



Opening Doors

**A Lent course to help the people of the Diocese of Chichester
in knowing, loving and following Jesus**

**Session 2 – written by Tim Watson
and edited by Rebecca Swyer**

Theme for session 2: Opening doors of prayer

In the second session of this five-session course we think about prayer. It is all too easy to think of prayer as asking God to do things. But C.S. Lewis (who died on the same day as President Kennedy) is quoted as saying that prayer “doesn't change God, it changes me”.

Suggested opening prayers (5 minutes)

Prayers and psalms can either be said 'responsorially' (i.e. a leader leads and others respond), or 'antiphonally' (i.e. two groups of voices, each saying alternate verses). Music / hymn / song suggestions are made, but whether or not to include them, and at which stage, is entirely up to you.

Grace, mercy and peace from God our Father
and the Lord Jesus Christ be with you

and also with you

Glory to you, Father, who forgives our faults
and heals our infirmities.

Your mercy endures forever

Glory to you, Lord, merciful and kind,
slow to anger and abounding in mercy

Your mercy endures forever

Glory to you, Lord; you who are a
tender Father toward your children.

Your mercy endures forever

Verses from Psalm 127 (this translation is from the Common Worship psalter):

Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labour in vain.

Unless the Lord keeps the city, the guard keeps watch in vain.

It is in vain that you hasten to rise up early and go so late to rest, eating the bread of toil, for he gives his beloved sleep.

**Glorify the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit;
as it was in the beginning is now and shall be for ever. Amen.**

A prayer

O Lord my God,
Teach my heart this day where and how to see you,
Where and how to find you.

You have made me and remade me,
And you have bestowed on me
All the good things I possess,
And still I do not know you.

I have not yet done that
For which I was made.

Teach me to seek you,
For I cannot seek you
Unless you teach me,
Or find you
Unless you show yourself to me.

Let me seek you in my desire,
Let me desire you in my seeking.
Let me find you by loving you,
Let me love you when I find you.

Amen.

Hymn/song suggestions: Take my life and let it be / Dear Lord and Father of mankind / What a friend we have in Jesus

Introduction / Recap (15 minutes)

- What was the one thing that struck you most about last week's session?
- How did you get on with last week's activities?

Bible reading (15 minutes)

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David.

The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, 'Greetings, favoured one! The Lord is with you.' But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be.

The angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus.

He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob for ever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.'

Mary said to the angel, 'How can this be, since I am a virgin?' The angel said to her, 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God.

And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God.'

Then Mary said, 'Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.' Then the angel departed from her.

'Lectio Divina' – a way of approaching scripture (slightly modified for this course):

First, have somebody read out the whole passage. Next, keep silence so that each can ponder. Then, take turns to read out the sections, with each person highlighting one word of their section. Keep a little silence after each. Finally, have the whole passage read again by another voice. Those listening may wish to close their eyes.

Luke 1:26-37

These points may be useful for further study or prayer (if there's time, the leader can read them out)

1. Imagine Mary's encounter with God's messenger (which is what the word "angel" actually means). See Mary going about the small, simple tasks of daily life, saying her daily prayers, making plans for her future ... maybe sewing something for her wedding! Hear the angel's joyful greeting; see the surprise, the amazement on Mary's face, and hear the angel's words of reassurance. And think about how many Bible stories – Moses and the burning bush; the boy Samuel in the Temple; or Paul on the Damascus Road – start this way, with a surprising encounter, or an unexpected word.
2. Now: listen to how the angel reveals God's project (God's strategy!): a plan that goes far beyond anything that Mary could ever have imagined. And at the same time, it's a plan that makes sense, which fits with everything that Mary has learned since childhood about God's plan for her people. Listen as the angel explains how God has the power to bring this about – it's not something that Mary has to do. She is not responsible for its success, or its failure. All she has to do is hear the call she has received, trust in God, and not be afraid.
3. Finally: listen to how Mary responds at each stage, as she learns just enough to ask the next question. Just enough to say, "I had my plans for my life ... but if this is what God wants for me, then I will respond to his call, without reserve." Just enough to say a "yes" that is a step of faith, a step into the unknown. And yet this fragile "yes" was all God needed to bring about the most extraordinary transformation of the world that there has ever been.

First reflection (10 minutes)

As Christians, prayer needs to be the foundation of everything that we do. Why? Because fundamentally our Christian life – in fact the life of the whole Church – is fundamentally all about what God is doing, not about what we do! Our lives as Christians are a response, both to what God has done for us in Christ, and to what God is doing now for us today. And prayer is a place where we encounter God, and where we open our hearts to listen to what God is doing, so that we can join in.

