



A sermon for the Cathedral Eucharist at Wells Cathedral, preached on Sunday 4 October by the Reverend Gill Sakakini, Cathedral Missioner.

Prayer and Art

The sixth in a series of sermons for the Year of Prayer at Wells Cathedral.

May I speak in the name of the Father and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I wonder what you think of when you hear the words prayer and art together? For the next little while, I encourage you to explore this with open hearts and minds because it isn't about how good we are at either art or at prayer. Phew, I hear you say! One thing that links art and prayer is that they are embodied activities; when praying we might bow our head, kneel or gesture with arms or hands. We might smell incense, see a candle or walk as we talk with God. Making art is also a multi-sensory activity; whether it's the feel of crumbly charcoal, the smell of clay, or the sight of inspiring beauty through a camera lens. So, what kind of praying is possible through art, can art be prayer, and can anyone do it?

Let's turn to the American poet, Mary Oliver who suggests what prayer is and isn't.

Prayer

*It doesn't have to be the blue iris,
it could be weeds in a vacant lot,
or a few small stones;
just pay attention,
then patch a few words together
and don't try to make them elaborate,
this isn't a contest
but the doorway into thanks,
and a silence in which another voice may speak.
— Mary Oliver (Thirst)*

The poet wants us to know that prayer is about looking, I mean really looking - not what we think we see but what is *actually* there. Sometimes, I invite people

in groups I lead to draw a lettuce from memory which nearly always proves challenging and highlights the fact that most of us - however much we grow, prepare or eat lettuce - don't pay very deep attention to its shape and form. It's not surprising, though, that we've forgotten how to attend to what is in front of us because our world is dominated by fast images on screens everywhere we go. If prayer and art are to happen at all we need to give ourselves permission to set some time aside, and in my experience this is easier to achieve with others.

What might help us cultivate a meaningful way of seeing? For 5 years I've led a weekly outdoor sketching group in a park. After saying our names, we disperse in silence across the park with a task to draw trees or plants through the seasons, whatever the weather. While the majority of people may not consciously pray, per se, I perceive a deep connection taking place between hand and eye and object, between drawing alone and sharing with others which is like talking and listening to God in a different way. At the end of sessions, I notice how the drawings communicate a growing love and gratitude for beauty which comes from sustained contemplative looking in the peace of the park. This may be Mary Oliver's opening of a *doorway into thanks, and a silence in which another voice may speak*.

In the Bible the Psalmists encourage us to pay attention to the natural world. They speak of trees clapping their hands, the bread of tears, mountains in the heart of the sea, and a table of food spread out. If we let our imaginations roam around these images, they somehow embed themselves in us and bring fresh meaning in our prayers. We also become attuned to the idea that God is always seeking us out and longing for us to come and speak and be. During the Week of Guided Prayer in June one participant was surprised that God communicated through a road-sign, something he saw every day but which on *this* day caught his attention significantly.

Let's return to the poem about prayer again. Mary Oliver suggests that, having paid attention, we patch a few words together. What if instead we playfully pieced together collage papers or fragments of coloured glass, and in the process expected to encounter God? As we remember St Francis today we get the sense he may have enjoyed similar playfulness, imagining Sister Sun, Brother Fire and Brother Moon, minerals, plants and animals to praise their Creator in the *Canticle of the Creatures*.

Sometimes, however, we don't know what to pray or have no words in our weakness and it is then that the Holy Spirit brings what we need, as St Paul writes to the Romans. What if we expressed our groans too deep for words with drawing tools and discovered God's will and ways through the creative

process? This can be liberating and even the disappointment of a failed clay pot has the potential to help us listen to the God who created both us and the materials we use.



It's not just about *making* art though. Sometimes looking at a painting, sculpture or photograph moves us to pray. This week I accompanied a collaborative art installation called *The Gleaning* to Holy Island in Northumberland (@thegleaning_shepton). As the title suggests, the large textile pieces, 11 in all, were made from gathered fragments stitched together which hang in front of clear glass windows. *Peace* is the title of one I have to show you, based on a painting by Piero della Francesca, called *The Baptism of Christ* in the National Gallery - which you may know. Before making the piece, we first contemplated the painting and noticed the harmonious palette of pale colours and the strong vertical composition as well as the depiction of the Trinity set in the Tuscan countryside. Next, we asked questions of the art and allowed it to ask questions of us which inspired imaginative prayer, first in words then in silence.

The piece we created went beyond both word and image when we pixilated a copy of the painting to the extent that only abstracted pale colour blocks re-

mained. Each segment is hand dyed, mostly from plants which prompts thankfulness for what the earth offers up. When people view this panel, they often speak of feeling engulfed or immersed as they gaze at and through the shapes where they find rest for their souls. To answer an earlier question- in this sense, art can be a form of prayer.

In this Year of Prayer and beyond, there are many more ways to explore prayer and art. I've enjoyed finding images throughout our Cathedral Church which connect - often quite playfully - with the Lord's Prayer. You'll soon be able to pick up this resource and pray a well-known prayer with a different dimension. In January I'll be teaching a course called Imaging the Story (<https://www.imagingthestory.com/>) which is an invitation to make, view and discuss art across the whole biblical narrative.

And finally, creativity is a gift we *all* possess to put into action. Christians believe humankind is made in the image of God so we therefore can create in our particular human way, taking up the raw materials of the earth to imagine broadly, to make joyfully and pray with all God's abundance.

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