

Some writings on prayer by Clare Boyd-Macrae

Christian meditation

As a young Christian, I was often frustrated that while I was exhorted to pray, no one seemed to provide practical details on exactly how to do this. As an older believer I can understand that even fervent pray-ers know that prayer is different for everyone, and don't want to impose what works for them on others.

It changed my prayer life, however, and consequently everything in my world, when I encountered a group who were willing to share ways of connecting with the Divine that they found helpful.

The World Community for Christian Meditation (WCCM) was founded by John Main, a Benedictine monk. As a younger man, he spent time in Malaysia and found that he was better able to pray using the disciplines of Hindu meditation than the Christian ones he grew up with.

Returning to the West and taking religious orders, he discovered that despite the popular perception of meditation as an Eastern spiritual technique, it was in fact also an ancient Christian practice described by John Cassian and other Desert Fathers and Mothers in the fourth and fifth centuries.

He proceeded to spread the word, and the WCCM now has branches all over the world. Their basic teaching is simple. You spend 20 minutes, twice daily, sitting still in meditation. And you use a mantra.

The mantra they recommend is 'Maranatha', an Aramaic word meaning, 'Come, Lord'. I prefer to use the name of Jesus, repeated in threes – 'Jesus, Jesus, Jesus. Jesus, Jesus, Jesus.' Using this way of prayer regularly has changed me.

Sitting still, breathing steadily, centring myself and saying the mantra reminds me over and over, in an almost physical way, that God loves the world and everyone in it, and that I want to be a part of that big love. Through the filter of the mantra, pain, anger, jealousy, joy, pride, confusion – all the emotions that used to render me helpless – are contained within the knowledge that God loves me too.

Making time to say the mantra every day isn't easy. Even harder is the praying itself, during which my mind flits around, distracting itself with thoughts about the day just gone, the day ahead, the shopping list, the idea for a faith column. And I bring it gently back.

That's all that happens. Some days I will have been sitting for fifteen minutes and I realise I have said the mantra precisely once. That's ok. What matters is setting aside the time to centre on God, who understands our busy, worrying, human minds.

The wonderful thing about the mantra is that I can take it anywhere, any time. Concern about the world, conflict with a loved one, exhaustion, happiness, a daily walk, all can be folded through with the mantra, infiltrated by the reminder of God's love. Helping me, in a tiny way, to be more loving myself.

What I believe prayer is and isn't

'An independent study showed that patients in a Korean experiment who were prayed for showed recovery rates twice as high as their counterparts who were not.'

A friend who knows I'm interested in these things recently sent me this piece of spurious information from the Internet. And it wouldn't surprise me if those prayed for did heal faster, or had better recovery rates than the others.

But it gives the wrong impression of prayer. Most of us, I suspect, think of prayer as a kind of shopping list. We tell God the things we want, and then wait for God to do something. This view is only strengthened by the fact that many people, even quite thoroughly secular ones, find themselves uttering desperate little prayers when they are in a really tight corner, like 'please God, oh please, don't let her die'.

Prayer is not a shopping list or an emergency button. It's what you do to develop a relationship and to let some of the big strong power of love that is God filter in to your life and the life of those around you.

To me, prayer is something I do every day, whether I feel like it or not, just as I talk to the members of my family every day, even if I'm feeling grumpy and would much rather spend the day alone.

Prayer is often a completely silent thing, a meditation or contemplation: just breathing quietly, being conscious of God all around me, breathing God in, storing up strength and patience and love to face the day.

Other times prayer is exultant and joyous, praising God for all the wonderful things and people, opportunities and happiness that fill my life. Still other times I let all my anger and despair hang out, asking God why such terrible things crush the innocent. Or else I just lie like something washed up on a beach, feeling swamped by depression or loss, or full of hateful emotions for another human being.

I find that when I pray for situations I am involved in, I change. If I pray about some conflict that seems irresolvable, something in me softens and bends. When I pray for strength simply to tackle the daily round with grace and humour, there is more chance that this will in fact happen.

