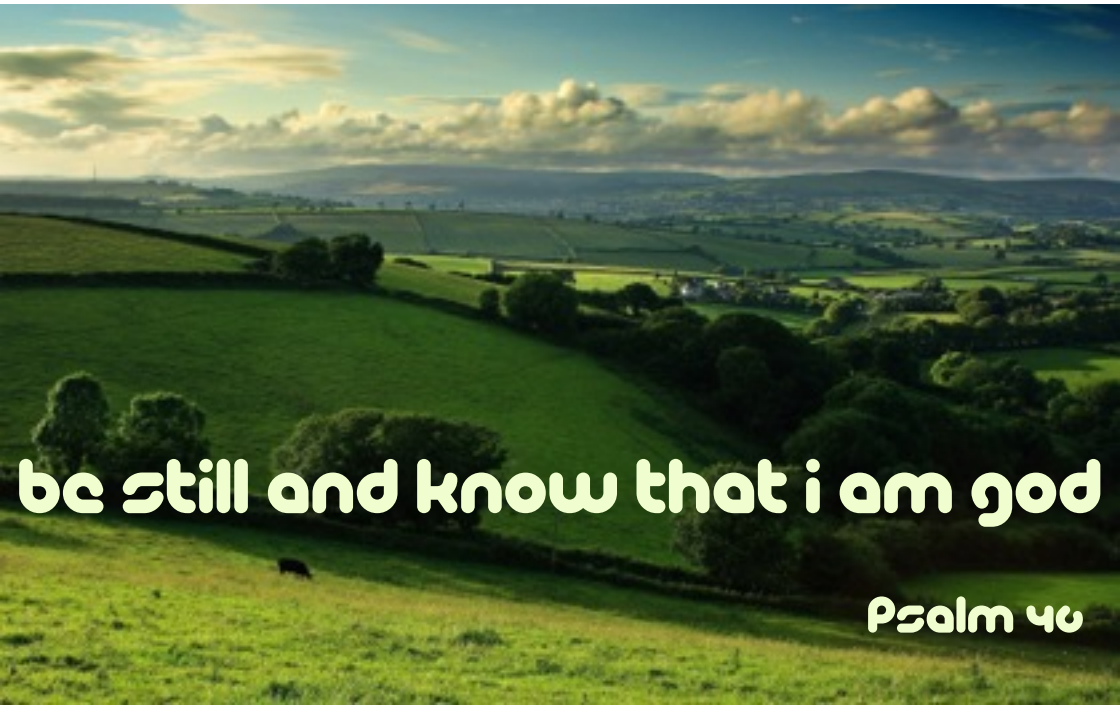


Prayers for october

contemplation & stillness



be still and know that i am god

Psalm 46

Introduction

This is one of the most difficult forms of prayer for many of us. It's hard for us to slow down and too often over-active minds from taking over any space that we might try to create. We often live hectic and busy lives and to suddenly put the brakes on and find a still space in which to pray in silence or contemplatively is really hard. And yet it's an important part of our prayer life to 'listen' to God and to allow space for '*our souls to grow by subtraction*' as the 13th Century Christian mystic Meister Eckhardt puts it.

There are several ways we can do this. But it's probably worth bearing in mind that stillness and contemplation, like all forms of prayer, needs to be practiced patiently.

Mindfulness

Mindfulness is a concept based on meditation that is all about being focused on the current moment and giving our full attention to it. It acknowledges that we tend to allow our minds to take over and work it's web of fantasy, projecting forward and imagining various scenarios or possible confrontations with others, or trawling back over past occurrences and 'mistakes'. These distractions tend to sap our energy and stop us being able to still ourselves to listen deeply to God.

Silent Meditation

So meditation can be simply sitting quietly in God's presence and recognising and noticing the attempts of our 'mind' to resist and sabotage that quietness and interrupt God's presence with us. The suggestion is not to deliberately 'fight' the interruptions but to simply notice and acknowledge what our minds are trying to do. It's like the phone ringing to interrupt a precious moment with a loved one or family member. We *do* have the option to turn off the ringer and deal with it later.

Try spending a few minutes doing this at a time when you know you are least likely to be disturbed. If you find this helpful you could try gradually increasing the amount of time. It's not a competition but just allow yourself to enjoy and 'rest' in God's presence without having to think about it.

Guided Meditation

We can also use *guided meditation* to help us enter into, for example, a story about Jesus.

Try doing this exercise in the box below.

Read Luke 22:7-34 then put the bible down and make yourself comfortable. You may like to close your eyes and relax by breathing slowly.

Visualise the upper room where Jesus had the Last Supper with his friends. Try to feel that you are present in that story, look around and notice what the room is like. Who else is there? How they are behaving? What is Jesus like? What does the room smell like? Is it warm or cold? How is the room lit? Where are you in the room in relation to everyone else? Are you part of the story or removed from it? What is Jesus saying? How is everyone else there feeling? Spend some time in the room seeing how things unfold. Then watch as the disciples and Jesus leave. Stay relaxed and allow the story to stay with you and finish the meditation when you are ready.

Letting go

Try this simple exercise as a way of *letting go* of some of the anxieties and worries which sometimes spoil our lives and our relationship with God.

Take a bowl and fill it with water. Take a stone, hold it in your hand, look carefully at the stone, imagine all your fears, worries and anxieties are

crystallised in the stone, don't focus on them but just allow them to be there in the stone. Then hold the stone tightly in your hand, feel the tension in your hand as you grip tightly to those things. Very slowly allow your grip to loosen, notice the stone becoming lighter as your hand gradually relaxes, until the stone is once again just resting on your hand. Then hand the anxieties, worries and concerns over to God - drop the stone into the water. Watch the ripples subside, sit in quiet for as long as you want or need to, allow the stillness of the water to still you, breathe slowly, allow God to quietly minister to you.

Active contemplation

If you find sitting still very hard remember we can also pray and contemplate when we are active.

Rhythm and senses

If you do an activity that is repetitive, like easy swimming or walking / jogging, you can take the opportunity to focus on each footstep – notice the feel of your feet on the ground (especially if you are able to walk barefoot), or the rhythm of your feet, or try to feel the wind on your face or feel the texture of the water on your fingertips. The simple rhythm of such activities can really help some of us to let go of the things which clutter our minds and connect with God in a deep, non-cerebral way.

These ways of praying are very different from our intercessory prayers or other more deliberate, thought-based prayer activities. This is all about listening and just 'being' with God in the same way that as you get to know a close friend or loved one really well you can be comfortable just being with them in silence and not feel the need to make small talk.

Appreciation

One really good way of praying in a contemplative way is simply (but very profoundly) appreciating what is around us. Walk for a few minutes

around your local area; the roads around your home, your own garden or the local park or footpaths – but try walking really slowly, exaggeratedly so. Stop whenever you want to and notice as many details, notice things you never get to see when you are in a hurry. Look up, and down, notice the small things and look again at the big picture. How much there is for us to appreciate in the world that God has given us.

Repeating a set prayer

Use a short set prayer – like the Jesus prayer (*Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner*), or the Lord's Prayer. Repeat it constantly for a 15 minute walk. At first, say all the words through over and over again. If your mind wanders, come back to the last word you were saying. Let the words wash over you and fill you. Then, take each word in turn and let it grow within you. 'Chew' on it to extract all the flavour - don't think about the word, just let it's weight and depth unfold within you. Sometimes you might do this with the whole prayer, sometimes you might spend the whole time with one word. Finally, come back to the whole prayer, repeating it again a number of times.