



Introduction

On this page I will try to explain a few definitions of prayer. Some of these are controversial as people attach different meanings to words like *meditation* and *contemplation*. **Not** all of these meanings describe Christian forms of prayer. The distinctive about Christian prayer is that it is always *relational* - it takes place in the context of a loving relationship between God and us - and just as there are many forms of expression within a loving relationship between two human beings, so there are many ways to communicate in our relationship with God. Some communication can happen quite naturally, just as a young child will learn communication skills by watching and listening to others. But other communication skills need to be taught to a child, like reading and writing. The same can be said for prayer. On the one hand we can speak to God in very simple ways using our mind or voice. But there are other ways of speaking to him that may not immediately come to mind. Some people's understanding of God may hold them back from speaking to him in ways which might have been helpful to them. Then there is the issue of listening. How do we listen to God? Over the centuries Christians have grappled with this question and come up with different answers, which is why different ways of prayer have developed. Prayers can be an overflowing of the heart expressed in shouting, singing, and even dancing, but prayer can also be silence, stillness, and a time of self-emptying before God. So here is my own imperfect attempt to describe what I believe to be the main categories of prayer.

Kataphatic Prayer

This is a Greek word meaning 'with form or images' and it emphasises the communication and relationship we can have with God through all of creation – including our own created bodies. We think our prayers to God using our brain, or speak or sing them with our mouths, or even communicate with our bodies through bowing, kneeling or dancing before the Lord. When the Word became flesh, and Jesus walked the hills of Judah with his disciples, the whole of creation was affirmed as the context through which we can grow in our relationship with the creator. In the Western Christian church it is the Kataphatic (sometimes spelt *Cataphatic*) forms of prayer which are the most common. Here are the main types of Kataphatic prayer.

Praising Prayer

When we praise another person we are celebrating something we can see is good about them. We praise athletes who demonstrate exceptional ability in their sport. We praise artists who create great works of beauty. We praise people for their acts of kindness towards others, or their generosity in giving, etc. In each case we see something which is good in a person, and we acknowledge the good that we see. Some people find praise very difficult to do. This is often because they have had such little praise themselves that they have been left with the inclination to see only the negative in others and themselves. Praise is an essential element in our relationship with others, and God has made us all with the potential for being praiseworthy as well

as for praising. This is because we are made in God's likeness so that something of the goodness of God can be found in each of us. So praising prayer is prayer that focuses directly on the goodness of God. It acknowledges the truth about God. It is a truth that we can be blind to or even take for granted. But praising prayer challenges us not to lose sight of just how extraordinary God's goodness is. It is not done as a way of encouraging God, or building him up. God does not have that kind of need! Rather, as we praise God, so the potential is released for our own transformation into a greater likeness of God, as well as a more deep and loving relationship with him. Psalm 13 : 6 "I will sing the LORD's praise, for he has been good to me."

Repenting Prayer

To repent is to discover and acknowledge the truth that we desire things and do things which are wrong. Some may feel that this is not a strong enough statement; that to repent must be to feel a deep sense of guilt for things done wrong or for the good that we have failed to do. People feel things differently and so the emphasis of repentance needs to be on the acknowledgement of guilt rather than the feeling of guilt. God's desire through repentance is not to condemn us but to convict us. There is no hope to be found in a condemned person. But in a convicted person, in someone who has discovered and acknowledged the truth about themselves, there is the possibility of forgiveness, of healing, and of a new start. There is still the potential for joy! A doctor can only bring healing to a patient when the truth of their disease is brought into the open. Justice can only happen when the truth about a crime is revealed for all to see. Forgiveness and healing will only occur when we have acknowledged the truth of our sinfulness to the God who loves us and whose desire is always for our restoration, and never for our condemnation. In repentance we draw out into the light that part of our self which prefers to live in the shadows and we do this by acknowledging the truth of our guilt to God. Sometimes it can also be helpful to confess our sins to another person that we can trust (James 5:16). Repentance does not come easily to us as our natural inclination is to hide our faults away. But we must not hide them from ourselves or try to hide them from God. We may have a separate time of prayer for repentance, or we can incorporate it into our regular prayers. If we make it our aim in prayer to always be real with God then it should fit naturally into our regular prayer time. Jesus includes it in the Lord's prayer, "Forgive us our sins," and places it in the middle of our relationships with others (Luke 11 : 4), so that is often a good place to do some repenting prayer.

