Since the start of this year here at Main Street, we have been thinking about prayer in different ways, beginning with the prayer Jesus taught his friends; the prayer Jesus prayed for us; then we looked at a prayer Paul gave to the church in Philippi; and then last week, we looked at the prayer of confession made by King David in Psalm 51.

Prayer is a massive subject, taking in all of these aspects and more: praise, repentance, intercession, petition, confession. There must be thousands of books written on the subject and -- certainly in my case, and possible it’s your experience too – there have been times in my life when I’ve spent longer *reading* about prayer than getting on and doing it!

So, to begin, what is prayer? Such a huge subject! There is a lot of guilt surrounding prayer; ‘Am I doing it right? Am I doing enough? What is the right way to pray anyway?!’

*An ancient definition of prayer is* ***‘keeping company with God’.***

Pete Greig, the co-founder of 24/7 prayer (heard of it? ‘Prayer Rooms’ which began 20 years ago). He says there are three things important to one’s own prayer life;

**Keep it simple** … *no fancy language that is alien to you, don’t let it become too complicated*

**Keep it real** ... *be honest about how you’re feeling, don’t pretend things are good if they’re not*

**Keep it up** … *keep going – don’t give up!*

*[Pete Greig, How to Pray, p26]*

Paul asked me if I would be happy to talk on the subject of ‘Contemplative Prayer’; a subject dear to my heart – I would probably say it’s the main aspect of my own prayer life. I have led several quiet days around this subject but in those cases people have come along because they are drawn to this aspect of prayer; I’m very aware that you are here because it’s what you do on a Sunday morning and you may or may not feel drawn to the contemplative aspect of prayer. I hope there will be something in what I say that you’ll find helpful.

Let’s start in scripture, that (sometimes!) contentious passage in Luke 10:38-42 where we read the familiar story of what happened when Jesus went to the home of Mary and Martha:

**As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, he came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to him. She had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord’s feet listening to what he said.But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made. She came to him and asked, “Lord, don’t you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!” “Martha, Martha,” the Lord answered, “you are worried and upset about many things, 42but few things are needed—or indeed only one. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her.”**

Much has been spoken, written and preached about this passage. I’m not intending to go into the rights and wrongs of either Mary’s or Martha’s actions, rather I read it for us to see that it illustrates two distinctly different ways to serve God and the ideal is to harness both in our lives.

For the purpose of what I’m saying today we’re considering Mary. She sat at Jesus’ feet and revelled in his presence and this is what I love to do too.

From a relatively young age I was drawn to the contemplative aspect of my faith ... [***Nun story] …*** and in recent years it has become really important to me.

I want to emphasise that this is *my own experience of this type of prayer*; if you’re a ‘contemplative pray-er’ too you may approach it in a very different way. If you google the subject you will get a huge variety of choices to look into, but this is how it works for me.

Again, I want to emphasise that if you’re not a ‘contemplative pray-er’ I am NOT trying to say that this type of prayer is what everybody needs to do, or ‘should’ do; rather it is something I find to be a good way for me to pray. I’m not claiming to be an expert in any way, but am happy to share some of my own experiences and maybe you’ll be encouraged to give some of this a go to see whether it’s something you would like to do too. (Maybe lots of you already do this anyway, forgive me if I’m covering ground you’re already familiar with.)

We read in scripture of Jesus’ example: in Mark 1:35 we read ‘**Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed.’** In Mark chapter 6, verse 31 we read “**Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest.”** And in Matthew 14:13 we see how Jesus, after hearing the news of John the Baptist’s execution, took himself away, **When Jesus heard what had happened, he withdrew by boat privately to a solitary place. Hearing of this, the crowds followed him on foot from the towns.** *Do we see this as a command or an invitation?*

In John chapter 10, verse 10. Jesus says ‘I am come that you will have life, and life in all its fulness’’; I interpret that as being ‘fully human and fully alive, *an abundant life’*.

In her book ‘Lost in Wonder’, Esther de Waal says “If we fail to find the time to stand back, to give ourselves….a breathing space, we are in danger of failing to be fully alive, or to enjoy that fullness of life for which we were created.” [page 1]

Maggie Ross, in her book ‘Writing the icon of the heart’, encourages withdrawing as Jesus’ example, to spend time in silence. She says, ‘lack of silence erodes our humanity’.[[1]](#footnote-1)

For me much of prayer is about being in silence, and in that silence entering into an inner stillness.

Maggie Ross says, “Silence is not the absence of noise, it is the vast interior landscape that invites us to stillness.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

**Stillness**….how do you interpret this? *(give a moment to think….)*

How can you achieve this in your own life?

Essentially, it’s a way to tune into God; ‘a listening ear and a praying heart’. Helps me to tune into what God may be saying to me. I’m sure we’ve all experienced those ‘nudges’ when we’ve felt moved to contact someone in response to a thought or a feeling and in my case, this is where that nudging begins.

