

Foundations

The way of prayer with Julian of Norwich

This course is based on the teaching of the English mystic Julian of Norwich. (1342-1420) Julian is a joyful woman. Her teaching is profound, but has a great depth of warmth and love. In her 10th revelation, she lays down three foundations of prayer, from which the Christian can not only pray in strength, but with joy and confidence. For those who find prayer a struggle, and even a burden, here is sparkling water to refresh.

Those who want to go further into prayer will find material on our website. Go to the PRAYER STORE page of www.serving-africa.org. This material might be of interest:-

Into his heart - a course on mystic prayer.

Into the flow - an explanation of intercession.

The Chartula of St Francis - teaching on prayer based on writings of St Francis.

The Navigation – St. Brendan's teaching.

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Introduction

All Christians know that they should pray, but many of us struggle to enjoy praying. It's like cleaning our teeth - we know we should do it, but often forget! Julian of Norwich has some good things to say about prayer - the basic straight forward experience, which was the foundation for her prayer, and should be for all of us. Encouraging and easy to understand, her teaching is a great joy to read today. I have taken a passage from her writing, and used it to explain and expand the foundation for prayer which she used, and which we can all use. She makes prayer fun - let's share her joy. I am also using the writings of Gertrude of Helfta.

Prayer goes much deeper than this of course, and for those who want to go deeper, I have written a number of courses and teachings which can be downloaded free from our website.

Julian's words

Here is the passage from Julian's "Showings". This is the 10th Revelation and I am using this passage as the basis for this course.

This is the will of God that we have in our seeking three things as a gift from him. The first is that we seek willingly and diligently, without sloth, as far as we can through his grace; gladly and happily, without unreasonable sadness and useless sorrow.

The second is that we wait for him steadfastly, out of love for him, without grumbling or striving against him until our life's end, which cannot be far away. The third is that we trust him utterly out of complete faith in him. For he wants us to know that he will appear suddenly and bless all who love him.

His work is done in secret, yet he wants to be perceived, and his appearing will be very sudden. And he wants to be trusted, for he is so homely and courteous. Blessed may he be.

1. Seeking

“Willingly and diligently, without sloth as far as we can through his grace; gladly and happily without unreasonable sadness and useless sorrow.”

Seeking is the engine of prayer - our inner drive to pray. It is simple - we put our ear to the Father's chest and listen to his heartbeat. Prayer is Spirit inspired, but has to have the agreement of our will. From this inner desire, our seeking takes a number of directions. Let's explore these directions - they will open up exciting ways of prayer, and then let Julian show us how to turn these ways of prayer into seeking.

Seeking - the background

Prayer is a work of grace: “Not of works” (Eph.2:8)

Everything in faith starts in the heart of God. We were saved by grace, and we live by grace, not by works. (Eph.2:8) We all agree with this, but then proceed to live by works! We make sure we have our “Quiet time” following the “ABC” of prayer. There is nothing wrong with this in principle, but it can so easily degenerate into a lifeless experience, and then we assume that this is what prayer is like. No wonder we find it so hard.

As we are about to see, prayer is a vibrant relationship experience, and this life flows from God, who gives us the desire to pray, the ability to pray, and the direction to pray. Prayer is a work of grace, and I hope this reality will release many from the guilt of a failed prayer experience, those who feel they do not have the faith to pray and those who find it a dry and lifeless duty. Throw away all your preconceptions. God does prayer in us. The sea is warm. All we have to do is to jump in and enjoy!

Prayer is a journey: “Seek the Lord” (Isa.55:6)

I was reading about a sports woman, an Olympic champion, who started her sporting career at a young age when she saw a picture of an Olympic champion and said “I want to be like that woman!” But she did not enter the Olympics the next day! First she had to find a sport, and then begin to practice it.

The same is true of our prayer walk. We don't begin by spending hours and hours in intercession. We begin by simply searching for the Lord, and at the same time he is looking for us. (Luke 15:1-7) Eventually we meet up, and start to journey in prayer together. Then there are many things to learn, many “tricks of the trade” as I am sure our young Olympian discovered. There are many mistakes to make and many precious jewels to discover, as we travel on with him.