Thanking Prayer

Being thankful is a state of mind. Its starting point is the view that nothing I have is mine as a right, or because I have earned it, but everything has been given to me as a gift. Living in a society which is so individualistic, and has a strong work ethic, it could be easy to see our achievements or possessions as acquired through our own efforts; that we do not need to thank anyone else for what we have. This sort of thinking taps into a deep desire within us for independence, to stand on our own two feet and determine the course of our own lives. But that is not the world which God has made. Maturity is not about being able to live alone well, but to live well with others, and ultimately to live well with God who has provided all the good things we have. It is a part of 'living well' with others that there must be thankfulness, firstly to God and then to those people around us. Psalm 107 is a song of thanksgiving that recalls all the different ways God had acted to look after the people of Israel, and repeats the line, "Let them give thanks to the LORD for his unfailing love and his wonderful deeds for humankind." Good parents will teach their child to say 'thank

you'. Left on their own they might well forget to do so. The Bible plays that same parental role with us as it repeats the message of our need to thank God, as it does in Philippians 4 : 6 "Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, *with thanksgiving*, present your requests to God."

Asking Prayer

God wants us to ask him for things. Pride can get in the way of this as we try to gain things, or make things happen, through our own efforts. But asking is a really important part of the relationship building process between us and God. This is why Jesus strongly encourages us to ask God for things (John 16:24), and the Lord's prayer is full of requests (Matthew 6:9-14). Of course, the most important request we can make is for a relationship with God. Jesus assures us that this request will always be answered with a 'yes', "Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; those who seek find; and to those who knock, the door will be opened" (Matthew 7 : 7-8 see also Luke 11 : 13). Even the robber dying on the cross beside Jesus found this request answered (Luke 23:39-43). But this is not the only thing we can ask God for. God is interested in even the smallest details of our lives, which means that all our desires or needs are important to him and can be asked for. These kinds of requests will not always be answered with a 'yes'. Our sinfulness, spiritual immaturity, and natural human limits to our knowledge and understanding of a situation can lead us to ask for things which God knows would not be good for us (see James 4:1-3). But gradually, through the transforming work of the Holy Spirit, we can grow in maturity and insightfulness to the will of God which will affect both the kind of requests we make and how God responds to them (see John 15:7, James 5:16, 1 Peter 3:12).

Meditating Prayer

The word *meditation* is a problematic word because it means different things to different people. In my description of meditative prayer I am simply talking about the use of our imagination in prayer. Some people will find that using their imagination comes more easily than for others. Some people will also find different surroundings help meditative prayer to happen, whilst others hinder it. In my own experience, sitting still in a silent and darkened room can be very helpful. So here are two ways of doing meditative prayer:

1. Take a gospel story and use your imagination to place yourself in the story. You might be an onlooker, or even one of the characters in the story. For example, you might imagine yourself as Joseph in the stories about Jesus' birth, or as one of Jesus' disciples on the fishing boat when the storm blows up on lake Galilee, or as a person in the crowd when the blind man has his sight restored by Jesus outside Jericho. Allow God to bring the story alive for you and he will show you so much more than you will have seen through a regular bible study. At the end of the session you can imagine yourself talking with Jesus about what you have seen, and how you have responded to the story. This form of meditation is commonly known as *Ignatian*.
2. Another way of doing meditative prayer is by going on an imaginative journey with Jesus. On this journey you could walk with Jesus, drive, or even fly to places and people that you are concerned about; talking to him about the many issues that may come to your mind. For example, you might be concerned about a friend who is ill in hospital. You could