I appreciate that I am at a stage of life where it’s easy to choose my own priorities; how full my diary gets is my own choice (sort of!) *Busy with small kids/job etc? tricky! No space? Favourite chair, nook, corner etc.* *Chantal’s basket*

**First quote from Ian Cowley’s book**

It is not easy to make 'being still' a part of our daily lives. In

essence, the commitment to stillness is a commitment to

prayer. This in turn is a commitment to living in relationship with God.

*[Ian Cowley, Going Empty-Handed, 1996, Monarch, p46]*

Up the garden to my chapel … For me, I start with thinking over the previous day (explain ‘Examen’.) I write a few sentences (explain 5-year diary) and in doing that I feel grateful for the small things as well as the big things in life. I may want to explore things further in my journal (where I write more than a few sentences!), especially if there’s a lot churning round in my head, but before I do this I focus on the word of God. These days I use an app, Lectio 365, which is about ten minutes long and encourages reflection on scripture; sometimes there is a particular word or phrase which jumps off the page at me and I may want to press the pause button and dwell with this for a while. I may want to write this word or phrase in my (other!) journal; helps me to focus more on the word in this way (explain ‘audience of one’ for my visual journal)

*Phone example*

I listen to another app, ‘Bible in one year’ (express!).

*Explain stitching, painting….*

When I’ve finished listening, I leave any activity with my hands; from here I find myself entering the stillness of which I spoke earlier:

Henri Nouwen says: ‘God’s presence is often a hidden presence, a presence that needs to be discovered. The loud boisterous noises of the world make us deaf to the soft, gentle and loving voice of God’ *[Henri Nouwen, In the Name of Jesus, p69]*

**Second quote from Ian Cowley’s book:**

“Someone once said that if you only three minutes a day to pray, you should spend the first minute being still, the second waiting upon God and the Holy Spirit and use the third minute to pray. There is no way we enter into a relationship with God any more than can do with anybody else if we are preoccupied with other agenda. It is vitally important that we learn to be still before we start praying.”

*[John Forbes, in Natal Witness, 26 October 1990, quoted by Ian Cowley, Going Empty-Handed, 1996, Monarch, p47]*

“In prayer we are assimilated to the mind of Christ. It is, after all, his will, not our comfort which we seek.” *John Dalrymple*

“My best, kindest and most creative self needs space to breathe and a little waste of time”

*Pete Greig*

***Read from John Dalrymple, Simple Prayer, ‘waste of time’ quotes***

We do not pray in order to gain something for

ourselves. We pray in order to give something to God. It is a

sacrifice. That is the language of love. (p37)

To be truly receptive we have to launch upon a

generous allocation of time to prayer without knowing

much about what will happen in that time. (p38)

Taking an image that Jesus used, that of the farmer sowing the seed. *(Quoting Andrew Rudd here)* It doesn’t matter how good the seed is that you put into your garden, how wonderful the picture is on the packet: unless the ground is good the seed may well not germinate, may be lost and wasted. It’s about us becoming good ground; becoming open, readying ourselves for the work that God has for us to do.

It’s about learning to listen, learning to pay attention. We can do this in nature, immersing ourselves in the garden, the countryside; it’s also about reading, listening paying attention to the bible. Perhaps there’s a verse, a phrase you always find helpful? (Explain ‘meditating on a verse’ – recap putting it on my phone….)

**But the silence in the mind, a poem by R S Thomas:**

But the silence in the mind  
is when we live best, within  
listening distance of the silence  
we call God. This is the deep  
calling to deep of the psalm-  
writer, the bottomless ocean  
we launch the armada of  
our thoughts on, never arriving.

It is a presence, then,  
whose margins are our margins;  
that calls us out over our  
own fathoms. What to do  
but draw a little nearer to  
such ubiquity by remaining still?

*[R S Thomas, Collected Later Poems, from the AD section]*

*Sum up … happy to talk more, especially about ‘praying through stitching’; my Quiet Garden Days; ladies’ retreat this year at Foxhill weekend in May, can be a ‘day girl’.*

**Closing quotes…**

God doesn’t love you more because you pray a lot,

God doesn’t love you less if you pray just a little.

God’s love is perfect and unconditional.

And the more we pray the more we are aware of that perfect love.

(Rich Villodas, https://www.instagram.com/p/CZNulthgfJy/)

….and anything that helps you to receive and respond to God’s love is prayer. (Jen

Goodyer at https://www.instagram.com/jengoodyer\_soulcare/)

1. Ross, M. (2013). [*Writing the icon of the heart: in silence beholding*](https://ref.ly/logosres/9781621895459?art=r11&off=7415&ctx=ss+interior+space.%0a%E2%80%A2~+Silence+is+our+natu). Cascade Books. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ross, M. (2013). [*Writing the icon of the heart: in silence beholding*](https://ref.ly/logosres/9781621895459?art=r11&off=1069&ctx=ll+we+need+to+know.%0a~This+silence+is+not+). Cascade Books. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)