

## Time on our Hands

"I've a question for you, Father, how do you pray?"

If I had a pound coin for every time someone has asked me that question I would be a richer man than I am today! It is a question asked by the disciples of Jesus, "Lord teach us to pray". It is asked by so many people when they begin to realise that there is something greater than them at play in their lives. I am sure it is asked by us all at different times in our lives, I have asked the question myself more times than I care to remember. I have had lots of answers, but I think the essence of all the answers is summed up by Thomas Merton:

*The great thing is prayer. Prayer itself. If you want a life of prayer, the way to get it is by praying.*

It sounds so obvious, it almost sounds a trite answer to our question that sometimes has come out of deep soul searching. Yet it is the most profound answer. You can read every book there is about playing the piano, but until you sit down in front of the keyboard and put fingers onto keys it's simply knowledge for the sake of knowledge. To play well you have to sit down and practice often. You will not learn to pray by reading lots of book about prayer, you will only learn to pray by praying.

When I was at college I went to talk to the Dean about prayer. I was struggling with the 30 minutes of silent prayer that started each day after the Eucharist and before breakfast. What do I do for 30 minutes? I remember saying that I had read quite a few books about prayer, especially during that 30 minutes of silence. The Dean sat and listened and eventually stopped me. His response was to say, in so many words, "don't read, do!" What he talked about was filling the silence with attention to God. No books, no tricks, an ancient form of prayer that becomes a part of life, but takes practice. He did give me a book to read, not in chapel but before I went to bed, "The Way of a Pilgrim" by R.M.French.

It tells the story of a nameless Russian pilgrim as he tries to search out the meaning of St Paul's phrase, "Pray without ceasing". He is introduced to the Jesus Prayer, an ancient form of prayer that was popular in the Eastern Church but is now practiced world-wide by many people. "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy upon me, a sinner." The first half is repeated as we breathe in and the second half as we breathe out. It sounds so simple, just like the answer to the original question but it is profound. It puts us in the right relationship with Jesus, he is Lord, and Son, and we rely on his mercy because we need his forgiveness. It moves with our breathing, reminding us that the Spirit is the breath of God for us, each time we breathe in we breathe in His Spirit. The repetition of the words over time quietens the mind and heart until we are allowing God to fill the silence with himself and his voice. If we find ourselves drifting, and we all like to drift in prayer, the words bring us back to the one who is most important and who is the focus of our time.

You will learn to pray by praying because the Spirit will fill you as you breathe to live, and you are spending time with Jesus so will become more like him, and God the Father will draw you to himself as he fills your life as he has filled all those who have asked the question, "Lord, teach us to pray".