imagine yourself walking with Jesus into the hospital and visiting your friend together, talking about your friend with him. Another example would be to fly with Jesus to a refugee camp in another part of the world and walk around the camp with Jesus discussing the needs of the people there. As you go on these journeys with Jesus try to be open to him speaking back to you and sharing his own heart with you. Also, let your journey be open-ended and see where the Holy Spirit takes you. This form of meditation can help develop a sense of companionship with Jesus as you travel together, as well as a growing sensitivity to the heart and will of God.

Meditation is only mentioned directly in the Old Testament, and mostly in the Psalms. We are told that Isaac would go out into the fields to meditate (Genesis 24 : 63) but no explanation is given as to what he was doing. Our ability to imagine is a gift from God, and so there is no good reason why it should not be another way through which we can communicate with him. Other references are made in the Psalms about meditating on scripture and this may have been more of an exercise in reflection on the text than a use of the imagination. God does speak to us through scripture as we approach it prayerfully, so this is an important way in which God communicates with us. However, the practice of this form of meditation comes more under my first description of contemplative prayer (see below) as it involves 'being present' to the scriptures as we read them.

Contemplating Prayer 1

There are two versions of prayer in the Christian tradition which are commonly called *contemplative*. This first version is about being 'present to God in any particular moment'. Others might use the term 'mindfulness'. Jesuits talk about being a 'contemplative in action'. It begins with being present to God in our Bible study and prayer time, and gradually overflows into more and more of our everyday lives. It is a way of becoming fully attentive to God in the world around us (hence this comes under the heading of *Kataphatic* prayer) which begins in our regular times of prayer as we quieten our thoughts and still our bodies; a practice which is also known as *Centering* prayer. It is a discipline which enables us to see what we otherwise might miss - God at work in creation, the lives of others, and in our own lives. It is a way of living our life intentionally and thoughtfully. To put it simply, a contemplative will notice beauty in small things, see something of God in them and praise him for them. Whereas a non-contemplative will be so full of thoughts and actions that they will pass such objects of beauty without even noticing them, let alone connecting with God through them. "To contemplate means, first of all, to be present to where one is - to be *here* and *now*" (Bishop Kallistos of Diokleia). This is prayer because these disciplines of prayerful silence and stillness bring about a greater consciousness of God's presence and speaking into our lives. It is a form of prayer which is much more about listening than speaking, and it enables us to discern what God is wanting to show us, whilst opening our hearts to the transforming work of the Holy Spirit. An example from the scriptures where this type of prayer happened is in Luke 2 : 19 which says that "Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart." She was attentive to the things she saw and heard. She 'treasured' these things as being from God, and allowed God to reveal himself to her through them. This form of contemplative prayer can lead naturally on to the second form which would come under the category of *Apophatic* prayer.

Apophatic Prayer

This comes from the Greek word meaning 'without form or images', and focuses on the fact that God is both separate and different to his creation. Whereas in *Kataphatic* prayer God, through Jesus, enters creation as a human being and welcomes us into relationship with him as one human being to another, in *Apophatic* prayer we are trying to connect with the God who is not human; who is outside of creation and therefore beyond our understanding; the God who is mystery; the God who is pure love. So, whereas in *Kataphatic* prayer we mostly communicate with God through words, in *Apophatic* prayer we put words to one side and attempt to communicate with the God of love through love. It is in the Eastern Orthodox Christian church that *Apophatic* prayer is more common, and is described here as the second form of contemplative prayer.