It's not a simple cause and effect thing. It's not as though if I pray in the morning I'll have a good day, and if I don't, I won't. But if, over days and weeks I make a habit of stilling my mind and spending time opening my heart to the great good power at the heart of the universe, things are noticeably different. There is a quality to my relationships and my work that is lacking if I don't make time for prayer and simply run frazzled, from one thing to another.

So, what about those Korean patients? Over the years I have been involved in praying for many sick and dying people. Sometimes they are healed physically, other times people of enormous faith, my mother being one, die. But the prayers make a difference. Prayer always makes a difference, because it activates the part of us that is not closed to wonder and possibilities and the unexpected. The regular practice of prayer lets something into our lives that is life-giving and healing, whether or not the healing is physical.

And to me, ultimately, prayer is all about deepening my relationship with God. There are other ways of doing this: talking to other Christians and people of different faiths, attending worship, reading the Bible, or sitting in front of a candle. But I believe that God is the creator of the universe, the great loving heart beating at its centre, the power for love that fuels all that is good in the world, the being that was personified in Jesus of Nazareth, who lived with such freedom, integrity, courage and love. This big and boundless God calls forth my allegiance and my worship, and is a source of grace in living that I cannot do without. That's why I pray.

Jesus' robe

Small babies, it is said, love swaddling cloths. They love the security of being tightly wrapped up—the closest thing after birth, maybe, to being in the womb.

Me, I love the feel of being swaddled too. A blanket, doona, sleeping bag, doesn't matter what. When I snuggle down under something warm and wrap it around me, I feel safe and loved and trusting, like a small child again.

It is, I have come to recognise, a spiritual feeling. I feel held by God.

Jesus offered a similar metaphor when he spoke of God as a mother hen whose wings shelter her chickens in protective embrace.

When I pray, an image that keeps coming to me, unbidden, is of God's love being like a mantle, cloak or robe. When I pray, I have an almost physical sensation of being wrapped in God's love. It feels as though God's love is encircling me, filtering all the stuff that comes through—criticism, praise, success, failure—all tempered by the knowledge that God loves me regardless.

But it's not all about me. The lovely thing about this robe metaphor is that it wraps me around and then spools away and out to every person I come in contact with through the day, every person I think of, read about, pray for, every situation—joyful or grim—of which I am mindful.

One of the surprising things about the spiritual life is that once you start to take it seriously and learn a bit about your forebears on the path, you discover fellow travellers long dead.

Julian of Norwich was an English mystic who lived in the 14th century. She lived in a cell built on to the wall of a church in Norwich. Her strange abode had one window opening onto the church, and one onto the outside world. She prayed, took part in the church services, and counselled those who sought her, and she lived to what was then considered a ripe old age.

I've long loved Julian's images of mother God. Recently, however, I came across these words by 'Mother' Julian: 'He [God] is our clothing that, for love, wraps us up and winds us about; embraces us, all encloses us and hangs about us, for tender love; so that he can never leave us.'

Julian has written about various visions and religious experiences which sound frankly weird to us today. But her sense of the all-embracingness of divine love, her famous assertion that 'all shall be well and all shall be well and all manner of things shall be well', and her sheer joy in her God makes her a kindred spirit.

Most of all, I love her for our shared image of God's love—winding us around, embracing and protecting us, connecting us to all living beings. God's children, swaddled in and connected by God's love.

Prayer too deep for words

Prayer gets some bad press. Or the wrong press anyway. Ask anyone for a definition of prayer, and it's my guess 90% of them will say 'talking to God', emphasis on the talking. Prayer is mainly associated with public people saying words in public places—priests, archbishops, the Queen.

As a Christian, I know that corporate prayer is important. We are a communal faith called to be a community that together explores what it is to be a follower of Jesus in this time and place. A vital part of that is worshipping together; together bringing to God our own concerns and joys, and the world in all its beauty and pain.

But it's the other side to prayer that gives me solace, energy, insight, courage and the power to endure. Wordless prayer—described in one place in the Bible as 'sighs too deep for words'.

