

I wonder if anyone here reads this column in the Sunday Magazine of the Sunday Star Times: “Mrs Salisbury: She knows a heck of a lot about relationships”. Sometimes it’s a bit X-rated, but if you read Mrs Salisbury’s advice, you’ll see that she really does seem to know a heck of a lot about relationships, and she usually dishes out clear, common sense answers to people’s complex conundrums.

When it comes to “doing” relationship with God, we can feel a bit like the people who write to Mrs Salisbury – struggling, confused and perhaps a bit lost. As with love and marriage, we can tend to assume that it’s going well for everyone else, and think that we’re the only one who has a problem. Maybe it’s with knowing how to pray, because no one has ever mentored us in that area. Maybe we feel bored or uncertain about prayer – we see it simply as asking God for things, and surely God already knows our needs. Maybe we feel we’re failing as a Christian because we don’t seem to spend much time praying as we should, or our mind fills with a thousand distractions when we try to.



Now, I don’t claim to know a heck of a lot about prayer! In fact, I struggle with it. So rather than speaking as an expert, I’m here to share some things I have learnt the hard and slow way ...

When I was a Bible College student, my main goal was to get my theological degree, and I saw the community events as an annoying interruption to the important academic stuff. Each term lectures and study would stop for a day of prayer, and I used to resent the intrusion. We weren’t even supposed to use the library on prayer days. While doing postgrad study I was invited to do some teaching, and to go with the teaching faculty on their annual retreat. We were given some Scriptures to meditate on, and one of them was today’s reading, from Exodus 33. I pondered the description of how Moses would go outside the camp, to the tent of meeting, to listen to God and pray. I came to a statement that unstitched me, in verse 11: “*The LORD would speak to Moses face to face, as one speaks to a friend.*”

What did that mean? I understood the words, I could do a good exegesis of them, maybe even read them in Hebrew, but as a description of how a person might know God and pray ... it was outside of my frame of reference. Knowing *about* God was one thing, but “face to face” ... that suggested *intimacy*. For most of my ten years as a Christian, I had talked myself into believing that *my* faith journey would never be a particularly experiential one. Half of those ten years I had spent studying the Bible and theology. Other people had feelings, but I knew God through my understanding and my intellect, and that was how it was. And that was OK.

And in one sense, that’s *still* how I am, but I realised two things that day ... Firstly, that my relationship with God was out of balance – I knew a lot *about* God, theologically, but my relational *heart* knowing of God was lagging far behind.

The second realization was that actually I *wasn’t* content that it should be that way. The feeling I had when I read that verse was more than puzzlement. I felt a *sadness*. I didn’t know what it meant to meet with God and pray, “face to face, as one speaks to a friend”, but deep down I realized that I *wanted* to know God that way. There was a *longing* stirring within me.

At the time, the experience was uncomfortable. I felt a bit of a failure. I felt lost. But as I look back, I see that my sadness was a ‘holy’ discomfort - it was a gift, an awakening. *God was at work*, drawing me closer, and stirring up a desire to know him in a more intimate relationship. So here’s the first learning ... *Our dissatisfactions with prayer may well be a sign that God’s Spirit is at work in us, stirring up a “holy” discontent!* As St Augustine declared: “You have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you.”

The next learning was that *the place to begin was right where I was* – naming things as they really were, facing myself, letting myself feel what I felt, putting aside the pretence. Mrs Salisbury will tell you that intimacy in *any* kind of relationship depends on honesty. It can never thrive while one party is withholding their reality, or putting up a front. At the close of the retreat we were invited to bring something that symbolized our retreat experience. I brought a little pile of ashes.

Authentic prayer begins with honesty – bringing our reality to God, just as it is, no pious pretending.

From the honesty flowed a cry for help – along with my ashes I brought the prayer of my heart for a deeper knowledge of his love. Reading further in Exodus 33 that gave me the courage to ask. Moses is at a particular crisis point in his leadership, and *he also* needs a deeper experience of God. So he says to God in v12 and 13:

“You have said, ‘I know you by name and you have found favor with me.’¹³ If you are pleased with me, teach me your ways so I may know you and continue to find favor with you. Remember that this nation is your people.”

On one level, Moses knows that he is chosen and loved by God. But he very much needs to *know* it at a deeper level, the level of tangible gut knowing. He repeats the request again later in the chapter, and God graciously answers his prayer. So I learned that it was OK for me to say, “God, I know you in Scripture, I believe in you, I believe in your love for me, but I so need that knowledge to sink down from my head into my heart.”

Along with our honest reality, then, we can bring our need, our desire, our feelings just as they, and ask God for what we most need from him. This was the next learning. And if our honest reality is that we don't feel much desire for God, then we can pray for the desire. If we're sad or worried that we don't feel much for God, then we can bring the sadness or the worry. One of the saints, praying to God, said something like this:

“Lord, right now I cannot say that I honestly desire you. Nor can I say that I even desire the desire. But I do desire the desire for the desire of you, and that at least I can bring to you.”

Well, no blinding revelation came in response to my prayer. God didn't reveal his glory in the way he did to Moses. But over the weeks and months and years that followed that unsettling experience, I have gradually come to have a deeper sense, like Moses, that God knows me by name and finds favour with me – that I am his beloved son in fact. What helped?