It is this sense of movement, of journeying, which makes prayer so exciting and keeps it alive and full of surprise. We never arrive, because there is no end to the journey. Every hour spent in prayer takes us on and on, further and further into the heart of God. So every time we pray, let's get on board the train, take a seat, and let the driver take us where he wants to go.

Prayer is a relationship: “Your love is more delightful than wine.” (SS.1:2)

The Song of Songs is a love story between two people - the Lord and his bride to be. (Us!) It's a beautiful story of a relationship, with its highs and lows, its thrills and its anxieties. The friends in the story describe the Lord and the bride's relationship like this: - “We rejoice and delight in you; we will praise your love more than wine.” (SS.1:4)

Our prayer relationship with Jesus is like this - it is a living and changing relationship. He feels our sorrow, and we feel his. He feels our joys and we feel his. He shares our hopes and we share his. Sometimes we are angry with him, and sometimes he is certainly frustrated with us.

This lovely relationship keeps prayer alive, because prayer is a living experience.

Prayer is a way of life: “She never left the Temple, but worshipped night and day.” (Lk2:37)

As we can see, the same themes are emerging again and again. Prayer is not a book, but a living experience. It is seeking an inner relationship which leads to a different way of life. Like all relationships, prayer has a physical as well as an internal side. If we confine prayer just to the internal side of our lives, we make a sad mistake.

Angela of Foligno, (1248-1309) when faced with the truth that she could not, as yet, fully love God, fell down screaming on the patio of St Francis' Basilica in Assisi. For her, prayer definitely was not just an interior experience. St Francis spent months in a wet and dark cave on La Verna in Italy. He may have been praying internally but the external reality of his prayer was clear - wet, dark, hard, lonely and fearful.

Prayer is a way of life, which all can see. Anna prayed every day in the Temple. This meant an external journey as well as an internal one. Catherine of Sienna walked to Mass every day, even though she was obviously very sick and near death. Marthe Robin, the French mystic turned her room, where she lay paralysed for most of her life, into a place of prayer, but it had a powerful external dimension. Padre Pio had the stigmata as the external marks of his way of life, and it affected him every day.

Prayer is not just time set aside for God. It is our whole way of life. It is everything we are and everything we do. It is our oxygen, our energy, our food, our life's blood. We are never “in prayer” because we are never out of it. Once we begin to see things in this way, the whole prayer experience is transformed into a life experience, with occasional times set aside just for intercession and worship. Much more fun!

Prayer is a faith step: “Lord if it really is you.” (Matt.14:28)

I remember reading the story of a Para-trooper. He said he loved jumping, and he loved the free fall, but every time, when he reached for the handle which would deploy his parachute, he thought “I hope it's there!”

There are no guarantees in prayer. The Lord promises always to hear us and always to answer us with “yes”, “no” or “wait.” We are not praying into a void, or to a capricious God. However, what he does not promise is “when” or “how” and here is the risk. Do we go ahead, knowing that he will answer, but at the time of the decision, he hasn't? We may struggle with this, but what other choice is there? If we knew for certain that everything would work out, where would our faith be? God would be treating me as less than human if there was no room for faith, trust and risk. If we are going to have these, then we have to have faith and put it into practice.

This can be a risky business. But it is this risk which transforms our prayers from a ritual list of wants to a dynamic and life giving force which can change any and every situation. Every time we see prayers answered, we have more faith and confidence, and can ask for more. Risk and blessing increase, often at the same time. The journey gets exciting, challenging and even frightening. We will make mistakes, and see things fail, but we will see wonderful miracles and answers to prayer beyond our imagination. Risk prayer is never dull!

Angela of Foligno asked about this and the Lord said to her “If on earth you were granted everything you desired, you would no longer hunger for me. For this reason I do not want to grant your every wish. For in this life I want you to hunger for me, and to desire me.”

So now we have got a better idea of prayer, what can we hope to achieve?

