

back page interview

'The truth is that all of us find praying tricky'

Michelle Eyre
chief prayer officer,
Discovering Prayer

Discovering Prayer helps people to explore Christian prayer and meditation, learning from the ancient traditions of nuns and monks. People can listen online to our 40 meditations based on the Gospel of John. The aim is to help people to restore balance in their lives, and refresh their relationship with God. We also lead retreats and workshops.

I believe there's a movement of the Holy Spirit which is calling people to pray afresh, to listen, and to let God carry more of the load of things that we try to achieve, perhaps sometimes in our own strength.

The rise in the number of lay religious indicates this. Oblates (I'm one of them), tertiaries, new religious orders — there are more than 5000 people living outside community yet drawing from the same well. There's new life in traditional religious communities with new online outreach, and the start of the St Anselm Community at Lambeth Palace. 24-7 Prayer has mobilised people across the world, and there are many new religious orders, such as the Northumbria Community, and Contemplative Fire.

One of the biggest barriers to prayer is guilt. People have an idea that it's about getting up at 5 a.m. and praying for an hour — setting themselves goals that are not God's goals. The truth is that all of us find it tricky.

And each person's way of praying changes at different times in their life. An oblate brought me a recording of evensong before Harriet was born, because she warned me that I wouldn't have time to pray. One person gets up in the night and listens to us when she can't sleep. In the past year we've had new people joining the website every day, and more than 1000 people have taken part either online or at events.

Many of us want to pray, but pretty much everyone finds it difficult to get going in prayer, and to keep going. Discovering Prayer helps people to learn to pray in simple practical ways. We major on taking it slowly, and not setting goals too high; but truly believe that setting aside even ten minutes a day can be the start of a transformation — not just for our own life, but for a life of service to others.

It attracts Christians and seekers — people who want to learn more about prayer and meditation — and I want it to be for everybody.

Our church is Evangelical, but I find labels unhelpful. I'm very comfortable with liturgy. I love cathedrals — I used to worship in York Minster — but I'm also happy in Low churches where there's simplicity. I'm talking to Quakers

and Roman Catholics, and have a "seeking atheist" on our board.

That's why I gave up my job. I thought it was really important to make prayer accessible to people. I've been doing this full-time for 18 months.

I'm a kind of social entrepreneur. I wrote business plans for Discovering Prayer, set up a high-calibre advisory board, and I'm now creating audio meditations, recording them with a professional company, and working with my brilliant husband, Rob, in the evenings. He's a web architect, and set up our website.

My days are really varied, but after prayer time and school run I usually pray for those using the website, have a look at the plan, procrastinate by looking at social media — especially Twitter — and then get to the task of the day. Tomorrow, for example, I'm writing an email guide to prayer which will accompany our free trial, then meeting Emma Pennington to talk about the Oxford Festival of Prayer [tomorrow]. It's amazing: a group of people decided to celebrate different forms of prayer, and provide teaching and space for people to learn that there's more than one way of praying. It's a day-long event which has been going for five years, and it's already sold out. I'll be there with headphones so people can try out the meditations.

I go to Anita Wright, who's an actor and top voice-coach, who volunteered her time to help me. She's helped both with script-writing and to make the audio recordings.

My background as a dancer has taught me to have a professional approach to creative tasks. Actors train for years before making audio books, and there's a reason for this, because practice improves diction and range of tones, which makes listening easier. I'm not acting when I record the meditations, but the way the voice is used is important.

My first experience of God was as a small child, when I had a high fever. My mother prayed that God would look after me. I believed in God, though I never went to church as a young child, and had little experience of the Jesus story.

I committed my life to Christ when I was 19 — not because of what anyone said, but because I met some Christians who I thought were exceptional. There was a joy about them, and what they celebrated in church seemed to permeate the rest of their lives. Though life is not always easy, the joy that I experienced then has often been real, in a way that it wasn't before I came to faith.

God taught me to pray, but with help from the nuns and monks at Wantage, Mucknell, Fairacres, and Malling Abbey. They didn't tell me what to do, but helped me to see and acknowledge God's gentle guidance, and prayed for me.

Perhaps there is a lack of teaching for us all about the variety of different types of prayer. I was staggered when a vicar friend of mine told me that there was no teaching on prayer at her theological college, and no preparation for pre-ordination retreats. This explains why some people go to the pub during their pre-ordination retreat.

If people have not learned the value of silence, and of abiding in Christ, why would they want to pass this on to others? Perhaps this also



explains why so many of us are so busy.

Everyone is welcome to try out saying a daily office.

Day retreats are increasingly valued, but I have a question mark about themed retreats. Is it too much about entertainment, and famous speakers? Not that I don't enjoy such things.

"Contemplative prayer" is not a term I use. It seems to mean different things to different people. I usually talk about silent forms (plural) of prayer, and it can take a bit of looking to find a group that meets near you, and that you have time to go to. This is why we've set up Discovering Prayer.

Prayer is one of the cornerstones of our relationship with God. It's how we learn to listen to God, and it empowers all our Christian service. Jesus prayed all over the place during his ministry.

I grew up in Reading, Berkshire, with my parents and sister Mel, who is a musician. Then I became a dancer with Springs Dance Company, having studied at the Royal Academy of Dance. I tested my vocation to the religious life for two-and-a-half years, before realising I had a vocation to be an oblate.

