

Confessions of a Minor League Prayer.
St Paul's – 8th February 2004

I learned to pray in bed.

Some time before conscious memory kicked in, my mother taught me to pray before I went to sleep. First, we would sing this song:

*Gentle Jesus Meek and Mild
Look upon this little child
Pity my simplicity
Suffer me to come to thee.*

Looking back, one wonders what impact words such as *pity* and *suffer* had on a child's mind. Rather than *pity my simplicity* perhaps I should have been taught to celebrate it. Did my parents really want me to grow up fast, to lose my simplicity by considering it something worthy of God's pity?

Well, I never asked them. Because I was just a simple child.

Although once we started to teach our own children to pray in bed, Judy and I had changed the song. Now we sang:

*Now at the end of the day
We meet together to say
Guard us while sleeping and
Guide us while waking
Lord, teach us to rest as we pray.*

Once the song was out of the way, Mum taught me to recite a prayer with her. It went like this:

God bless Mummy and Daddy
Mum wrote the prayer, so she got first billing.

Judith and Ann
Yes, I was required to pray for my sisters.

Gran and Grandad
My father's parents

And Aunty Lois
My father's sister, one of my maiden aunts

Grandma and Grandad

My mother's parents

And Aunty Pat

My mother's sister, my other maiden aunt

All my other relations

And make Philip a good boy. A-men.

This last line about making Philip a good boy I think had the less than salutary and doubtless unintended effect of teaching me guilt from an early age, since it seemed based on an assumption that Philip was not a particularly good boy and that this was something that needed God's daily attention. This may have been a correct assumption, of course.

So this was my experience of prayer from a time before I can remember.

Was this prayer? Is this what prayer is supposed to be? Ken asked me to talk today about prayer and, particularly about How To pray. I think he had in mind a little mini-seminar on prayer types and techniques. 101 ways to pray. Seven short cuts to a rich prayer life.

Well, if he, or any of you, had that in mind, I fear you'll be disappointed. It is true that I have experienced a rich variety of ways of doing prayer. God has blessed our family with the opportunity to share worship and prayer with Christians of all shapes and sizes and many nationalities. I've worshipped in churches in Soweto and Salzburg, in Los Angeles and Lesotho, in Richmond and Romania.

I've prayed in small groups, by myself, and in large groups. I've climbed mountains and said a prayer at the top (usually, *Please God give me strength to get back down*). I've been in a prayer group in which a Ugandan bishop and a World Vision President started by praying for 20 minutes each with such eloquence and skill that none of the rest of us were game to say a sentence. Is that prayer?

Before you think this has endowed me with any expertise in prayer you need to understand *why* I have been exploring so many different ways to pray. The answer is, I find it hard to pray. Even today, I feel so dissatisfied with my ability to create an intimate space between me and God that I keep looking, keep searching, keep reading.

So this is not a talk about prayer by a person who has a gift for prayer. I am not a gifted prayer. These are the confessions of a minor league prayer. Some people have the gift of prayer. I do not.

But, I guess for today's purposes this isn't too bad, because at least I can share some of my discoveries about the ways in which people pray. The Holy Spirit works as he wills in the hearts of men and women, and maybe something I say will be useful to you. Maybe one of these methods will help you to create that intimate space between you and God. Let's see.

Because, to come to my final point somewhere near the beginning of this talk, I think the important thing is not how we pray, just that we do pray. Just do it. There are all kinds of ways to pray. Some work for you, some won't. Just as there are many ways to worship. Some

work for me, some don't.

There is no one right way to pray. Probably no wrong ways. Although there may be right ways for you, and wrong ways for you. Let me tell you my story then.

So I begin with prayer in bed. My next experience of prayer, of course, is what happened on Sunday. I grew up in the Methodist Church. We only had communion once a month, but our service pretty much followed the old book of common prayer. Unintentionally and unconsciously the language of the book of common prayer imprinted itself on my mind.

Not only the language, but a particular style of prayer.

It is very meet, right, and our bounden duty, that we should at all times, and in all places, give thanks unto thee, O Lord, Holy Father, Almighty, Everlasting God.

I'll bet more than a few of us know what comes next...

Therefore with Angels and Archangels...

Is this prayer? Well, of course, it is. It's in the Common Book OF prayer after all.