We can change things. Prayer changes things because it moves the heart of God. We set our expectations too low, because that is what the church has come to expect. We set limits on our prayers, praying but not really believing. We limit God, and yet he sets no limit. “Ask anything of me” (John 14:13) is his invitation, and as we seek him more, so we will begin to understand the power at our disposal, and pray for more. Faith will rise and so we will believe and expect more - and receive it for the glory of his name. We are not the first to discover this:-

- * The people of Israel cried out to God from their prison in Egypt, and God heard their cry. (Ex.2:23-25)
- * Hannah cried out to God for a son, and received not only a son, but one of the greatest prophets of all time. (1 Samuel 1:10)
- * Amos, appalled at the fate which awaited Israel pleaded with God to relent, and he did. (Amos 7:1-3)
- * Nehemiah felt the burden of unconfessed sin in his nation, and cried out to God for forgiveness, and received it. (Nh.1:5-11)
- * Jesus prayed in Gethsemane and history was changed. (Luke 22:42 |)
- * The church cried out to the Lord and Peter was freed from prison. (Acts 11:5)

Prayer can change the world. We can change the world.

Julian and “seeking”

Now we have a good background, let's look at what Julian teaches about the “seeking” work of prayer. This is her instruction:-

“We seek willingly and diligently, without sloth, as far as we can through his grace; gladly and happily, without unreasonable sadness and useless sorrow.”

*** Willingly**

Prayer has to be something we want to do. This is obvious of course, but so easily overlooked. We study prayer, discipline ourselves in prayer, train in prayer, and in the process crush all the spontaneity of it. We need to have a free and willing approach to prayer, just as we do to other things in life that we enjoy. Does this matter? I think it matters enormously because the Spirit “blows where he wills”. (John 3:8) The Spirit is a breeze, drifting where he pleases, and if we are willingly involved in prayer, we will drift in the breeze as well. Our prayer will be very lightly attached to the earth, and powerfully attached to heaven. But if we are heavy in prayer either because we think it's good for us or because a capricious God will punish us if we do not pray, then prayer will die.

*** Diligently**

The woman who lost her coin (Luke 15:8-10) searched “carefully” until she found it. Prayer is a diligent process - carefully working our way along the path of what the Lord is saying, until we understand. It is not instant. Sometimes we do seem to get quick answers, but they are just steps on the path of diligence.

“Willingly” and “diligently” fit well together. We may be skipping along behind the Spirit, but we are skipping with care and with expectation that we will find what we are seeking.

*** Without sloth**

Just because we believe in spontaneity, that does not mean we can be lazy. There has to be order and preparation in our prayer life. There does have to be discipline to under gird the willingness and the diligence.

*** As far as we can through his grace**

When we read Julian's writings, she is such a positive and bright person, but also with good common sense. “As far as we can go” is so encouraging. We cannot all go the same distance, and we should not criticise others or feel guilty because we cannot go as far as them. We can go as far as we can go, and God, by his grace will not only accept this, but will help us to go that little bit further each day. Prayer is a work of grace, and should never burden us with anxieties about how far we can go, how much we can do, how better others are. We should just enjoy going as far as we can, “through his grace.”

***“Gladly and happily, without unreasonable sadness and useless sorrow”**

I think we are beginning to get Julian's message - prayer is supposed to be a joy, not a burden. But what does she mean by “unreasonable sadness and useless sorrow?” Prayer is an experience, not a list of recited words. As we pray, our whole humanity, and especially our emotions are linked to the Lord. We “feel” prayer as much as speak it. Julian would encourage this, because that was exactly her experience, but she is warning us that we also have to take care that our emotions do not take us into areas which are not helpful. We can be too extreme, and if we are, we lose our focus in prayer.

Many other mystic writers warn us of this dangerous area. Even love, if we push it too far can lead to extremes of behaviour which are not helpful. In prayer our emotions must be involved, but just as in all our relationships, we need to keep them carefully balanced and in hand.

2. Waiting

“We wait for him steadfastly out of love for him, without grumbling or striving against him until our life's end.”

