

# *essentials*: lessons learnt on prayer

Miriam Brandon describes lessons from her F3 year



Coming to the end of my FY2 year, I was tired. I had done an intense Accident and Emergency placement; I was living away from friends and family; I had struggled to get involved in a local church and felt far from God. My career as a doctor wasn't quite as glamorous as I had imagined from watching TV series like ER or Grey's Anatomy. I found myself sleeping on the floor of the doctors' office during night shifts, doing countless PR examinations, and armed with my clipboard and seemingly unending patient lists, I felt like a glorified secretary! I knew that God hadn't abandoned me, but I found it hard to still my thoughts and listen to his voice and to feel that peace I had experienced previously.

It was during this time when my prayers were becoming few and far between that I heard God say 'STOP'. I had been on a conveyor belt going from medical school to work and had not stopped to listen

and reassess where I was and where I should be going.

For my F3, I joined a monastic community based at Lambeth Palace called St Anselms. I joined 40 other young people aged 20-35 in a rhythm of prayer, meditations, structured Bible reading and teaching. During this year, there was no aim or goal. I wasn't working towards a degree or training. I wasn't training to get better at evangelism, or to increase my theological knowledge. My aim was to listen to God and to learn how to pray, to stop and know my creator better. The Lambeth year has not made me an expert on prayer. I can still be cantankerous and distant in my relationship with God; prayer can be a struggle, but I've learnt a few lessons.

## be real with God

In the Psalms, the prayers are real. The psalmists come to God as they are: in anger, depression, frustration, repentance, joy and thanksgiving.



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They tell God exactly how they feel:

*I pour out before him my complaint;  
before him I tell my trouble.*

Psalm 14:2

We have a tendency to distance ourselves from God when we have done something wrong or are angry with him. We push him away but he wants us to tell him what's wrong, to give it to him and to trust he has it sorted. God understands us and is with us when we go through the rough stuff. How do we know this? Well, he came to the earth as a human, he experienced rejection, bereavement, loneliness, misunderstanding and imprisonment. He understands our pain and wants to be with us in it.<sup>1</sup>

## retreat

Silence is not something we do well in the West. What with work, television, tablets and mobile phones, little of our time is left to stop and listen to God. We do not leave space and solitude for him to speak. We come home from busy workplaces or universities and are tired. We switch on the TV, we talk to our spouse or housemates; we travel to and from work; we read a book, tamper with our mobile or read a newspaper, but rarely pause and listen. I often wonder if we have become terrified of silence, of God and our neglected depths.

During my year learning to pray, God spoke most clearly to me during my retreat. I deliberately stepped out of my busy and crammed life, handed in my mobile phone and laptop, and focussed my mind and heart on God. I laid aside my unending and addictive 'to do' list and let God's voice pierce my life, work, and relationships. In the clamour of my own needs, I wanted his voice to have precedence. Distractions serve as decoys that protect us from ourselves, our pasts and our mistakes. Paradoxically, a retreat is an advance into God and true self-knowledge. Shut in with God,

there is nowhere to run. Alone with God, we allow his love to bring healing and restoration.

Retreat characterised the life of Jesus. A desert, a hilltop, a boat on Galilee, gave him the solitude he needed for prayer and contemplation. Matthew 14:23 illustrates Jesus' work/prayer balance; *'After he had dismissed them, he went up on a mountainside by himself to pray; later that night, he was there alone.'* If retreat was integral to Jesus, it is vital for us.

I have committed to doing a silent retreat week each year. Retreat, however, should not be a once a year event, but part of daily living. I find it useful to spend 15 minutes each day in the hospital prayer room or another quiet space. Here I can sit and be silent in the presence of God.

## receive

Prayer sometimes feels like a chore: a list of people and needs that require our attention. Rather than enjoying a warm but awe-struck friendship with God in prayer, we're distracted by the mundane: the friend we forgot to text back or the task we forgot at work or what we're going to make for dinner. There are times we reach for God and there's only a vacuum: no joy, sense of his presence, nothing. Prayer becomes something we do instead of an endless dialogue with God, our dearest friend. God wants to break into our lives, give us peace in conflict, joy in sorrow and rest in our restlessness.

Prayer is a great chance to express community. Sometimes we'll know that we are struggling to pray, and need the help of others. But why wait for these times? James reminds us that prayer and confession is a group activity as well as a personal one.<sup>2</sup>

Prayer is not something we tick off in order to class ourselves as a Christian – it should be something integral to our being through the good and the bad times. ■

REFS

1. 2 Corinthians 1:3-4

2. James 5:13-16