Somewhere along the way I was introduced to Christian Endeavour. This was like an extra Sunday School. As it meet on Sunday afternoon it meant we could be at church ALL day on Sunday.

The most terrifying part of Christian Endeavour was the chain prayer. We always sat in a circle in CE. We would bow our heads and someone would start with a sentence prayer then the person on their left would say another, then the next person and so on around the circle. You'd think it would not be too hard for a dozen or so kids to think of 12 different things to say a sentence prayer about, but I tell you, if you were over number 7 or 8 you often got increasingly panicked as your turn came closer. Higher ups had already got the easy marks like *Thank you God for our church* and *Thank you God for our leaders*.

Usually you were reduced to pray for world peace. And anyone who thanked God for their pets was obviously out of ideas.

Is this prayer? Of course, it is. Over time, we came to work out that there is nothing you cannot pray about. The point was that God is interested in everything. Anything we can think of, we can pray about.

I think I learned about ACTS in Christian Endeavour. ACTS is a little memory aid. It suggests a framework for praying. That prayer has four parts. Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, Supplication.

You begin with A for Adoration. So say something adorable about God. It can be as simple as *Dear God* or *Jesus, you are terrific* or it can be *Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God of Hosts, heaven and earth are full of thy glory*.

After Adoration, comes C for confession. *Sorry Lord, that I haven't thought about you much today* or it can be *We acknowledge and bewail our manifold sins and wickedness.*

Adoration, Confession, then Thanksgiving. What do we have to be thankful for. Tell God in any way you like.

And then Supplication. The things we want to ask for.

Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, Supplication. I like it. It reminds us to put our shopping list at the end. Too often our prayers can be focussed on ourselves. We come to God with a shopping list of requests. The ACTS framework reminds us that God came first, and comes first. It reminds us that we have no particular right to expect God will hear our requests. Yet, if we come to God recognising his place in the universe, confessing our unworthiness and thankful for all he has done, our minds and hearts are in the right frame to ask for things.

So I learned to pray.

When we moved to Melbourne in 1976 and I joined World Vision, I shared an office with a fellow named Phil Smith. Phil had not suffered from a Christian upbringing and had had a dramatic conversion experience only a few months before. No-one had taught him to pray.

World Vision was in the habit then, and I hope still, of having brief department devotions at the beginning of the day. The first time I heard Phil Smith pray I had to open my eyes to see who he was talking to. You see I had learned to start prayers with *Dear God* like I was starting a letter, and to sign off at the end with something like *in Jesus' Name A-men*. But Phil Smith just said *Well now we're all here I'd like to ask about the situation in Uganda, do you reckon we can do something about that God?*

This was quite a revelation to me. Yet, I recognised this as prayer. No doubt. A kind of prayer that emphasised the immanence of God. I doubt Phil Smith knew the word *immanence* but he sure knew that where two or three are gathered together in His name, there is Christ in the midst.

I think the first time we experienced charismatic prayer was in Hong Kong when we lived there in the early 80s. Youth With A Mission had a training centre there and one evening we joined their worship service. I recall we were asked to "sing prayerfully". I knew about singing of course. I was a Methodist after all. But here was an interesting combination. Singing and Prayer. Together.

This entailed singing *Father We Adore You* about 100 times while we stood on our feet and swayed, hands held out, palms up. Well some of them did. I found it quite weird and thought the emotions generated were a bit contrived.

I've been in Charo services since and come to appreciate that this can be another kind of prayer. If ACTS is a framework, or a discipline, that helps us to pray, then I could see this kind of music meditation in the same light. And I saw then, and many times since, how many

people find this combination of music and prayer draws them into a place of intimacy with God.

Different people find different ways to pray, because God made us all differently. And when you overlay cultural differences, things get really interesting.

One time I went to church in Soweto in South Africa. They asked a woman to pray and it was nothing like the kinds of prayer we hear from Audrey or Helen.

First of all it wasn't in English, so I could only take in the rhythms and music of the way she prayed. She began softly. Almost whispering. Then with each sentence she turned up the wick. Little by little there was more energy, more passion, more emotion in her prayers. Soon she was shouting. Then screaming. Then sobbing. Then wailing. And then she began to turn it down. The wail became a sob. The sob a scream. The scream subsided into a shout and finally she was whispering an A-men. She had given her whole emotions into this prayer. And so had we.

