



A sermon for the Cathedral Eucharist at Wells Cathedral, preached on Sunday 7 June by the Reverend Prebendary Alan Moses, Warden of Spirituality in the Diocese of Lincoln.

The First Sunday after Trinity

We have reached the final day of the Week of Guided Prayer at which my fellow-guides have been assisting members of the Cathedral congregation to think about their life of prayer, both as individual disciples, and as members of the Christian community which worships here.

I am sure my fellow-guides will join me in saying what a joy it has been to be here this past week and to share your common life. It has been a tiring time—but also one of many blessings which will remain in our memories long after the weariness is forgotten. We have met lots of fascinating people who a real desire to grow in the life of prayer. We have been welcomed into peoples' homes and wined and dined deliciously. We have enjoyed sharing, as we do this morning, in the worship of this holy place.

Those who have taken part in this week have been called 'pilgrims.' Pilgrimage reminds us that the Christian life is a journey, through this life to God. Even if we never go on a physical pilgrimage to Jerusalem, to Rome or Assisi, Canterbury or Walsingham, Lourdes or Santiago de Compostela, we are all people of - and on - the Way, with Jesus Christ, who is the Way.

So this week is a staging post, if you like, on the pilgrimage of both individual disciples and of the Christian community into which God has called them. Today is not the end: there is more to come; there is further to go.

Yesterday, guided by one of the vergers, I made a brief private pilgrimage to the place where the ashes of departed members of the Chapter are buried. Among them is a great and holy priest who was one of my predecessors as Vicar of All Saints, Margaret Street in London. Father Kenneth Ross came from there to be Canon Chancellor here. Sadly, his time here was all too brief, as he died less than two years later. It was not the cathedral's fault – his health had been broken by the traumatic experience of having to close the residential choir school at All Saints, which had been at the heart of its life for over a century. It had become financially and educationally unviable, but he was unfairly blamed for it by many.

In happier times, Kenneth had a regular column in the 'Church Times' wittily entitled: “**Ross on Why.**” Readers could write in with questions about the

Church's faith and practice, and he would tell them why we believed this or why we did that. He was a spiritual agony uncle to the Church of England.

So, why prayer? Why should we pray? How should we pray? How can we learn to pray, or to pray better?

When the disciples had witnessed Jesus at prayer, and sensed that this was at the heart of his relationship with the Father, they asked him: “**Lord, teach us to pray.**” In response, he gave them what we call 'The Lord's Prayer – the Our Father.' And if you are struggling to pray – just say that.

In St. John's Gospel, at the end of Jesus' final words to the disciples at the Last Supper, he prays what has been called his '**high priestly prayer,**' or his '**prayer of consecration,**' in which he prays for the disciples who are to continue his mission in the world after his resurrection and ascension, and for those who will come to believe through them. The Letter to the Hebrews teaches us that the risen Lord does not cease to pray for us, but as our great high priest, who is able to sympathise with us in our weakness, because he has shared our life, continues to intercede for us in the presence of the Father.

Our prayers – whether in common or individual – are in fact drawn into Jesus' unceasing prayer – and into the prayer of the whole church, living and departed in the communion of saints – which is not a collection of the heroically holy, whom we could not possibly hope to emulate, but the relationship with all believers, saints known and unknown, which transcends time as well as space.

Some of what we have done this week has been communal – at the Eucharist and the Daily Prayer of the Church, in addresses by some of the guides – and some has been spent in one-to-one conversations with guides each day.

As you go forward on this pilgrimage of prayer, may I suggest that both the communal and individual need to be held together in a creative tension.

Let me begin with the communal. Two members of our group are members of religious communities – whose life is built around a daily routine of corporate prayer – the office and the Eucharist, - as is this cathedral, and Lincoln Cathedral where I now serve in what my children call 'non-retirement', and the parishes I have served in throughout my ministry.

One of the Church of England's foundational documents is the Book of Common Prayer, which provided a simplified and vernacular form of daily liturgical prayer which was meant to involve the whole populace. As has often been said, it was deeply rooted in the Benedictine Rule of daily prayer in community. It is intended to immerse people in Scripture and Sacrament. The reading of Scripture is meant not just to inform us about God and Jesus, but through the work of the Holy Spirit to transform us into the likeness of Christ. The celebration of the

Sacrament is to make of us a Holy Communion, a people consecrated by the prayer of Jesus to be his disciples; not just for our own benefit but for that of the wider community in which we are set.