Seeking and waiting may see a strange combination, but they are two edges of to a strongly tempered weapon. When David challenged Goliath, the words and the actions were powerful, and Goliath was brought down. (1 Samuel 17) Yet when the Lord wanted to show Elijah his power, it was revealed most powerfully in the “small still voice”, the “daughter of the voice”, the awesome silence of unlimited greatness. (1 Kings 19:9-13) When the Lord stood before people, he spoke words of power - “I am the resurrection, I am the way, I am the truth, Lazarus come out, storm be still!” Yet before Pilate he finally took the position which Elijah encountered, he was silent, and in that silence Pilate was deeply troubled. (Matt.27:14)

Our 21st century faith has become action orientated. We have exchanged theology for “do-ology.” What we do has become the test of our effectiveness. This has robbed our prayer of its power. We have become a one sided sword-seeking but not cutting through. We need to rediscover the power of waiting, of standing in the stillness of the powerful Lord we serve. This, as we will discover, frightens the enemy as much as our actions. It allows the unrestrained power of the Lord to flow in any way, in any direction, at any time and to any purpose. But does that reduce us to mere channels?

Not at all. We have to absorb and become the powerful waiting stillness, and then our prayer will be more powerful, which is what we want it to be.

Habakkuk gives us a glimpse of “waiting steadfastly.” After the powerful vision of chapter 1, he needs to know what is going on, and what he is supposed to do next. So he says “I will stand at my watch, and station myself on the ramparts; I will look and see what he will say to me, and what answer I am to give.”

(Hab.2:1) He is still, attending to his duty (his “watch”) knowing that God will answer the watchman's call. We can sense his watchful stillness, his readiness to wait in conviction for an answer and clear direction. This lonely figure, holding to his duty in his watchtower has a powerful link with what Julian is hinting at - in waiting, God is powerful beyond our expectations. But Habakkuk is not reduced to a cypher or a channel. His whole personality is involved in waiting.

Paul's spiritual armour in Ephesians 6 encouraged the waiting/stillness posture for the spiritual soldier. (Eph. 6:10-18) The armour described is defensive, but not defeatist. We stand armed and ready to fight - this is our challenge to the enemy. We “stand our ground, and after we have done everything stand.” (Eph.6:13)

The enemy is defenceless against the soldier who knows how to fight, has the willingness to fight, but waits is still confidence. He is undermined by this - at Armageddon the enemy was defeated without a fight, by the mere presence of the rider on the white horse. (Rev 19:11-21)

The ability to be still is not easy to acquire, because it goes against our human nature. The disciples wanted to call down fire on the village which opposed Jesus, because they wanted a quick solution, (Luke 9:51-56) and Peter's impetuosity is well documented. (Mark 8:32).The farmer who wanted to pull up the weeds is not commended by Jesus. (Matt.13:28) Waiting until the harvest was the long term and only answer. Waiting is something the people of God have found hard to do. It requires much practice.

Julian gives us four suggestions to help us:-

*** Steadfast**

We cannot be “like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind.”(Jas.1:6) We have to “Stand firm, and we will see the deliverance the Lord will bring.” (Ex.14:13) This firm and confident ability to wait comes with practice. As we spend time with the Lord, we can absorb this characteristic from the spiritual world. Our difficulty is that it is contrary to our “Instant-solution” lives!

When we can e mail the other side of the world and get a reply in seconds, the virtue of steadfast waiting is eroded. May be it is in the physical world, but God's principles do not adapt themselves to our lifestyles quite so readily.

*** Out of love without grumbling**

Julian is, as usual, quite right in adding "out of love" here. For us to adapt to the Lord's ways of doing things has to come from our love for him. His ways are not our ways. (Isaiah 55:8) If he wants waiting, if he wants steadfast, then if we love him, we will readily adapt to his ways. If we are doing it out of duty, then like Israel in the wilderness, we will end up grumbling, and grumbling corrodes relationships, and weakens effectiveness.

*** Without striving**

Difficult isn't it! We have to be active, we have to be steadfast, and yet we cannot strive. Julian is warning us against of the danger of our humanity. We see things that need doing, and we push on to get them done. Yet if we don't, are we not failing to be determined and to press on? (Phil.3:12) It's a balancing act, but we have to be Spirit led, not human nature led. We need to be very light on our feet - going forward, waiting, moving a little this way and that as the Spirit leads us. Striving only succeeds in wearing us out and risks extinguishing the light of the Spirit in us. (Isaiah 42:3)

3. Trust

"Trust him utterly out of complete faith in him. For he wants us to know that he will appear suddenly and blessedly to all who love him. His work is done in secret yet he wants to be perceived, and his appearing will be very sudden.