After the retreat experience, and its wake-up call, I talked to a friend whom I regard as a kind of spiritual Mrs Salisbury. She *does* know a heck of a lot about prayer and relationship with God! She suggested finding a spiritual director to talk to, and also that I might try another retreat some time. I followed through on her suggestions and found both spiritual direction and time alone with God on retreat very helpful.

So the next learning was that it *can be really helpful to have a companion on the journey of prayer* - someone to meet and talk with about how it's all going, how to deepen your experience of prayer, how to eave ordinary life and prayer together. It might be in the form of a mentor, a spiritual director, a person with particular training and skill to help others in prayer, but it might just as well be a prayer partner, a person to have coffee or a beer with every so often so that you can talk and pray about life.

The learning from time on retreats is one that again applies to all important relationships – *deepening of intimacy requires quality time, without competing agendas.* Of course a lot of our prayer is on the go, in the midst of life's busyness, and we'll hear more about that in a future sermon. But I've found that the quality of my “on the go” praying depends on the longer, intentional times that I give to God. When Israel's relationship with God was in trouble, Hosea declared God's intention to take his people back into the wilderness, where he could have them to himself, and woo them again ...

“So now I am going to draw her back to me. I will lead her into the desert. There I will speak tenderly to her.” (Hos 2:14)

What happens in that quality time? That will vary for each of us. Just as there is a variety of human love languages, so I've found that prayer and intimacy with God is not a one size fits all business. I most often sense God's personal communication to me through meditating on Scripture, through being out in creation, and when I'm writing about the honest, nitty-gritty stuff of my life in my journal. But it may not be the same for you. Another learning, then: it's good to *explore different ways to pray – think about what you enjoy doing, what brings you alive, what deepens your friendships with others, and see whether that might offer some clues.* Be creative.

A wise person once said: “Pray as you are, not as you aren't; pray as you can, not as you can't”

As I explored, I learned that *deepening our experience of prayer is not a matter of technique.* No genuine relationship of love operates by A-B-C formulae or techniques, even if there are some basic principles that help. Prayer is not magic. It's not about how to get what we want by using the right words in the right way with the right tone of voice, etc. Jesus was adamant about this in his teaching on prayer in Matthew 6. I like the Message rendering of verses 6-8:

⁶Here's what I want you to do: Find a quiet, secluded place so you won't be tempted to role-play before God. **Just be there as simply and honestly as you can manage. The focus will shift from you to God, and you will begin to sense his grace.**

⁷⁻¹³The world is full of so-called prayer experts who are prayer-ignorant. They're full of formulas and programs and advice, peddling techniques for getting what you want from God. Don't fall for that nonsense. **This is your Father you are dealing with, and he knows better than you what you need. With a God like this loving you, you can pray very simply.**

“Just be there as simply and honestly as you can manage.”

The Matthew 6 passage also provides a final learning about prayer as relationship. Jesus emphasizes that we pray to a loving Father – and the assumption is that fathers care for their children with a love that is unconditional, generous and wise: “This is your Father you are dealing with, and he knows better than you what you need. With a God like this loving you, you can pray very simply.”

In reality, the human love we received may have been demanding, distant, disappointing, unreliable, or even abusive, with the result that trust or intimacy in relationships are difficult, even when we have grown up. Our relationship with God as a heavenly Father can also be affected by childhood events. Unconsciously, we may feel we need to earn God’s love by being dutiful in our prayer times. We may fear that missing our quiet time will result in some kind of divine payback. We may bring everything but our honest selves to prayer, in order to stay safe and keep God at arm’s length. We may not bother bringing our deepest desires to prayer, because at some level we feel sure that we will be refused or let down by God. If early on we learned to manipulate weak parents to get what we want, we may unconsciously bring that same attitude to prayer, treating God like the genie in Aladdin’s lamp. In other words, *our deep-down images of God will affect our approach to prayer.*

So, for some, ‘Father’ may be a difficult image. If so, it’s OK to focus in your prayer time on other biblical images of God: perhaps God as light, or your rock, your refuge in the storm, the good shepherd, or the loving, nurturing mother of Isaiah 49. Perhaps Jesus is the one with whom you feel secure and able to pour out your heart. That’s OK. The important thing is to be praying, and if we are praying, simply and honestly, then we are giving God an entry point into our guarded hearts, and over time God can bring the healing we need in order to be able to love and trust him fully.



Let’s recap, and as we do, consider which of these you need to take away today and spend more time with ...

- Our discontent may be ‘holy’ – a sign that God is at work.
- Authentic prayer begins with honesty – no pious pretending!
- It’s OK to ask God to reveal his love to us more deeply
- It can be helpful to have a companion on the journey of prayer.
- Deepening needs quality time, without competing agendas.
- Find your own life-giving ways to pray and connect with God.
- Keep it simple: prayer is not about performance or techniques.
- Our deep-down images of God will affect our approach to prayer.

These, then, are some learnings from a fellow struggler – I hope some of them may be helpful and relevant to you.

A closing prayer (Richard Foster)...

*Dear Jesus, how desperately I need to learn to pray.
 And yet, when I am honest I know that I often do not even
 want to pray.
 I am distracted!
 I am stubborn!
 I am self-centred!
 In your mercy, Jesus, bring my “want-er”
 more in line with my “need-er” so that I can come to want what I need.
 In your name and for your sake, I pray.
 — Amen.*