN THE BIBLICAL TRADITIONS

The three great monotheisms fathered by Abraham – Judaism, Christianity and Islam – have always advocated a structured approach to prayer and worship. All three set aside a day of every week for sacred rest. All three divide life into fixed liturgical seasons. They all advocate fasting and pilgrimage. They all pray rhythmically using certain prayers at certain times on certain dates.

The prophet Daniel punctuated his daily round of governmental responsibilities with three fixed times of prayer and, significantly, he did this facing towards Jerusalem. Even the threat of death failed to disrupt these offices because they were intrinsic to his Jewish identity.⁷ For the people of Israel in exile far from their temple, it's quite possible that this rhythm of thrice-daily prayer served as a spiritual, social and perhaps even political expression of solidarity: a defiant assertion of faith in their destiny as the people of God.

Jesus, as a devout Jew, almost certainly kept the thrice-daily offices of prayer practiced by his forefathers. Scott McKnight writes: 'It would have been nearly impossible for Jesus to have been a Jew in the first century, at least a pious Jew, and not have participated in Israel's sacred rhythm of praying.'⁸ Of course, we know from the Gospel accounts that Jesus would also pray at irregular times – frequently rising early or even praying all night – and we are granted an insight into his private discourse with the Father, which was marked by informality and intimacy (Mk 14.36). But such extemporaneous prayer would have supplemented, rather than supplanted, the fixed prayer times centred on the Shema ('Hear O Israel ...') and the Hebrew prayer book, which had formed an integral discipline for Jesus and his contemporaries from childhood.

A faith like ours that is rooted in the Abrahamic tradition and modelled on the historical example of Christ has every reason to embrace strict rhythms and forms of prayer. Early Christianity certainly did so. It was while Peter was observing the Jewish midday prayers that he received his vision of the sheet descending from heaven (Acts 10). Previously, he and John performed their first miracle on their way to the Temple for three o'clock prayers (Acts 3). The Didaché, which is dated by most scholars to the early second century, instructs catechists to recite the Lord's Prayer three times a day.⁹

Phyllis Tickle, whose book *The Divine Hours* has equipped many thousands of people to rediscover such rhythms of prayer, argues that fixed offices were practiced universally until the fall of Rome. Only then were they cloistered away from the laity in monasteries to be maintained by a religious elite. Tickle argues passionately that,

'Little could have been more detrimental, more enervating, to the whole body of Christ on earth than the loss of those diurnal rhythms of praise and thanksgiving by all believers. As a result, and as part of its own emergence and re-configuration, what post-modern, post-denominational, post-Reformation Christianity now calls us to is the reclamation by all Christians of fixed-hour prayer and of the spiritual richness that comes from this most ancient and holy practice.'¹⁰

PRAYER WITH THE 'COMMUNION OF THE SAINTS'

For many members of our increasingly fractured and individualistic society, there is an inherent appeal in traditions which offer a sense of spiritual connectedness with the past, a global, ecumenical connectedness with other Christians in the present, and even an eschatological connectedness with the future. Scot McKnight is an unlikely champion for such ecumenical and liturgical notions, since he describes himself as 'a stubbornly low-church Protestant'. However, he draws a helpful distinction between praying 'in' the Church (by which he means praying extemporaneously in the context of Sunday services and mid-week meetings), and praying 'with' the Church at common times and in common ways so as to identify ourselves with the daily chorus of prayers rising from the worldwide body of Christ. 'Praying with the church,' he writes, 'at fixed times with set prayers can engage the mind, the heart, the soul, and the body – and can be just what prayer was meant to be: the total engagement of the whole church with God.'¹¹ By using the psalms, the Lord's Prayer and the set liturgies of the great Christian traditions at fixed times in the day we may pray, he says, in fellowship with 'the Communion of the saints'; joining in unison with other Christians around the world, but also in harmony with previous generations who have prayed these very words for thousands of years (Heb 12.1).