I became an occupational therapist, a manager, married my gorgeous husband, joined St Andrew's, Oxford, and had a daughter, Harriet.

She is seven. For many parents, it's difficult to go on retreat when they have children; so the first thing I did was to organise a mini-retreat in our church for two hours, with a crèche on a Saturday morning. It wasn't silent, but I think allowing noise is a good thing, because this is life; and it's also good for children to see people being quiet and praying.

For some people, keeping five minutes of silence is terrifying. To

turn the radio off and wash up in silence, gently interceding for someone, perhaps — that's a very new experience.

I love the West Country for holidays. Really, you can't beat Cornwall, can you? I'd also really like to go to Sicily.

I like the sound of the sea, because it reminds me of childhood holidays that seemed to go on for ever — in a good way. I'm happiest outside, with people I love, in city or rural locations.

I was influenced by my keenly atheist junior-school head teacher, who taught all religions in assembly out of duty, and accidentally enthused me for Christianity with the story in Ephesians of putting on the whole armour of God.

I'm working on living a life of prayer; so I do try to go for a prayer time and office each day. I then pray a lot, in small bursts through the day. This is actually quite simple and easy to do. I pray for people after I've met them, just a short holding them before God in prayer. I intercede for people who ask me, and if there's a serious, long-term request I pass it on to the Sisters. What motivates me to keep going is a belief that my small efforts are pleasing to God, and somehow bless others in ways I may never know.

I'd like to be locked in a church to dance with Martha Graham, the late founder of the Center of Contemporary Dance, though I reckon she'd be a bit fierce, and I might not be able to move the next day. And could it be a cathedral, please: the kind that makes your spirits soar?

Michelle Eyre was talking to Terence Handley MacMath.
discoveringprayer.com
michelle.eyre@discoveringprayer.com

IT IS the summer of 1976 all over again. The heat builds up until noon, then turns down a notch or two. The trees burn for a bit, then creak and sigh. The mason bees buzz outside their crumbly mansions in the track, and the hornets, as big as little birds, swarm by the ruined bread oven. A kind of high-temperature intensity, plus a torpor, rules all things.

A collection of Cornish ghost stories tumbles from behind the radiator. Dated 1974, it is the work of my first writer-friend, James Turner, now in heaven. Surprisingly mint from such dusty hiding, and entitled *Staircase to the Sea*, it is set on the Cornish coast — that violent edge of it called Bedruthan Steps, where he and I talked "writing" by the day, to the ceaseless crash of the Atlantic far below.

When he died, a year or two later, I returned from Suffolk to speak at his funeral, and the hearse, with only me and the rector in it, travelled to the crematorium. Strangers to each other, we scarcely spoke. Every few minutes, a mile or two of James's and my Cornwall passed by in the great heat — a hill, a tower, a pub, all sizzling in the sun. Thirty miles to Truro, where many wreaths were wilting in the racks.

I cannot remember a word I said, feeling sorry for the young curate who had never heard of either of us. The dead man's address remains vivid up until this moment when his novel fell from the radiator. It was Parsonville, St Teath.

Our minds are curiously retentive and rejective. So I can hear every decibel of the Atlantic as it crashed on to Bedruthan Steps, but not a word of what I said at the funeral. James's widow had stayed at home, rather as women do at a Highland funeral. She had looked bewildered



word from Wormingford

The discovery of an old book takes Ronald Blythe back to 40 years ago

as much as sad. It had all been so sudden, that final Sunday: holy communion at the eight-o'clock, coffee with the neighbours, a roast for lunch, a BBC concert at three, some of the new novel rattled off on the tall Remington, a letter to me in his Gothic hand, and then the pipe falling from his mouth at bedtime.

When I got off the Cornish Riviera train, his widow, Catherine, said: "What did he mean — going off like that?" People can be very indignant about death. I managed a few hours at Bedruthan Steps, his "staircase to the sea", the title of the novel from behind the radiator.

They say that the heatwave will go on for days. The white cat sleeps 20 feet up in a tree. The ancient farmhouse is cool within and baking

without. It is the quality of such buildings. Its water supply runs near freezing. Walking in the garden, I saw what at first I thought were burnt emblems on stilts, but which turned out to be old roses, York and Lancaster, Duchesse de Somebody or other, and John Clare. And St Edmund, of course. And wilting water plants and bright-as-a-button heart's ease.

My Cornish friend was 68 when he died: a good age, I thought then. But, later, one changes one's mind. Animals never change their minds. They like a routine, a place, a temperature; and, in the white cat's case, a height. The birds like to sing at dawn in the summertime, and are Augustine in their collective voice. Heaven knows what they are saying. But it gets one out of bed.

Another hot day. People return from the Italian holiday they booked in winter, feeling short-changed. My friend's letter says that "Cornwall was hell over Easter, but our new vicar is the goods." But one can't have everything. Although my house at this moment says that I might.

Printed by Mortons Printers and Publishers, Newspaper House, Morton Way, Horncastle, Lincolnshire LN9 6JR; registered as a newspaper at the Post Office

ISSN 0009-658X



9 770009 658151