

WHAT IS PRAYER

“PATTERNS OF PRAYER”

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INTRODUCTION

With so many things in life getting started is often the hardest part. Prayer is no exception. Yet even the journey of a thousand miles begins with the first step. And it is that first step that matters most, at least in prayer. The only way to begin to pray is to begin.

These pages are written simply to help people get started. They were originally written as Prayer Leaflets, loose, easy to hold pages that could be carried in a handbag or pocket and read at odd moments throughout the day. They are more concerned with praying than with prayer. There is no attempt to convince anyone about the importance or value of prayer. They are offered as an invitation to pray or as an encouragement to keep on doing so.

Perhaps encouragement is what we all need most in prayer. For most people want to pray and are, in fact, praying far better and more often than they realise. But what is happening in their lives does not seem to fit in to the standard definition of prayer! It's easy to be discouraged by the way others talk or write about prayer. Indeed some of the saints had the same experience: ‘I have to leave aside the learned books’, St Therese of Lisieux tells us, ‘and simply talk with God in my own way, as a child talks to its father’.

Prayer is simple but it is not easy. It is simple because God loves each one of us personally and uniquely and prayer is basically our response to that love. But it is not easy because we ourselves complicate it and turn it into something it was never meant to be. We can make too much of prayer as being something special, as if it were different from the rest of our lives, from the way we feel, the joys we share and the pain and struggle of everyday life. Real prayer is as real as the life we live and the one cannot be separated from the other.

The one condition essential to prayer is desire; to want to pray is the beginning of prayer. Without it we will never make a start; with it we have already begun. Wanting to pray becomes much easier if we realise how much God himself wants it and invites us to do so: ‘No matter how much you think about searching for God’, St. John of the Cross reminds us, ‘he is looking for you much more’. God’s prayer is for us to seek him; ours must be to stop hiding from him.

We must never lose a prayer or let it die because we cannot find words to express it, for prayer is always greater than words. Each prayer is special and unique and if we do not pray our own prayer, no one ever will; it will be lost forever. We can never pray in the wrong way as long as we pray in our own way. There is a prayer hidden within every human heart waiting to be set free. If we listen, we can hear it ourselves and even if we don't, we know that God already does.

The one thing we must never do is measure our prayers. Long or short prayers are not the issue; length of time is not as important as taking time. The heart of prayer is to try to say what we mean and to mean what we say. If the heart is right, the prayer cannot be wrong.

Because they were written individually and over a space of a few years, some points in the book are repeated under different headings. This only serves to underline the original purpose for which they were written: a gently reminder of the presence of God in our lives and an invitation to linger awhile and rest in that presence. Perhaps, even in book form they are best read in that way.