



A sermon for the Cathedral Eucharist at Wells Cathedral, preached on Sunday 31 May by Sister Lizzie Ruth, Community of St Mary the Virgin, Wantage

Week of Guided Prayer/Trinity Sunday

May I speak in the name of our Triune God who is inviting each of us deeper into prayer... Amen.

As we begin this Week of Guided Prayer, I can share with you a little prayer journey of my own I've been on. It's related to my prayer corner in my cell.

In our way of life at my Convent in Wantage, in addition to our Daily Eucharist and our five-fold Daily Office, each Sister also sets aside time each day for her own personal prayer. One hour at some point in the early morning and at least half an hour at some point in the evening.

For these private prayer times, we're free to pray in the location we find most conducive to prayer: whether in chapel, or in our cell, or even in the garden. It's interesting how we're all so different. One Sister might find chapel most conducive to prayer. Another might prefer to be outside to pray. One Sister might find complete stillness helps her to pray. Another might find that certain types of prayer come more easily to her while walking, or that she hears God more easily while doing a silent activity like knitting. I've really enjoyed experimenting with all of this. I do love praying outside but my main spot for my personal private prayer times is my cell.

We don't have pictures on the walls in our cells. I am, however, allowed one icon or picture to pray with in my prayer corner. One icon or picture. A Three-Person God to gradually deepen my relationship with each day.

Maybe a fairly obvious choice of picture for my cell would be Rublev's Icon of the Trinity. At least that way I've got all three Persons of the Trinity in the one picture. And there's the way in which we 'the viewer' are drawn in to be the fourth person round the table in conversation and meal fellowship and communion with the Trinity.

Great image of prayer! But for some reason that icon doesn't resonate so much with me. No shame in that. I've been advised by various spiritual guides over the years, "Pray as you can, not as you can't." Different ways of praying and different

things in prayer work for different people. Do what works for you and your spirituality.

What about an image of just the Holy Spirit? That would surely represent the whole Trinity. The Spirit proceeds from both the Father and the Son. It's the Spirit within us who helps us cry both "Abba Father" and "Jesus is Lord" and helps deepen us in both those relationships – the child dynamic and the disciple dynamic. And of course it's the Spirit who helps us to pray. Great focus for my prayer corner.

Well, I tried an image of the Spirit, but a visual representation of the Holy Spirit tends to be a dove, or perhaps a flame. And looking at a picture of a dove or a flame, even though it represents the Person of the Holy Spirit, isn't the same as looking at an actual image of a person. I find the latter more, well, personable, and Christian prayer is supposed to be conversation, communion, interpersonal relationship.

Another thing I've noticed in trying to find the right prayer focus for my cell is that I find it very powerful to have a picture or icon in which the person's eyes are looking directly into mine. I read a book once that was actually a kind of handbook for couples wanting to increase their intimacy. I was drawn to it because Song of Songs is one of my favourite books in the Bible and I like the Christian mystical tradition of our soul being in a very intimate relationship with God. I had a spiritual hunch that this book about intimacy might have something to teach me about prayer.

Wow!!! There were some simple exercises in this book that to this day have had SUCH a huge impact on my prayer life. One of them was suggesting that the couple spend a good 10 minutes or so just looking into each other's eyes. I've tried that many times with an icon of Jesus and every time I've been blown away by how powerful it is. Reminds me that one of the most profound descriptions of prayer is attributed to a simple peasant who, when asked what he did in his prayer time, replied, "I look at Him, and He looks at me".

Another exercise the book suggested was the "melting hug" where you hug each other for about 10 minutes, concentrate on the feeling of being held by the other person, and experience the subtle barriers between you gradually melting away. With a little creativity – a cushion, or just one's imagination – that can be both a very restful and a very healing form of prayer.

And then there's my favourite: sitting face to face, again for about 10 minutes, with your hands on each other's heart... Try that with God in your prayer time and prepare to have your spiritual life profoundly deepened!

So, anyway, I'd narrowed the picture choice down to 'an image of a person with direct eye contact'. Now there was just the question of which Person of the Trinity's eyes to look into. Well, Jesus' made the most sense. He is, after all, the exact image of the invisible Father. In his face is the light of the knowledge of God's glory.

But, sometimes, I feel I need to interact in prayer with God as 'Father' more so than with Jesus, and that a picture of God as Father really helps that. Jesus doesn't mind that. He's delighted! And other days, I feel I need to interact with God as 'Mother' more so than with God as 'Father'. And I don't think any of the Trinity mind that! When Jesus taught us to call God "Abba" and when the Holy Spirit helps us cry "Abba" – it's the sheer intimacy and the 'young child' element of our relationship with God that's being emphasised. It's not a description of God's gender.

And so after much fun and fascinating experimenting in prayer, I've now ended up with four pictures that live in a drawer, and because I really value all of them, they take it in turns to be the prayer focus in my cell: one of Jesus looking directly into my eyes which allows me to look directly into his, a secular classical painting of a couple in love to which I've attributed my own layers of Christian symbolism, a painting of God as Father that I found on Pinterest, and a picture of God as Mother that I had lot of prayerful fun creating myself using AI.

Well that's me just describing one interesting journey in prayer I've been on. As we enter into the journey of this Week of Guided Prayer, whether or not you're one of the Pilgrims participating in the week I offer each of you something to ponder. I wonder if you have a spot at home that you find most conducive to prayer. And if you were able to create a little prayer corner or focus somewhere, I wonder what you would choose to be in yours and why...

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