

Dicipleship

A letter about prayer

By bishop Åke Bonnier, Diocese of Skara



Dear parishioner!

This is my annual letter from me to You. We are amid our three-year period of discipleship and this year we will deepen our understanding of discipleship with the theme of prayer.

I have a habit. I pray every day. Usually, I pray for what has touched me during the day, for what worries me in the world, for what I am grateful for, for what I have received from others and from God, and much more! I usually share my prayer on Facebook, where I always ask: Do you want to pray with me? For me, prayer has become a habit I do not want to live without.

Do you have a habit? Something you do every day, something you would miss if you didn't do? May I challenge you to make prayer a habit of yours, something to try every day?

Does it help to pray? Does prayer work?

When will I have time to pray?

You may be wondering why I give you this challenge. Maybe you are already praying and can happily say 'yes, I do have the habit of praying'. Maybe you pray everyday or at times when life doesn't turn out the way you thought. Maybe you turn my challenge down and say that you do not have the time, that your life is filled with commitments, work and responsibilities. Maybe you feel that you get more done by action than by praying, that your everyday life is already full, that you do not want one more thing to do and plan for. Or maybe you are asking: Is it worthwhile praying, does it even help?

When the world looks as it does, I too, sometimes wonder. It is hard to pray for peace in the world when wars just seem to continue, or to pray that no one should starve or be subjected to violence or violation of rights and integrity when it happens every day. What is then the point of praying?

I do think it helps to pray. But we don't always get what we ask for. It doesn't always turn out the way we want. Prayer is not a transactional act-like when we deposit into an account and then expect to be able to withdraw the corresponding amount- being sure we get what we 'pay for'. In a way, prayer is something other than what our everyday life is filled with. At the same time, prayer is part of everyday life, but not as another task to complete, a responsibility that rests on our shoulders, or even something we can do well, in a correct manner. To pray is to enter a relationship, a relationship to life itself, to the one who gave us life. A relationship is nothing to 'manage'- but to live. Prayer is starting a conversation with God, a conversation that does not have a given direction but that continues throughout life. It is a conversation where we can come in contact, not only with God, but with ourselves, deep within, and where we are offered an opportunity to live with what is both difficult and wonderful.

It is true that prayer takes time, just as relationships do. You actually have to take a moment to pray, otherwise there will be no prayer, no relationship. And yet, I am bold enough to say-prayer does not take time away from anything else. The time that prayer takes, creates time. Time that is about finding a different focus from what I myself can control.



Perhaps one can say that it is a time for handing over and for receiving. In prayer I hand over to God what I worry about, fear for, long for, hope for and rejoice in. And I receive the time and focus that come out of the good that lies in not holding all power. What do I mean by this? The good that comes from not holding all power is all about me not being God. Everything in the world is not on my shoulders. In the surrendering act of prayer, when I cry out to God about war, famine and abuse- I am reminded about what is within my power to be responsible for, and what is not my responsibility. In praying this way, I am also reminded to put my trust in God, to rely on God having the ability to do what is Gods to do. We call this 'the hearing of our prayers', the times when we experience that God hears our prayers, that we see something actually happening, because we pray.

We pray in service of the good

Even though you don't 'do' anything when you pray, in the sense of performing an act, you can say that prayer is an act of resistance. The words and the meaning of a prayer are, among other things, to stand up against all that destroys humankind and all of God's creation. When we pray for the world, for the creation, for our neighbor, for peace – then we 'put ourselves at the disposal of the good, on God's side in the fight against that which wants to destroy life for us and for the earth' (Lars-Åke Lundberg, 'Prayer! The language of hope. A small school of prayer' p.60). This, dear parishioner is something we do only by praying! To pray is to have the courage to believe, hope and plan for another kind of world: a world of togetherness. When we pray we enter into that togetherness. To pray is to step into such a kinship, because we do not pray to our private God, nor to the God of the Swedish people, nor to the God of the protestants or the Pentecostals, but to- in accordance with the teaching of Jesus about prayer- our Father. In the three-letter word 'our' lies our confession to a common God and thus to a single humanity. This, I believe, is profound!