And he wants to be trusted for he is so homely and courteous."

Seeking and waiting have to be built on trust, otherwise they can quickly degenerate into mere disciplines. We can quickly begin to think "I have waited, I have sought. God has to answer. Job done!" But prayer has to contain one more element to make it real - trust.

Peter saw Jesus standing on the water. (Matt 14:22-33) He believed that he had received the call to do the same. Job done? Not at all. In reaching over the edge of the boat and putting his feet into the water, he had to exercise trust - that inner conviction not only that the Lord had called, but the Lord would be faithful to his call. In the environment of trust, there are no guarantees except those offered by the Lord. Trust is what makes the whole intercessory environment work. Without it we can never truly advance.

Caleb got it right. The Promised Land was full of challenges. The people of Israel were tried, and they were not a military but a civilian army. The future looked tough. But - "If the Lord is pleased with us, he will lead us into that land." (Num.14:7)

Trust however, is a difficult commodity, because our humanity so quickly gets in the way. We think we are trusting, but we are really depending on our experience and our ability to do things, which we disguise as trust! What elements make up trust?

* Trust is the inner conviction that God both can do it and will do it. (Caleb)

* It is spirit inspired. (Esther 4:15-16) It has to be filled with courage (Shadrach. Daniel 3:17-18) and under girded by sacrifice. (Hebrews 11/12)

* Trust has an element of the urgent about it. It is not something we can spend our time on, but has to be instinctive, because its framework is the imminent return of Jesus. If the 5 virgins had to keep their lamps alight in expectation, then we too have to keep our trust active and urgent also in the same spirit of expectation. (Matthew 25:1-13) It is so easy to become casual in prayer, but time is short, and our failure to intercede could have serious eternal consequences.

* But trust is not a burden.(Proverbs 3:5) Julian speaks of trusting in God who is homely and courteous, a God who just wants and longs for us to trust, as part of our loving and intimate relationship with him. He is very much wanting us to trust. It is not a big test to see if we are good enough, but just part of our spiritual breathing, our natural spiritual condition. He longs for us to trust, because it delights him and brings us deep satisfaction and contentment.

Next steps

So this is Julian's simple teaching - her foundation for prayer. Not difficult is it? The next question is what soil does this prayer flower in? In other words what kind of life do we need to live so that prayer can flourish in us? For that, we turn away from Julian, to another great prayer warrior – St Gertrude.

Gertrude - a heart prepared

I have taught a lot about intercession - what it is and how we carry it out. But before we can live in a house, we have to prepare the rooms. If we do not do this, then how can we hope to experience Spirit-led intercession? St Gertrude, who lived in Germany in the early fourteenth century, writes a very fascinating paragraph about this in the second part of her book "The Herald of Divine Love." Here it is:-

One day, Gertrude was thinking and reflecting beside a pond in the cloister, and as a result of this stillness she wrote:- "God, the source of all ineffable delights, made me understand that, if I were to pour back like water the stream of graces received from yourself in that continual gratitude I owe you; if ,like a tree, growing in the exercise of virtue , I were to cover myself with the leaves and blossoms of good works; if, like the doves, I were to spurn earth and soar heavenward; and if, with my senses set free from passions and worldly distractions, were I to occupy myself with you alone; then my heart would afford you a dwelling most suitably appointed from which no joy would be lacking." (Bk 2:3)

Let's study what she is saying, as an aid to the preparation of our own hearts for intercession.

1. God the source of all ineffable delights

(“Ineffable” means “too great to be described.”)

Our inner room of prayer is where we meet with the Lord. It is so important that this room has the right pictures on the walls - Gertrude calls them **“delights.”** They come from God, not from our human spirit, and they lift us up. We do need lifting in our prayers, because often the way of prayer is hard and lonely. What pictures might we want, which will delight us?