When we speak words, whether it's to God or to another person, we're always in danger of imposing our own agenda. When I pray for the nation and the world in words, I seem to end up asking God to remove John Howard from office, to deliver his long overdue comeuppance to George W Bush. When I pray for situations I'm involved in with words, I tend to ask that I be vindicated, victorious, understood.

And let's face it; I have very little knowledge of most of the people and situations I pray about. Asylum seekers. Politics in the Middle East. A friend or family member I no longer feel I understand. My own confused motives and affections and ambitions.

The wonderful thing about wordless prayer, though, is that you don't have to pray for any particular thing to happen; you just have to pray. I don't need to pray for a certain outcome which is just as well, because most of the time I have no idea what the 'best' outcome would be.

With wordless prayer, you don't even have to pray about anything. You just have to pray. All you need to do is set aside time to be with God in stillness and things happen, change, develop, grow. Not instantly, usually not in the way you'd expect.

How you do this wordless prayer, of course, is a whole other story. Christian meditation, contemplative prayer, visualising, using a mantra—there are a thousand books and groups and courses to get you going and keep you in the practice.

In my experience, when things are lifted to God in wordless prayer, surprising things happen. A solution no one had thought of presents itself. Attitudes that seemed set in stone soften and change.

With words, it's too easy to tell God what we think should happen. To squeeze the immensity of God into a little box whose size and shape we can handle. With wordless prayer, that's all blown apart. It's scary, exciting, deep, disturbing, profound. Your life will never be the same.

Muddling through

Recently I talked with a friend who had just missed out on a job he had felt strongly called to. He had been so sure that this was the best way he could be useful. What do I do now? he asked.

I'm in a bit of a hiatus myself. The vocation I embarked upon so joyously and with such a powerful sense of purpose a dozen years ago has evaporated. Not only are there few opportunities for me to do my thing, worse, I no longer experience joy and satisfaction and a feeling of rightness when I do it.

So, what now God? What was the big idea?

At times like these, I remind myself of the quiet heroism of simply muddling on. Most of us would love to have a clear and shining path laid out in front of us—the certainty that we are doing what we are best at, what satisfies our deepest yearnings and what can best serve the world we find ourselves in. Remember that classic line in the movie *Chariots of Fire*? Olympic runner Eric Liddell tells his sister, 'When I run, I feel God's pleasure'.

But such clear paths are few and far between. They appear and disappear, leaving us confused about their validity in the first place.

All we can do, then, is muddle on as best we can. For me, this means being faithful. By spending daily time in quiet contemplation, connecting with God. By treating my partner and children with civility and tenderness. By being an attentive friend. By putting in at my job. It gets no accolades. It's not heroic.

There is good precedent for muddling on in times when the way ahead is far from clear. The children of Israel wandered for '40 years' in the desert before finding their promised land. Jesus fasted, prayed and sought direction for '40 days' in the wilderness before he began his public ministry.

In Biblical language, the number 40 just means a long time. The point being that sometimes it takes a while to work out where we are going and what we are supposed to do once we get there.

Franciscan Richard Rohr writes about 'liminal space'—the uncomfortable place or time we find ourselves in when there are no certainties and the way ahead is far from clear. He argues that it is precisely this sort of vulnerable space we desperately try to avoid but to which God consistently leads us.

A book on prayer I read years ago talked about how those of us who are pray-ers sometimes expect miraculous things to happen as a result of our practice. Whereas, in actual fact, the truly miraculous is developing the ability to cope, and to cope with grace, with all that daily life dishes up. And to be attentive to the God who is revealed as much in the mundane as in the miraculous.

World wide web of prayer

The old man calls us in urgently, beckoning us to join him in their living room. I'm in India, in my old neighbourhood, wandering around with my 24 year old son, showing him my old haunts. I don't think I know these people, but we're the only foreigners around here and they would have known my parents, remembered me as a kid.

He doesn't speak much English and my Gujarati is rusty at best, but his daughter is there and her grasp of English is good.

'I think someone in your family is very sick?' she asks, 'Is it your husband?'

'Yes, he has cancer,' I say.

'We've all been praying for him,' she tells us, 'everyone at church'.