By way of contrast, I worshipped in a Romanian Orthodox service. There were three kinds of prayer going on here. First, the prayers of the Orthodox service. Not too dissimilar from the prayers of the Anglican communion, except they are in Romanian.

Next there were the prayers of the choir. All men. Standing to one side of the congregation, who, by the way are all standing all the time. There are no seats in most Orthodox churches. If you have heard a Gregorian chant, you have an idea of what these sung prayers sounded like. There was a bass with a voice so low it rattled windows. And then beautiful harmonies. Long drawn out chords. Soft. Rising and falling. Filling and emptying. A special kind of prayer without words.

And thirdly, there were the prayers of the congregation. They just seemed to pray non-stop regardless of whatever else was going on, although I think it was more ordered than it seemed. All their prayers were accompanied by the sign of the cross, made most vigorously, over and over, faster and faster.

And this was another kind of prayer.

Of course, I have been talking mostly about public prayer. Prayer we engage in together. But Jesus hardly talks about this kind of prayer.

When Jesus' disciples ask him how to pray he says nothing like what I have been talking about. He says

MAT 6:5 "And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. 6 But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. 7 And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. 8 Do not be like them, for your Father knows

what you need before you ask him.

Somewhere along the way I guess I realised that even if there was a place for communal prayer, Jesus was more concerned about private prayer. The one-on-one with God kind of prayer.

Again, this takes many forms. Many Christians practice what we call a “Quiet Time” taking time to read a scripture, or a devotional reading, stopping to listen to God. Prayer in these places can be quite unstructured. It can be more an experience, an emotion, a flow, rather than the sort of thing you can write down or describe in systematic terms.

I know that I found it useful at one stage of my journey to keep a journal. I would copy out a scripture, think about it for a while and record my musings. They’re still there somewhere on my C: drive. This finally led to a sabbatical from work during which I drew together the thoughts of almost 15 years with World Vision and wrote a deep and complex paper on the meaning of Christian Mission. Although I circulated this paper widely I doubt anyone other than me ever read it. But at the end of that time I also wrote a book, *Journeys to Justice*, which many people have found interesting, and one or two even found helpful.

Around this time I still felt that my prayer life, such as it was, was still too focussed on me and my thoughts and not enough on God and his thoughts. I started to explore contemplative styles of prayer. I did not find this at all easy.

My experience was a bit like this one that Adrian Plass describes.

Adrian has decided that he will get up early to meditate on the idea of eternity. He writes in his diary...

PLASS p 89-90

Most people find contemplative styles of prayer difficult. The simple instruction to “clear your mind” makes about as much sense as an instruction to “remove your ears.” Our heads are just full of stuff. But I found there are ways to practise contemplation. I took part in a week long program as part of a Conference once in which we practised meditative techniques. I discovered that it wasn’t just about sitting around waiting to see what would happen, but a constant process of thinking about what I was thinking. Allowing thoughts to enter one’s mind and then examining them, evaluating them. Is this thought about the cross between a ferret and a giraffe something useful, something divine, or just a distraction? Evaluate, put it away. Say a brief prayer or repeat a favourite verse to refocus our minds on prayer. And keep going.

This also is prayer. And many will attest to the power of God to speak into the spaces in our mind as we relax and try to get away from the confusion, muddle and lies of the world.

So what point am I trying to make here? I guess I am saying that prayer works. It works whether we do it well or not. It works whether we feel prayerful or distracted. It works whether we sense God’s presence or feel distant. It just works.

When we introduced email at World Vision people started to use it to send prayer requests. One or two of my colleagues suggested this was inappropriate. People should use the email for business. I disagreed. Instead I encouraged people to respond to prayer emails by pausing in their work and praying. I don't think too many hour-long prayer meetings happened, but I do know that lot of people just stopped for half a minute, said a prayer and then went on with their work.

And you know what happened. Miracles. I wish I had kept a record now, but I came to realise that a lot of those emailed prayers were being answered. An email which went to 300 people in the World Vision office generated a torrent of prayer. And those prayers seemed to make a difference.

So pray. By all means, pray. By whatever means work for you today, pray. It doesn't matter that we're not very good at prayer. It only matters that God is good at prayer. So just pray.

A-men