*** Jesus loves me. “Jesus looked at him and loved him” (Mark 10:21)**

In our world, we devalue people, and especially, in the West, we devalue those who believe in prayer. That's why the first delight is the delight of knowing that we are loved. We are known by our names. (John 10:3) Jesus knows our names, and calls us by those names. But this isn't like a waiting room, where we get called to consult with a doctor or a dentist. This is a unique and loving call - a call direct from him to us. It is a sweet call, which gladdens our hearts and makes us feel special. Comparing us to sparrows Jesus says “You are worth more than many sparrows.” (Mt.10:31)

We find this so hard to accept. In our devaluing society, we have learnt to protect ourselves against these dehumanising effects. Faced with selfless love, we struggle. The Lord would say “Look at the picture - my picture of love. I delight in you.”

*** Rejoicing. “God rejoices over you.” (Isa 62:5)**

The next picture is a beautiful one - the Lord rejoices over us. It is sometimes hard for us to appreciate this. We become so involved in the struggles of life, that we become very independent. We receive few encouragements and we grow to accept this as the norm. But not with the Lord. He rejoices over us. (Replace “us” with your name!) He loves to be with me. He enjoys my company. When I am sleeping, he is longing for me to wake up, so that we can continue to live and be together. He is a faithful friend, never leaving us, always wanting to rejoice over us! He loves me. He loves my character. He wants to be with me.

This is such a delight. Can I really be worth that much to the Lord? Yes, and it is good to reflect on this, and absorb it. In this way, by having this unique value,

we grow strong in faith and prayer. After all, if he rejoices over us, what have we to fear?

*** Peace. “Peace of God which passes all understanding.” (Phil 4:7)**

God is “Shalom”(Hebrew: Numbers 6:26)) and God is “Eirene.”(Greek: 1 Cor.1:3) Peace is rock solid security. Nothing can break Shalom, because God guarantees it. Nothing can break Eirene, because Jesus used his blood to guarantee it. (Col 1:20.) Satan attacks our peace, but he is throwing himself against a fortified pillar and a bronze wall. (Jer. 1:18)

***Contentment. “I delight to sit in his shade.” (SS 1:1-4; 2:3)**

Our next picture is drawn from the Song of Songs - a beautiful book describing our relationship with the Lord in terms of love and longing. The first four verses just shine with contentment - of knowing that the Lord is close, and we are safe. This is not escapism. We are not looking for a place to hide from the battle, but rather for that inner sense of rest which contentment brings. We find that place within the heart of Jesus, and we should delight in this place.

*** Hope. “I will come back and take you with me.” (John 14:3)**

Christian hope is not vague. It does not say “I hope it does not rain today!” Christian hope is the assurance of things we do not yet see. Jesus promises that he has gone to heaven to prepare a place for us. We hope, with confident certainty, that this is the case. We are not whistling in the dark because we are afraid, but putting our feet firmly on the rock of the promises and life of Jesus. Often in our praying, we need hope, because the prayer walk is hard, steep, difficult, lonely and sometimes appears ineffective. Then we need to look at the picture of hope, draw our courage from the promises and press on toward our goal. (Phil 3:13-14)

Why bother with delights?

Gertrude knew what we all know – discouragements are plenty in the arena of faith. These delights lift our hearts, remind us of the good things which come from the Lord, and provide motivation and encouragement to pray with confidence. Once we have this, all the things which Julian taught become easier, powerful and easily within our reach.

2. Pour back like water the stream of graces in continual gratitude.

From pictures we move to graces. Giving back creates a flow between us and God, generating a feeling of mutual ministry. This is such a fulfilling experience, but many who pray see it all as one way traffic, and so do not receive the refreshing they need from a two way relationship. (Julian has already taught us this truth.) But what are the streams of graces?

*** The grace of worship from a forgiven heart. (Luke 13:13)**

When the woman who was bent double was released from her suffering, she turned her heart to worship and praise. The movement of God's Spirit in our lives should lead to a response of worship. Only God can move in us by his Spirit, but he is longing and yearning for a response from us, and that we have to give willingly and freely from our hearts. We worship him, freely as a response to his working in us. This move of grace results in joy for both of us, and more movements of his Spirit. This grace of forgiven worship creates a powerful dynamic in prayer, which transforms words into experience. It is a grace I long for, and experience every time I pray. Without it, what is the point of prayer?