We chat for a bit, and before we leave, the old man asks if we can pray together. His daughter asks if we mind if she does this in her mother tongue. I cover my head with my scarf, as is the custom when praying here, and she launches into prayer – voluble and fluent. I pick up a few of the words, and the religious phrases wash over me in a familiarity born of years spent sitting through long Gujarati church services, a familiarity as comforting as a childhood lullaby.

I don't understand exactly what my new friend is asking for; I suspect it might be a miracle, in the sense of complete physical healing.

This kind of miracle is not quite what I pray for. Complete physical healing and the prospect of a normal life span would be a dream come true, and sometimes that happens, but I don't think life usually works that way. The burden of my prayers is simply that we all become more and more open to the love and grace, both human and divine, that flows in and around us all the time.

But that doesn't mean miracles don't exist in the new situation we face. There are miracles aplenty as I marvel at the number of people who are holding us in their prayers and the support we feel as a tangible result. It's a miracle that we have access to the best health care, that we are surrounded by people who love us, that we have the resources to care for each other through all this.

Gujarat is where my grandparents worked as missionaries for 13 years and my parents for 20. It was my first home, and I continue to turn up every few years, desperate for a fix, travelling back to Melbourne, my second home, freshly and poignantly addicted to my first. In this distant, strange, familiar, confronting, fascinating, exhausting and beloved country, I pray, in Gujarati and in English, with old friends and new.

I want to tell them that part of the miracle is them: people on the other side of the world who are praying for a man they've never met and most likely never will. The great global web of prayer seems miracle enough to me.

Playing chicken on the Ballarat Road

Twenty-five thousand vehicles a day thunder past my work place, where the Geelong Road veers off. They're not all cars either. There are massive noisy trucks, belching exhaust, and motorbikes producing noise way out of proportion to their size. Their approaching speed is often deceptive. More times than I care to remember I have thought I had ample time to get across, but have only just made it, leaping to the safety of the pavement as the slipstream from the speeding car almost blows me away.

Recently I returned from a three-week holiday, feeling more deeply rested than I had for years. Maintaining the peace wrought by a really good holiday is a challenge once you return to work, children, city life and twice-daily chicken runs on the Ballarat Road at peak hour.

One small thing that helps is a discipline I have imposed on myself over the past month. After I've parked my car and have to cross the road, I no longer look to see if there's a break in the traffic. I just walk on slowly to cross at the lights, knowing that getting to work two minutes later is not going to matter. And I arrive in a quite different frame of mind.

A friend of mine was knocked down by a car a few years ago, while he was hurrying across a road on foot, not paying attention. He endured months of painful rehabilitation, but was lucky enough to be alive and to eventually resume normal activities. He said it taught him about hurry and distraction.

The Buddhists, who know so much about the practice of meditation and wise living, talk repeatedly about 'being present in the moment'. Many Hindu gurus say something similar.

Peter Matheson, a Uniting Church theologian, talks about the 'God-ladenness of each moment'. How can I be truly present in the moment, or sense its unique God-ladenness, if I am dodging insanely fast cars, mentally hurrying myself into my office before I'm even there, worrying about what lies ahead, panicking that I won't get everything done?

I believe God has given me time to do all the things I have to, without a crazy, ungodly, stressed out rush. I can stop striving, stop stressing, stop running faster and faster in an effort to keep up: with my competitors, with my friends, with my own or other's impossible goals.

In the lead up to Christmas, I need more than ever to relearn this. To emulate Jesus, who apparently practiced a rhythm of engagement and retreat: making time to be alone and still to feed his soul and connect with God, away from crowds and busyness.

We need to develop such a capacity if we are to live being truly present to the moment. Discovering each moment's precious God-ladenness. And one small way I am starting to do this is by no longer playing chicken with the cars on the Ballarat Road every morning. By walking slowly to the lights, savouring the day, knowing that what lies ahead will wait for me.

Images of God

Somewhere in the disorganised collection of articles I can't bear to throw out but can never find when I want them, is one that lists images of God used in the Bible. I don't know if my memory is exaggerating, but I'm pretty sure it lists 200. I've read the Bible all my life, but I couldn't believe how many there were. I grew up with about three images of God, and I suspect many Christians are still in the same boat today.

