



**A talk during the Week of Guided Prayer at Wells Cathedral, given on Tuesday 2 June by Sr Lizzie Ruth, Community of St Mary the Virgin, Wantage**

---

## **Praying without Words**

Good morning. I thought this morning we could spend a bit of time thinking about praying without words - or as I prefer to call it, praying beyond words.

Perhaps the most simple form of praying without words is just pausing for a moment to become aware of God's presence. Let's do that now at the outset. Let's just take a few seconds to be silent and still, and deepen our awareness of God's presence - both surrounding us and within us. (30 seconds silence)

\*\*\*

I think that many of us very naturally link the word 'prayer' with talking – with us addressing God in one way or another. Perhaps if you were brought up in a Christian home you were encouraged to "say your prayers". Perhaps through church you're very accustomed to singing hymns and praying liturgy. Perhaps you've come across the reminder that a balanced prayer life involves elements of thank you, sorry and please - all ways of us addressing God with words.

So perhaps the next thing this morning is to remind ourselves that prayer is a two-way exchange. In any conversation, there's a time to talk and a time to listen. We all need moments to listen to God, and also just to spend time quietly in God's presence. Our prayer lives shouldn't be one-sided, always us addressing words to God. In fact, in our ongoing conversation with God, it was actually God who initiated the conversation, and actually God is always reaching out to us and addressing us far more than we ever address God in prayer!

One way of listening to God is to simply sit in silence for a while and specifically ask God to speak to us. Like the boy Samuel in the temple, we can just say, "Speak Lord, your servant is listening" and then wait expectantly remembering that God longs to communicate with us, and believing that God will.

Sometimes when we do that, we might sense certain words in our heart that we feel God saying to us.

Other times, instead of speaking to us through words, God might seem to put an image in our mind. And other times, we might feel God communicating something to us at a level deeper than words or thoughts or images - for

example, perhaps a general feeling of God's love, or an assurance that God's got things in hand and everything will be ok.

Let's try this kind of prayer together just for a minute right now. You might like to close your eyes.... God you're always reaching out to us, always communicating to us in love. As we spend a minute in silence now, please help each of us to sense what it is you're wanting to communicate to us at this moment, whether it's words, or an image, or a feeling, or something more intangible... Speak Lord, your servant is listening... (1 minute silence)

\*\*\*

Thank you God. Amen. You might like to open your eyes again. For obvious reasons, this kind of prayer might best be described as Listening Prayer because we were actively listening out for what God might be wanting to convey to us. Do you see that that's slightly different from the first silence we had of simple awareness of God's presence, even though both are silent prayer?

Over the coming minutes I'm going to share with you some other different nuances of wordless prayer. They might all come under the umbrella term 'contemplative prayer' but they're all different strands of it.

Now for another strand... We thought yesterday about praying with scripture. I like to describe the pattern of Lectio Divina as like eating a chewy sweet such as an Opal Fruit or Starburst. First, we experience our initial taste of the scripture passage by simply reading it slowly a couple of times. That's like just putting the sweet in our mouth and noticing its flavour before we begin to chew. Then, we spend time meditating on the words that most stand out to us, or we really enter into the story in prayerful imagination as one of characters. That's the 'chewing' stage. Responding to God in prayer after this time of meditation is like us swallowing the sweet. And then, properly, Lectio Divina ends with spending some with no words or thoughts now – just spending a good few minutes silently resting in the 'aftertaste' of the passage and our engagement with it.

In fact I'd like to offer "Savouring Prayer" as a helpful description of that kind of prayer. We meditate on a passage, we pray with it, and then we end by spending some time at without any words or thoughts, savouring the aftertaste as it were.

Now with the three strands of silent prayer we've thought about so far, the awareness of God's presence prayer, the listening prayer and the savouring prayer, there's been a certain intentionality on our part. I'm going to pause to become more aware of God's presence, I'm going to sit and listen for what God might like to say to me, I'm going to savour the after-effects of this Bible

passage... And we might choose a set length of time to do this: I'm going to do this for 10 minutes, 15 minutes...

But sometimes in the course of life you might experience just getting swept up into a kind of deep wordless prayer for a moment. It might feel a bit like something suddenly launched you into a deeper stillness or silence just for a few seconds or a few minutes. Occasionally, God lifts us up into this prayer out of the blue. Maybe more commonly it was caused by something.

Imagine a skier skiing down a slope. The snow is like our words or thoughts or the Bible or a spiritual book facilitating our prayer. But suddenly a word or a phrase really touches you and you feel something inside you launched into the air as if that word or phrase acted as a ski jump. And now, on the inside, you're just floating in the air for a while, suspended in stillness and in a place closer to God than words can reach.

It's not only words from the Bible or a spiritual book that might occasionally have that effect on you. It might be a beautiful sunset, or sitting in a really peaceful spot in nature, or the sun coming through the window in the silence.