PRAYER AS A LIVING CONVERSATION

When Jesus gently chided Martha for rushing around busily doing things for him, while her sister Mary 'merely' sat with him at his feet, he insisted that 'only one thing is needed' and 'Mary has chosen what is better' (Lk 10.42). Christians are called back repeatedly to 'be' with Jesus when all our instincts are commanding us to 'do' things for him. Brother Lawrence famously learned to do this 'by an habitual, silent and secret conversation of the soul with God which often causes me joys and raptures inwardly, and sometimes outwardly, so great that I am forced to use means to moderate them.'¹²

How do we learn to live in the constant conversation with God described by Brother Lawrence? How do we 'pray continually' as St Paul urges (1 Thes 5:17)? Every Christian tradition recognises the merit of divine offices to remind us regularly of Christ's presence. The Catholic author Brennan Manning once challenged me to think

differently about prayer: 'Don't view the hour you spend in a prayer room as your time of prayer for the day,' he said, 'The hour you spend in the prayer room is the time in the day when you deliberately re-centre yourself on Christ so that you can pray for the other 23 hours.' This will all seem very obvious to those familiar with contemplative thought, but to a young evangelical, charismatic, nonconformist like me, Brennan's words were revolutionary. The Mennonite theologian (and Benedictine oblate) Arthur P Boers contextualises it like this: 'The Psalms ... confirm that we can know God's presence at all times only if we set aside certain times for prayer. The Jews did not buy into a more current notion that since God is present everywhere and in all times we can pray whenever we feel like it. Rather, they believed that praying regularly at set and specific times helps focus and orient one to God at all other times.'¹³

I am part of a community in Guildford which practices a rhythm of prayer three times a day. The midday prayers are the simplest and perhaps the most appreciated. At noon each day an alarm goes off on my watch, reminding me to stop whatever I'm doing, wherever I am, and simply pray the Lord's Prayer. I do this knowing that I am joining with all the other members of the community wherever they happen to be: with Richard who's an architect in London, with Liz who's a social worker, with Amy who's a student nurse at the local hospital and with many others who are seeking to punctuate their days with remembrances of Jesus.

Of course, there are pitfalls associated with all such Rules. There is the danger of spiritual elitism associated with the appearance of righteousness. There also is the danger of Pharisaic legalism whenever we make our rules the object of faith, or sink into the 'vain repetition' of our prayers (Mt 6.7). Those entering into such Rules will therefore do well to keep before them the words of Étienne de Muret, the eleventh century Abbot of Grandmont Abbey who said, 'No Rule is absolute except the Gospel.'¹⁴

In the conclusion to his poem 'The Four Quartets', TS Eliot describes the mystery of Christian experience as an impossible blending of life's ephemeral 'hints and guesses' with the deliberate actualities of 'prayer, observance, discipline, thought and action'.¹⁵ As we seek to grow in the realm of 'prayer, observance, discipline', we shall encounter Christ even more in the 'hints and guesses', the 'music heard so deeply that it is not heard at all'. The Abbot of Worth Abbey, whose prayerful lifestyle impressed Tony Burke so much, describes this process of prayerful discipline which leads to greater delight, as a 'virtuous circle of awareness': 'Monastic life aims to remind us constantly that God is in our midst and sets up a virtuous circle of awareness to help us do this: pray constantly, in order to have a pure heart, in order to see God everywhere, in order to pray continually.'¹⁶

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Karl Barth, *Prayer and Preaching* (London: SCM Press, 1964), p. 19.
- ² John Humphries, *In God We Doubt: Confessions of a Failed Atheist* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2007), p. 29.
- ³ Tearfund, *Prayer in the UK: A Report to Mark Global Poverty Week 2007*, available at www.tearfund.org
- ⁴ Abbot Christopher Jamison, *Finding Sanctuary* (London: Orion Books, 2006).
- ⁵ Northumbria Community, *Celtic Daily Prayer: Prayers and Readings From the Northumbria Community* (New York: HarperOne, 2002), p. xix.
- ⁶ Peter Greig, *The Vision and the Vow* (Eastbourne: Kingsway, 2004).
- ⁷ Three hundred years before Daniel, the psalmist describes crying out to the Lord 'evening, morning and noon' (Ps 55.17)
- ⁸ Scott McKnight, *Praying With The Church* (Orleans, MA: Paraclete Press, 2006) p.32.
- ⁹ Michael W Holmes, *The Apostolic Fathers, Greek Texts and English Translations* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007).
- ¹⁰ From the foreword to McKnight, *Praying*, p. xi.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 5.
- ¹² Brother Lawrence, *The Practice of the Presence of God and The Spiritual Maxims* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2005), p. 20.
- ¹³ Arthur P Boers, *The Rhythm of God's Grace: Uncovering Morning and Evening Hours of Prayer* (Orleans, MA: Paraclete Press, 2003), p. 33.¹⁴ Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. *Life Together*. New York: Harper & Row, 1954, p. 77.
- ¹⁴ Stephen C Barton (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to the Gospels* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 249.
- ¹⁵ TS Eliot, *Complete Poems and Plays, 1909–1950* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1952), p. 136.
- ¹⁶ Jamison, *Finding Sanctuary*, p. 55.

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