When I was a kid, God was Father, with occasionally a Lord or King thrown in for good measure. That was about it, except for God as Judge, which didn't help much. Surprise surprise, we grew up with woefully inadequate pictures of God. Lords and Kings mean very little to contemporary people, and the few associations we have with the words are unlikely to be positive ones. As for father, I love my mine dearly, and he loves me, but many people are not so fortunate. And, like many others of my generation, even the nicest fathers tended to be absent a lot of the time.

In Alice Walker's wonderful book *The Colour Purple* one of the characters talks about getting the old white man (her image of God) out of her heart. I suspect many of us have to do the same.

In the Bible, there are dozens of images of God, including some blatantly female and maternal ones. There's light and shepherd, vine and fire, dove and potter, lamb and servant, mother hen and breast feeding woman. There are many many more. Some, like a vine or a shepherd may not be particularly helpful to urban people in the 21st century. But they point to the richness of the picture of God in the Bible alone. We neglect this at our peril.

I rediscovered this for myself recently when I spent a weekend at a monastery, something I try to do once a year. It was a Cistercian monastery, and they offer spiritual counselling. I usually do my own thing at these places, attend their daily offices and wander around feeling peaceful, but this time I decided to force myself out of my comfort zone and ask for spiritual direction.

I did wonder what could be achieved in an hour, or maybe two, with a total stranger, but I thought I'd give it a go. When the monk, the spiritual director, asked me what I wanted, I said that I needed help because I was having trouble praying. For most of my life I have spent time alone in prayer on a regular basis. As an adult this has mainly taken the form of contemplative or meditative prayer. But recently I've been relentlessly frustrated in my prayer times. My head has buzzed, I've felt unhappy and the whole thing has felt like a waste of time.

I explained this to the monk, who asked me some more about my background. We talked for an hour, and he kept coming back to my image of God. What was my image of God when I was a little girl, he wanted to know. What is my image of God now?

After we had spoken, I went for a long walk, which is often the way I process things. And it came to me, as I walked across paddocks to the upper reaches of the muddy Yarra that borders their property. The reason I couldn't pray was that my image of God had not changed since I was a small child and He (definitely a He) was a distant, largely absent and almost constantly disapproving figure. I have studied theology, thought about these issues, discussed them with others, even written poetry about a God who was bigger than we can ever imagine, but it hadn't got through to my heart.

When I prayed, I had a visual image of a bloke, old, in a long black gown. All I heard him saying to me was 'Gees you're a crap prayer. How long have you been doing this? Twenty years? Thirty? And you still can't get it right. Stop wasting my time.'

And I wondered why prayer didn't seem to be working for me.

Realising this was a major breakthrough. These days, when I pray, I sense, more often than not, that God delights in our relationship and loves to spend time with me at the start of each of my days. I picture a figure (probably female) who has infinite love for every human being, even me. I picture Jesus, who was particularly tender with people who despaired of themselves. I picture the Holy Spirit as a soft breasted dove or a wild wind or fire, comforting and enlivening me.

I don't always feel peaceful, and my head still buzzes. But it's okay, and those 20 minutes each morning are my anchor and arrow for the day. I am energised by this encounter with the biggest love in the universe. Because although Jesus said that if you have faith you can move mountains, sometimes I wonder if he didn't mean love. If you are loved and know it, it seems to me you can do anything. You can cope with just about anything.

Slow down, we move too fast

Sometimes I think what our society needs most is a good dose of Sabbath.

Ask anyone how they are, and chances are, they'll say 'busy'. Or maybe 'frantic'. They may complain about it, (I suspect most people would prefer a more balanced life,) but there is the assumption that if you are busy, you are somebody.

In the old days, Sundays were sacred. Shops were shut, there was no sport. A lot of people spent the morning in church. No one worked. Many families had a big dinner then hung out together, or with friends. In some more religious households, this practice might have been a little excessive, and you weren't allowed to do anything that might remotely be construed as being fun.