Contemplating Prayer 2

The second form of contemplative prayer is also known as the 'prayer of the heart'. It is a prayer of love in which no words are necessary. It would be similar to a parent lovingly watching their child play, or two lovers gazing in silence at each other. Contemplation involves doing exactly this, looking and loving. Possible places in scripture might be Matthew 9 : 36, "When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them", Mark 10 : 21, "Jesus looked at him and loved him." which have both these two elements. Then there were the women who saw and loved Jesus as he died on the cross, "Many women were there, watching from a distance. They had followed Jesus from Galilee to care for his needs" Matthew 27 : 55. In the spiritual classic *The Cloud of Unknowing* we read "Love means loving God for himself alone, above all else, and loving others as oneself. In contemplation God is loved in this way: nothing else is sought. There is a naked intent, a single-mindedness of spirit, directed towards God alone." This form of prayer has as its goal an entering into an experience of God (sometimes called 'union with God'), and the transformation of our capacity to love God (and therefore other human beings as well) which comes through that experience. John of the Cross describes the experience as being "when an effect of the spirit overflows in the senses." Blaise Pascal wrote of his experience as "Joy, joy, joy, tears of joy." It is the heart's response towards God of those who have truly discovered that they are beloved of God.

Mysterious Prayer

I struggled to think of a name for these types of prayers. I could have called them Charismatic prayer, but all forms of prayer involve the Holy Spirit and could not happen without him. I could have called them Grace prayer, because they are a gift from God, but again, without God's grace no prayer would be possible. So I ended up calling them Mysterious prayer because they are types of prayer for which there is a strong element of mystery. Probably the biggest mystery is why God chooses to gift these types of prayer to some people and not to others. But the other mysterious characteristic is in the way they seem to form a special momentary connection between creator and created. Difficult to understand. Difficult to explain. Hence mysterious!

Praying in Tongues

The more technical word for praying in tongues is *Glossolalia*. It is a prayer of words in that it comes from the mouth, and the words may be of another earthly language as found in Acts 2:1-

11. Or it may be of a heavenly language that no one may interpret without the help of the Holy Spirit. Paul writes about both human and angelic tongues (1 Corinthians 13:1) and writes that both tongues and the interpretation of tongues are a gift from God (1 Corinthians 12:4-11). Paul clearly saw the use of praying in tongues as important. He tells the Corinthians "I thank God that I speak in tongues more than all of you." (1 Corinthians 14 : 18), and it does seem at times that a special grace of God is given when people pray in tongues. However, it has also been a gift that has divided churches and made some Christians feel inferior if they do not have the gift. In reality the gift of tongues may be given by God to a brand new Christian or to a Christian of many years. It is not a sign of spiritual maturity. We may certainly ask God for the gift of tongues if it is on our heart to do so, but we cannot demand the gift. If we could demand the gift of tongues it would, by definition, not be a 'gift'.

Special Revelation

There is no such thing as a first class, second class, or even third class Christian, we are all one in Christ. Yet a life steeped in prayer and the pursuit of God is transforming, and that transformation opens us up to the possibility of a deeper form of connecting prayer with God. In Numbers 12 : 6-8 God tells Miriam and Aaron, "When there are prophets of the LORD among you, I reveal myself to them in visions, I speak to them in dreams. But this is not true of my servant Moses; he is faithful in all my house. With him I speak face to face, clearly and not in riddles; he sees the form of the LORD." Moses' faithfulness, but also his humility (see verse 3) meant that God was able to reveal himself to Moses in a way that he did not with others. There are a range of ways in which God gives special revelation. Some people in the Bible received revelation through dreams that left them feeling troubled. Other forms of special revelation were more dramatic. In Isaiah 6, the prophet has a vision of God which overwhelms him and he exclaims "Woe to me! I cried. I am ruined!" Daniel (a man held in high esteem by God, see Daniel 9:23) was another one who had extraordinary experiences of God, and there were many more. Such experiences are a special gift from God and they did not only occur in the Old Testament. Paul refers to such an experience of prayer in 2 Corinthians 12:1-4. Throughout the centuries since Paul wrote of this experience there have been many others who have had similar encounters with God. As it is written in Joel 2 : 28 "And afterward, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophecy, your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions. "