That Common Prayer or Worship is called the *Opus Dei* – '**the work of God.**' Our prayer is not just a leisure activity, a hobby on the side, something to do in our retirement; but the heart and soul of our common life and the foundation of our personal spirituality. It calls for discipline and perseverance: praying not just when we feel like it, but when we don't.

There was a time when the clerical and choral establishment of a cathedral like this would get on and do it whether people were there or not. Cathedrals were not parishes and did not have congregations. Nowadays, cathedrals like this do have congregations. They are not just there as consumers of beautiful music and services. They are called to take part in the worship and mission and service of this cathedral church.

Liturgical Prayer is not magic. Just as good road systems do not necessarily produce good drivers, if Lincolnshire is anything to go by, so even the best of liturgy and music, preaching and teaching, does not automatically make us good disciples.

That calls for our commitment as individual Christians: we are to devote time set aside and attention paid to our personal prayers of adoration, confession, thanksgiving and supplication. Personal prayer and prayer in common are not alternatives, nor in competition: they complement and feed each other.

Personal prayer can take many different forms and may change as our circumstances do. As that gentlest of the Counter-Reformation saints, St. Francis de Sales teaches in his "Introduction to the Devout Life": parents who are responsible for the upbringing of children cannot be expected to pray and live like Franciscans, young mums will not have the undisturbed time of empty-nesters. Bishops or Deans have duties which mean they cannot live the life of enclosed monks.

Different forms of prayer suit different temperaments or stages in life. One of the roles of spiritual directors or companions is to help people discern which forms of prayer suit their personality and their situation. There is an old adage that we should '**pray as we can, not as we can't.**' There is a truth in this, but not the whole truth. We should seek to grow in prayer, to be more open to conversation with God – which means making space to listen, to pay attention, to absorb what we hear, so that we may be directed and fed by it, and embody it in our lives.

There is another old saying that '**Christianity is caught not taught.**' Again this is true but not the whole truth. The disciples saw Jesus at prayer – and then asked him to teach them to pray. A priest I know, who had grown up as a Baptist, realised at one point in her life that she had never been taught to pray other than asking God for things: so she bought herself a rosary and taught herself to pray using that. The Church, the clergy, have a duty to teach people to pray.

But we should not forget the bit that is true: the contagious effect of people who pray. Some years ago, I heard a sermon by a bright young priest on Candlemas, the Feast of the Presentation of Christ in the Temple. The Holy Family encounter two old people, Simeon and Anna, who recognize the infant Jesus as the light to the nations: The preacher described Anna as the temple bag lady which was witty and attention-grabbing - but neither wise nor kind.

During my ministry I have been blessed to know a lot of Annas and Simeons—old people who spent a lot of time in church praying. I can recite a litany of their names, but I told my fellow-guides the story of one of them. When I was a shiny new curate at Old St. Paul's in Edinburgh, I was trying, with little success, one Saturday evening before Evening Prayer— with little success – to pray in the Lady Chapel. Our Senior Sacristan, Isabella, was moving about the church getting things ready for the following day's services. Isabella was a frugal soul, and she had loose false teeth, which meant she was emitting a series of clicks and whistles as she moved about.

I found this deeply distracting and irritating – until the Lord whispered in my ear that she was saying her prayers. Years later, when she had died, we discovered from her prayer journals how often and how much she prayed. She had to limit her morning prayers to two hours, otherwise she would be transported and not get to her work in a law office on time. So her main prayer time was kept for the evenings.

The point of telling you this story is that people like Isabella, the Annas and Simeons who fill God's house with prayer, amidst all the activities needed to keep places like this going, the busyness which can all too easily make us forget what they are for, to lose touch with their heart and soul, are those who might just make it possible for people who just wander in to look, then see someone at prayer, to catch the faith, to want to learn to pray; or those who come in need, like the desperate woman in today's gospel, to touch the robe of Jesus.

The Reverend Prebendary Alan Moses
Warden of Spirituality, Diocese of Lincoln

7 June 2026