But things have changed. There is no Sabbath here and now, no break from the relentlessness of 24-hour availability of everything. You can do the supermarket shopping on Sunday afternoon. You can send and receive emails in the middle of the night if you've the notion. Children have sports commitments on both days of the weekend, and there's more footy on Sunday than Saturday. You can do your phone banking anytime. The 7-11, which started as a shop open from 7am till 11pm, is open around the clock. There is never any time, all week that you can sit back and sigh and say 'ah well, everything's shut now, I'll just have to make a cup of tea and pick up my novel'. The world's gone crazy.

Last year I interviewed three people in early middle age who had survived a life threatening illness. They had looked death in the face and lived to tell the tale. I asked them how this experience had changed their lives, and all of them said that they didn't rush or worry as much. They treasured things they'd thought themselves too busy for before. They didn't feel quite so driven. And they reignited the desire to investigate the spiritual dimension of life.

Is it possible to learn this without travelling to the portals of death? I hope so. I belong to the Uniting Church, an institution full of good and busy people. A few years ago, it suggested a period of Sabbath, so that its members could rediscover what their faith was all about, reconnect with God's limitless resources, be still and reflective. A halt was called to all but the most necessary of meetings.

The practice of Sabbath comes from the Biblical stories of creation. After six days of hard work, God rested and took pleasure in what God had made. The practice developed to reflect this divine rhythm of work and rest and play. It is also simple good sense, recognising what human beings need to be healthy.

Jesus himself, a busy man, very much in the public eye and endlessly pursued by all manner of people, made sure that he had time when he was un-busy. Before he started his public ministry, he did a 40 day retreat in the desert. Sometimes, when the crowds got really bad, he would simply disappear for a while, go to the hills and spend a night in contemplation, or visit his friends Mary and Martha and Lazarus, cooking and talking and just lying around. And Jesus only lived to 33. How much more do we, with the prospect of a life maybe three times that long, need to pace ourselves?

But for me it's more than an issue of pacing. It's not just a matter of reducing our stress levels and improving our quality of life. It is a chance to connect with something deeper and bigger than ourselves.

Specifically, as a Christian, it is something more again. It is a reminder of grace: that central Christian belief that affirms that God loves us simply because God loves us. God's love for us is no more dependent on how busy we've been 'doing good' than a parent's love is dependent on their child's impeccable behaviour.

If I am constantly busy, I run the risk of falling into the trap of thinking that God loves me because of the good things that I do. When I stop, and reconnect, I remember that God's love is the given, it comes first, and that any good I do is simply in response to that.

So how do we do Sabbath? It's hard, because everything and everyone around us is insisting that if we stop for a moment we will be left behind and will never catch up. It may sound like a contradiction

in terms, but I find I have to be disciplined about stopping work. I am not good at this Sabbath business, it doesn't come naturally. It doesn't help that my two main jobs are writer and mother: two jobs that are never done. You can make all sorts of plausible excuses not to stop.

But experience has taught me that when I do stop, mysteriously, things get done more smoothly than if I don't. In fact, it sometimes seems as though the more time I spend in stillness, the more easily the rest of my tasks and responsibilities accomplish themselves. Perhaps this is what the sixteenth century religious reformer Martin Luther was talking about when he said that he was so busy he had to spend three hours a day in prayer.

Observing Sabbath will be different for everyone. For me it involves lots of things, from saying yes to a coffee with a friend to seeing that it's a gorgeous day and talking the dog for a walk even though I think I can't afford the time. It's walking a little more slowly, and noticing what the sky is doing. It's putting on a CD at night and listening to it by candlelight, doing nothing else, not even the ironing. It's sitting doing absolutely nothing for ten minutes in the middle of the day. Most of all, for me, it involves the daily practice of connecting with God in contemplative prayer.

I don't always manage these practices, but I'm getting better as I get older and realize that life is too short and too precious to waste being endlessly busy. They allow me to experience joy in a way that is lacking when I'm rushed and stressed and anxious. I start to see colours I usually miss, really hear songs I thought I knew, realize how fortunate is my life and how dear the people around me. And I remember that I am loved, whether I've been frantically busy today or not.