Have you ever experienced this for yourself? I'll call this strand of silent prayer "Airborne Prayer".

As I said, this can happen unexpectedly: maybe it was certain words or a certain stunning view in nature that launched you into the air. Alternatively, maybe your intention was to sit in silent prayer for 15 minutes and after 10 minutes of feeling like you were 'trying', suddenly it felt like God lifted you up into a deeper stillness for a few minutes. If you ever find yourself airborne in the way I'm describing, it's good to stay with it for as long as it lasts. If you were intending to pray with a whole Bible passage but one of the phrases in the first sentence launched you into wordless prayer, don't worry about the rest of the passage – stay airborne as long as it lasts!

Now a slightly different image for you. Imagine a hot air balloon floating in the sky being kept afloat by the occasional blast of fire within it. If we discover something that helps keep us airborne in prayer we can use intentionally like that hot air balloon flame. There might be a certain word or phrase that you find it helpful to use in your silent prayer time, gently repeating it every now and again just frequently enough to keep you in the air above words. That word or phrase might be something like "Abba" or "Jesus" or "Here I am" or "Take me deeper".

Let's now move completely away from words. There's one last style of wordless prayer I'd like to mention this morning, and that's praying in silence with a certain inner posture in mind. Let's look at some examples so you can see what I mean.

*The Cloud of Unknowing* is a spiritual classic written by an anonymous author in the 14th century. It's a book about a form of wordless prayer where you take on a certain inner posture. The reader is encouraged to regularly engage in a kind of silent prayer where they picture three things in their imagination simultaneously. First, they imagine that they're kneeling or sitting on a cloud, and that cloud is hiding from view all the things in life they might be worried about or that might be distracting them. Up here above that cloud, it's just them and God. Nothing else to worry about. Secondly, they imagine that God, who is invisible, is inside a dark cloud in front of them. They're to concentrate all their attention on God who is hidden in that cloud.

And thirdly, they're to lift up their heart to God, and imagine arrows of love for God and longing for God coming out of their heart and going into the God-cloud.

Do you want to have a go at that for yourselves just for a minute? If you close your eyes I'll talk you through it so you can try it out very briefly now, then have a go at home when you've got more time. First of all, imagine yourself sitting on a cloud that's masking from view everything you might be worried about or distracted by, everything on your to-do list, everything that's going on in your life. Forget about everything. It's just you and God for now. And now focus your attention on God who's hidden in a dark cloud in front of you. And now lift your heart towards God and imagine arrows of love and longing shooting out of your heart towards God. (10 seconds)

\*\*\*

Ok. That at least gives you a little taster. As I mentioned, that's the main image of wordless prayer given in the book *The Cloud of Unknowing*. But there are lots of other inner posture mental images you could adopt. You may have often seen, or you may do it yourself, people praying with their hands open on their lap in a posture of receiving from a God who longs to give to them. If you like, in that inner posture you're visualizing the arrows coming in the other direction – from God to you.

And not so different from that is the form of silent prayer where you imagine God as the sun shining on you. You simply rest in God's rays – resting in God's warmth and love and healing.

Do you see - you can consciously choose which kind of inner posture to adopt in your silent prayer – which direction the arrows are going and which kind of image you're attaching to your silence?

Here are three other little examples: kneeling in silent adoration, resting in God's arms, smiling at God and experiencing God smiling back at you. Each has a slightly different focus and feel. And then there's also an inner posture where you let go of all thoughts and images altogether. More like sitting with God in silence in such strong sunlight that you can't see or picture a thing!

So to end I thought we could have around 4 minutes silent prayer together and every 30 seconds or so I'm going to suggest a different inner posture for you to try.

First, I invite you to close your eyes and experience God like sunrays shining warmth and love on you... And now imagine yourself kneeling before God in silent worship and adoration... Now imagine yourself as a child resting on God's lap... Now trying sitting in God's presence without any thoughts or mental images at all... And lastly imagine yourself silently looking at Jesus while he smiles back at you....

Amen. As I said, everything I've described this morning comes under the umbrella term Contemplative Prayer. Within that you'll find that different books and spiritual writers concentrate on different strands that I've mentioned, and that between them they use so many different words to describe these things. You might come across the words Meditation, Contemplation, Acquired Contemplation, Infused Contemplation, Centering Prayer, Resting Prayer, Prayer of the Heart, Prayer of Quiet, Waiting on God, Prayer of Recollection – and that's just to name a few!

What I've aimed to do this morning is separate out the main different strands of wordless prayer for you, and attach to them my own descriptions for the sake of giving you a broad overview and you feeling you can give some of them a go without needing to read a book on them first. Perhaps you might feel inspired to have a go at incorporating a bit more wordless prayer into your own life. Perhaps you might even try it out at some point within the next twenty-four hours...

Sr Lizzie Ruth  
Community of St Mary the Virgin, Wantage

2 June 2026