

Do you find prayer difficult? Strange, isn't it, how we can slog-away at prayer sometimes for hours-on-end, day-in, day-out, using all sorts of different ideas – books, candles, essential oils, music etc ... and *still* nothing happens? We seem to be able to get 10-out-of-10 for effort and technical merit but zero for artistic impression.

Yet prayer, like breathing, should be one of the most natural things that we can experience. Perhaps we are just trying *too hard*...

When we try and pray, we often get the impression that God lives away at the North Pole or somewhere equally obscure, and so we feel we need to try lots of complicated ways of getting a message through to him. We *try*, but little seems to come from it: novelties and new ideas soon wear off and the prayer becomes lifeless again. God seems rather distant; a person that other people seem to be close to, but not me. I never see him, even though my eyes are always scanning the distant horizon ... waiting ...

Maybe that's the problem: we're looking **too far away**. We have forgotten the deep insight of St Augustine: "*God is closer to us than we are to ourselves.*"

We don't recognise this. God is **so close, so natural**, but we don't see him because we think *he should be more distant*.

Let us ponder one deep root in the Bible. There is a profound belief in the Scriptures that although God is the creator of the Universe, God is close. In the Old testament, Yahweh is the God who travels with his people through the desert; in the New Testament, Jesus is given the name "Emmanuel" which means "*God is with us*". For both the Christian and the Jew there is a firm belief that God remains close to each one of us and that each individual human heart is naturally open to God.

Now, even if we know this in our heads, we don't always feel comfortable with this God-who-is-close, and we often try to use many ways of talking about God which can hold him at a distance: for example, we call him "King" or "Judge" or "Redeemer" etc. ... Now all of these can



Talking with God

Fr Dermot Preston SJ

be very useful in understanding the fullness of God, but our basic relationship with God should be expressed in the language of **FRIENDSHIP** (as in Jn 15.15) or, in the more passionate language of the prophet Hosea, **LOVE**.

So, how should all this affect my prayer? It should affect it profoundly. Growing in prayer consists in me building a relationship with God. No longer should we always try to keep our prayer so precise and on its best behaviour as if the Bishop were coming to tea, but our prayer should be as disorganised, unpredictable and laid-back as any friendship. A golden rule in prayer is: "If it works in friendship, it normally works in prayer". For example, a friendship needs time to develop: as I need to spend time

with a friend, otherwise I can easily lose touch. So it is with my prayer. I can't just let my relationship with God sort-itself-out while I get-on with other things, I need to spend time with God. "*Wasting time with God*" is a good definition of prayer. As I may "waste time" with a friend, doing nothing in particular – just talking about life, friends, family etc. ... sometimes being serious and concentrated, sometimes just idling the time away, saying nothing-much about nothing-in-particular. Often the test of a developing friendship is when we can be quiet, and not even feel that we *have* to make any conversation, but can occasionally just sit there.

As a prayer-guide, Ignatius of Loyola insists on the central importance of this type of "friendship/discussion" prayer with God. He calls it the prayer of **COLLOQUY**, and throughout the Spiritual Exercises, when he suggests various types of prayer (Contemplation, meditations etc...) they always finish with the Colloquy prayer. Not just to meditate on the Psalm, but to talk directly with God about it afterwards.

In this conversational prayer with God, we can learn much from the Bible. If we look at the Old Testament we see Moses and all the prophets speaking naturally with God. Jesus took this closeness with God even further, by praying (and encouraging his disciples to pray) by calling God, "**Abba**" which was the very intimate, family word used by a small Jewish child when talking to his Dad (see Luke 11:2-4 and Gethsemane).

If we learn to pray in this way, our prayer will deepen, becoming more honest, natural and good-humoured in the process. We can also learn a lot by remembering the very direct prayer offered by Topol in "The Fiddler on the Roof". His horse having gone lame, he sits dejectedly by the side of the road, and pondering all the things that are going wrong in his life, he prays ...

"I can understand it" he says to God, "when you punish *me* because I am bad; or my *wife* because she talks too much; or my *daughter* when she wants to go off and marry a gentile, but ... **What have you got against my horse??!**"