*** The grace of love from a lover's heart. (Luke 7:36-38)**

From the grace of forgiveness we move to the grace of love - his love for us, and ours in return. That's what the woman in Luke 7 shows us - it has to be a reciprocal feeling - love to him, love from him, love to him, love from him - on and on and on. This emotional experience, this grace gift of mutual love - is almost beyond description, and forms a golden circle around our prayers. Florence describes it. Julian would have known it. We must desire it with all our hearts, for this is truly the heart of all prayer - mutual love.

*** Grace of knowing the mind of God. “We have the mind of Christ.”**

(1 Cor.2:16)

This is total flow! We are in touch with the very essence of Jesus. As he can see our hearts, so he allows us to see into his heart.

Why bother with graces?

This endless flow of graces creates thankful and appreciative hearts in us. We have a defence against cynicism or bitterness, and are drawn on in prayer by the reality of our mutual relationship with God. We can pray without them - but why do so? The flow of graces is available to us all. Like water in a desert, they bring the flowers of God’s character to life. They bring joy, delight, hope - and powerful prayer.

3. Covered with the leaves and blossoms of good works.

One of the dangers of intercession is that it is so intense, that we can tend to just intercede. But we are not exempt from the normal Christian life, and “leaves” and “blossoms” must be on our “tree”, so that it can be seen that what we are doing in our praying is to God. (Matthew 7:17)

These leaves and blossoms become our covering - we are dressed in them as a tree is covered in them. They are signs of the life of the Spirit within, and a promise of fruit that will last. What good fruit should our prayer produce? There is one which is precious above all other:-

*** Service/servant heart: “If anyone would come after me.” (Mark 8:34)**

From the many good works that could flow from us, the servant heart is the key. It is the heart of Jesus, (Mark 10:45) and he encourages us to have the same heart. (John 13:1-10) It leads to a crucified lifestyle (Gal.6:14) which is the Lord’s plan and longing for us.

If we can let this fruit grow, then we have the finest foundation for prayer of any kind, because we have the heart of Jesus, and he has our heart. But it is a

big challenge. We need our attitudes and minds transformed away from the world's ways, (Rom 12:2) and we have to resist the attacks of the enemy, who hates the servant heart. (1 Peter 5:8)

Only the Spirit can do this work in us, but we have to be willing to let it happen. It is not easy (2 Cor.11:16-33)

4. Spurn earth and soar heavenward. Set free from passions and worldly distractions, occupy myself with you alone.

If our heart is going to be set free into the heavenly places, which is our function and desire, it has to have its anchor chains cut. No balloon can fly while attached to the earth. Gertrude gives us three pointers in this direction:-

*** Passions**

The Lord loves the passionate heart - the heart on fire for him, and which longs to serve. But there is a danger here. Sometimes passions can become all-consuming, to the exclusion of everything and everyone else. I have met people who pour their lives into evangelism, and in the process neglect their families. I have met people who give and give and give all the resources they have, and neglect their own needs to the point of sickness. I have also met people who love to such an excess that they are unable to distinguish between love and infatuation.

We do need to be set free from the passions which corrupt our relationship with Jesus, and prevent us soaring heavenward. (Mark 4:19) But we must maintain a balance, so that we do not get tripped up by the enemy. Not an easy path to walk, but if we get it right, our prayers will soar heavenward.

*** Worldly distractions**

This should come as no surprise to us. Jesus said “No one who puts his hand to the plough and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God.” (Luke 9:62)

We are distracted by the cares of the world,(4:18) the need to provide, (Matthew 6:26-27) family (Luke 9:59-60) wealth,(Mark 10:22) comfort, (Luke 12:16-19) by the pressure of the enemy, (John 10:10) sickness (Mark 1:29) and many others. These invade our hearts every time we try to “soar heavenward.”

To deal with these, we have to control our mind, allowing legitimate concerns to be turned into prayer, but keeping excessive demand away from the prayer stream. This comes easier with practice!

*** Occupy myself with you alone**

This is probably the aim of the whole process - to so control or remove distractions, to have a life growing in conformity with the Spirit, to have a controlled mind and a balanced nature - then we can devote ourselves to him alone.

Gertrude concludes her meditation with these words – “**Then I have created a dwelling suitably appointed. From which no joy will be lacking.**”

I cannot think of a better preparation of the heart for prayer.