Even more than that: prayer itself is something that God does! Prayer is part of God's own nature, of God's own life. It was central to Jesus during his earthly life and ministry, it was the foundation of every important step he ever took:

Now during those days he went out to the mountain to pray; and he spent the night in prayer to God. And when day came, he called his disciples and chose twelve of them, whom he also named apostles"

Luke 6:12-13

In fact, amazing as it might seem, according to John's Gospel Jesus also prayed specifically for us, on the night before he died:

I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me.

John 17:20-21

Prayer is also something that the Holy Spirit does, both for us and in us. Whenever we pray, in fact, it is first and foremost the Holy Spirit who prays – and this is especially true when we don't know how to pray, or when we just aren't able to do it ourselves:

Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

Romans 8:26-27

Prayer, then, is a place where the Holy Spirit teaches us. And like all teaching and learning, this is a process which happens over. Prayer is the means by which our hearts are gradually transformed, converted by the Lord; it is the place where we go deeper with God, where we grow as Christians, and where we receive the daily nourishment that we need for our on-going journey of faith.

I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come.

John 16:12-13

So it's important to realise that when we pray, we are always learners. We respond to God's initiative, out of our own weaknesses and our own limitations, and we ask for God's help. No one is ever an expert in prayer! – or rather, God is the only expert – but God has promised to teach us everything that we need to know.

Jesus was praying in a certain place, and after he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, 'Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples.' He said to them, 'When you pray, say ...'

Luke 11:1-2

Questions for group discussion (20 minutes)

- "Prayer is something that God does." Does thinking about prayer in this way change your attitude to it?
- If you're completely honest, do you really think that prayer is all that important? If not, why not?
- Can I share the story of a particular time when prayer has made a difference to me?

Second reflection (5 minutes)

But why is prayer so important specifically when we are making plans for the future? For example, when we are planning a strategy for our Diocese or our parish?

It's so important precisely because we need to realise that what God is doing, and what God might be asking us to do, might be very different from what we come up with on our own – very different from our own expectations, or from our own clever ideas.

For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord.

Isaiah 55:8

Reassuringly, the Bible is full of stories about people who needed to learn this lesson! For example, Naaman the Syrian (2 Kings 5), or the apostle Peter (Matthew 16:21-23) – strong personalities who had their own clever ideas ... who thought that they knew how God ought to operate ... and who needed to be radically converted through an encounter that really surprised them!

Prayer, then – like any relationship – always involves a step into the unknown. We have to be willing to let go of our certainties, and be open to what we will discover. And maybe, just maybe, we'll find that God's focus isn't where we'd expect it to be ... perhaps God is actually more interested in our relationship with Him (our faithfulness) than in anything that we think we can do for Him (e.g. a successful ministry programme).

Then the crowd said to Jesus, 'What must we do to perform the works of God?' Jesus answered them, 'This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.'

John 6:28-29

So prayer is a place where we open the doors of our heart to God: where we offer ourselves, our time and attention, to God – this is our "sacrifice" – and then ask for our understanding to be transformed, converted (Romans 12:1-2), so that we can receive the gift of seeing the world as God sees it.

About the author of these reflections:

The Revd Dr Tim Watson has recently joined our diocese from Liverpool. As well as heading up our CMD (Continuing Ministerial Development), Tim also leads the newly established Chemin Neuf Community mission in Brighton and Hove.

Questions for group discussion (15 minutes)

- What transformation, conversion, or deepening of faith might God already be trying to bring about in my local church? In the Diocese of Chichester?
- How do I think that the Diocesan strategy might relate to God's strategy? What "yes" might God be asking us to say, in order to put God's plans into practice?

For the week ahead

- In your personal prayer, take time to explore different ways of praying, both from within your tradition, and from traditions with which you might be less familiar. Finding these methods might take some research.
- Find out about some of the houses of prayer in the Diocese, and consider making time for a guided retreat or quiet day. Again, this might take some research.
- Are there any arrangements still to be made for your visit to a holy place?

Concluding worship (10 minutes)

A prayer of surrender to the will of God

**Take, Lord, and receive all my liberty,
my memory, my understanding,
and my entire will,
All I have and call my own.
You have given all to me.
To you, Lord, I return it.
Everything is yours; do with it what you will.
Give me only your love and your grace,
that is enough for me.**

Amen.

As a group, offer prayers of intercession for the church and for the world, each time ending with:

Lord, in your mercy
Hear our prayer

The prayers of intercession may be concluded as follows:

Merciful Father
Accept these prayers, for the sake of your Son, our Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

A prayer

**Heavenly Father,
as we celebrate this year of mercy
open the doors of our hearts and minds
that we may show forth in our lives the mercy and compassion
that we see in the face of your Son Jesus Christ
who is alive and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit
one God now and for ever. Amen.**

The grace

**The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God,
and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with us all, evermore.
Amen.**

Optionally, close with a hymn or song.

Suggestions: Abba Father / Purify my heart (refiner's fire) / Oceans (where feet may fail)

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