Finding the prayer that already is

Our new archbishop Martin Modéus says that the prayer we may be concerned about, wondering what it is or

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how it should be spoken, which words may be the right ones for it -that prayer is already in us. 'The understanding that prayer is something we create ourselves, based on our own preconceived notions easily gets in the way of the prayer that is already there, and prevents us from seeing it. He continues: 'there are plenty of books on how to pray, and that is well enough. The problem is that it creates the impression that you must be knowledgeable to pray. However, prayer, like breathing, comes as a gift' (Modéus, Finding the prayer that already is p. 20).

It is a great relief to think that prayer is already within us, that it is not something that can turn out to be right or wrong, or something we can do well or do poorly- prayer is a gift just like breathing. Prayer can't be wrong. The primary and most natural form of prayer is our breathing- to breath in and receive life and to breath out and live. It is hard to imagine a more profound image of grace than to, despite everything that is and that has been, receive life, treasure it and live it.

There are many ideas and thoughts about what our prayer is and how we should pray. In the end, maybe the best is simply to try, to be still and to let your thoughts



be in the merciful knowledge that you are seen, affirmed and loved- not because of everything you cope with, not for everything you struggle to change in your life, not because you manage to be a good parent, spouse, partner or friend- but simply because you are you! Be still for a while knowing that you are alive, that life is a gift from the one who wants you, just as you are, to live! Knowing this, in this awareness, we can live. This is how simple prayer can be.

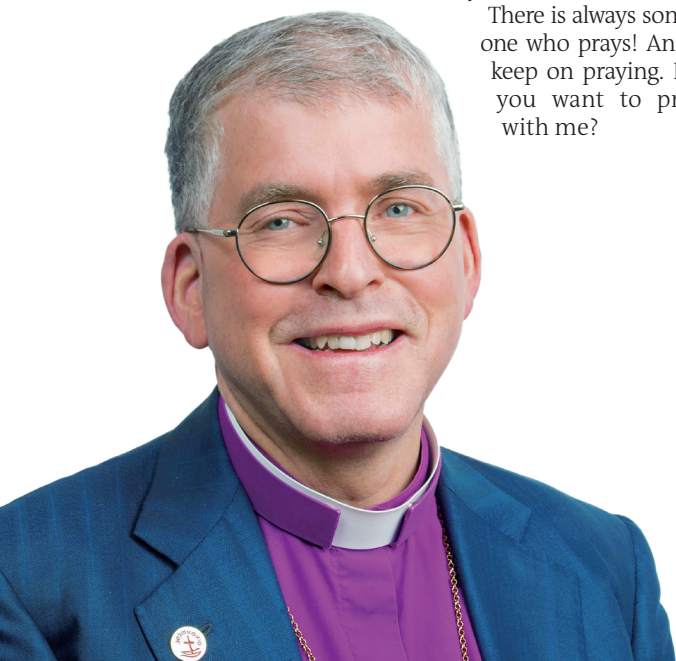
If you want to use words when you pray, I will share a prayer that you can pray every day. Perhaps you are already familiar with it- the 'Serenity prayer': God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and wisdom to know the difference. This prayer is a great help when you get stuck and don't know what to do. Many pray it every day, even people who do not consider themselves Christians or believers. They use it as a sacred habit to be reminded of what is important and what is less important, supporting them to live life as it is given.

My invitation to you- get yourself a sacred habit!

Dear parishioner- with this letter I want to invite you to a sacred habit: try to pray with some regularity! Maybe the evening works best for you, as it does for me. Maybe morning is a time that suits you better. Or you pray whenever you are out in nature enjoying the beauty that surrounds us. It may be as simple as breathing in, reminding yourself to open yourself to life, and breathing out reminding yourself to live the life that is right now yours. There are also apps to download that may help you to find your routines for prayer. Of course, you can go to church and pray, alone and/or together with others. It is powerful to get together for a jointly worded prayer addressing what is currently happening or joining the prayers that have been used for decades or centuries. The church is a community of prayer, a community where everyone is welcome. Always!

Finally, I want you to know that even if you can't bring yourself to pray, there is always someone praying for you. It can be comforting to know when you don't have the strength to pray. Within monasteries around the world there are people, monks and nuns, who have committed to this as their most important work, to pray for the world, for you and for me.

There is always someone who prays! And I keep on praying. Do you want to pray with me?



Questions:

1. Have you ever, intentionally, prayed?
2. Do you have a favorite prayer, one that you can share with a friend or a neighbor perhaps?
3. What caught your attention in this letter?

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "J. Pernier".

Svenska kyrkan 
SKARA STIFT