

Prayer for the Day

BBC Radio 4

By Scottish Quaker and writer Alastair McIntosh

A thread of 6 x two-minute broadcasts, at 5.43 a.m.

Saturday 25th Nov to Friday 1st Dec 2023 (excluding Sunday)

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Prayer for the Day – Alastair McIntosh - Saturday 25 November 2023

Good morning.

I used to be so uncomfortable with the idea of “prayer”. If I’d made a word cloud, there’d have been such terms as *compulsory*, *hypocritical*, *magical thinking* and *Christian cringe!*

But gradually, that discomfort shifted; and in the coming week I’d like to share with you some thoughts on why.

But first, I am a Quaker. Join me, if you wish, as is our manner: to be gathered in a fleeting moment of receptive silence.

[*Inwardly counts to 5 seconds*]

So ... it was nearly seven years ago, and I was at a bus station to head north and catch a ferry to a distant Scottish island. The queue was very long, they’d newly introduced a booking system, and the driver said to stand aside, on standby.

But an older woman watching, picked up on my anxiety. Wearing a long grey skirt and with her hair tied back in what I think of as a Presbyterian bun, she stepped forward, and said brightly: “I have a booking. If you can’t get on, have mine and I’ll go later.”

Well, we both got seats, and as we journeyed up the road she told me that she was a “hermit nun”, a solitary Roman Catholic sister, a retired obstetrician who had spent her life in hospitals in war-torn parts of Africa; and now she gave her days to study both the medical and military literature of torture, and *praying* for its victims.

“How, do you do that”? I asked.

“Just,” she said, “by holding them in God.”

O God our ground of deepest being.

That we might also help

to hold the suffering of the world:

Hold us, this day, in you.

Amen.

Prayer for the Day – Alastair McIntosh - Monday 27 November 2023

Good morning.

The Hindu faith has many holy days, and today marks the ending of a less-well-known devotion called the *Bhishma Panchak*, that involves participants in five days of fasting and ritual for spiritual advancement.

The story behind it hinges on a sacred text, the *Bhagavad Gita*, in which an ancient battle provides a metaphor for our inner conflicts, and what it means to let our lives be held in prayer.

The Penguin Classics translation renders the *Gita's* opening line: “On the field of Truth, on the battlefield of life, what came to pass, Sanjaya...?”

Sanjaya is the eagle-eyed charioteer to the blind king, for political power lacks vision without spiritual eyes. And through his blow-by-blow account of that which came to pass, Sanjaya draws the reader, to the attitude of prayer.

I'm reminded of a time when an old woman, a Presbyterian *cailleach* in my home Isle of Lewis, poured out a cup of tea and then requested that I said a grace.

They say that with a proper length of grace the tea goes cold; and mine, that clocked in under twenty seconds, failed miserably.

“Ifff ... *that* will be your blessing!” she sniffed.

But what both she and the Hindu *Bhagavad Gita* call us back to, is to be present to what comes to pass. For this is nested in the “battlefield” that is our life on earth. And this in turn is nested in the way, the Truth and the life, by which each level of our being rests in God.

And so, concludes Sanjya: “again and again *joy* fills my soul.” So too:

Thy “kingdom”, thy community come,
Thine opening of the way be done,
In earth, as is in heaven.
Amen.

Prayer for the Day – Alastair McIntosh - Tuesday 28 November 2023

Good morning.

I used to struggle with the very notion of prayer, connecting it to *childishness* and *wishful thinking*.

But some years ago, I felt oddly moved to set out on a pilgrimage, and I went back to the island of my childhood in Scotland's Outer Hebrides.

For twelve days I meandered from the south of Harris to the northern tip of Lewis, weaving through the villages and camping out on solitary moors and hills.

It was a journey not just outwardly, but inwardly; exploring what I later came to write of, as an *ecology of the imagination*.

For when you're out alone for several days on end, the thought perhaps arises: do we merely *have* imaginations, or might we move within a greater field, that *is* imagination?

You cannot tread through such a place and not be called to questions about God. They're running through the kindness of the people, their churches and the ruined chapels by the sea, the standing stones and healing wells and place names. For as the Welsh poet R.S. Thomas put it: "The parish / has a saint's name time cannot / unfrock."

I mused on Henry Corbin, the great French scholar of Islam, who in summing up the Sufi mystic, Ibn Arabi, concluded: "Prayer is the highest form, the supreme act of Creative Imagination." We pray to God, and God too "prays for us."

In one of George Bernard Shaw's plays, Joan of Arc's inquisitors put it to her that the voice of God sounds only in her imagination. "Of course," she said, for "that is how the messages of God come to us."

O God, who said in words of primal poetry:

"Let there be ..."

Pray for us, with us, in us,
through divine Imagination.

Amen.

Prayer for the Day – Alastair McIntosh – Wednesday 29 November 2023

Good morning.

Tomorrow sees the start of COP 28 in Dubai - the United Nations' 28th annual conference on climate change – attended by scientists, activists and world leaders, including King Charles who'll give the opening speech on [Friday](#).

The most recent intergovernmental [report](#) says that human beings have “unequivocally caused global warming” and with poor communities “disproportionately affected.”

So it is that Pope Francis, who has sadly had to [cancel](#) addressing the event, [called](#) last month for a “pilgrimage of reconciliation” because, he said, “the world sings of an infinite Love: how can we fail to care for it?”

Science, politics and economics alone are not enough to tackle the root causes. These are also spiritual: the idolatry of consumerism, through which we, “can't get no satisfaction”.

An example of the distinctive voice that faith groups can bring to the table, is in the [story](#) of the feeding of the five thousand. The people are hungry, but the disciples are skint: so off they go to Jesus to suggest that he sends the people out ... shopping!

But [Andrew](#), the fisherman, brings in the lad who shares what he has, and so in contrast to an economics of greed, they begin to subvert the dominant paradigm.

Jesus sits the multitudes down in groups, small enough to get to know each other and to drop their masks. He blesses the boy's loaves and fishes, and after they've maybe opened their hearts to one another and shared of their plenty, there's enough left over to fill twelve baskets.

So, what is going on here? Is this a literal miracle of magic, the wizardry of Christ? Or are we being shown, the deeper magic? The togetherness we need to see the planet through.

O Christ the living face of God whose name is love,

Teach us the economics, of community.

Amen.

Prayer for the Day – Alastair McIntosh – Thursday 30 November 2023

Good morning.

Today is Saint Andrew's Day, celebrated here in Scotland for our patron saint. But it's also the first day of COP 28, the United Nations' climate change conference in Dubai; and by a rather nice coincidence the recently appointed [Chair](#) of the UN's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change happens also to be a Scot: Professor [Jim Skea](#) of Dundee.

Andrew the fisherman brings back again to my mind that tale of the feeding of the five thousand – that overcoming of the economics of no-can-do, when the miracle of love is activated, and we drop our masks and make community, one with another.

A patron saint serves as a spiritual archetype for a nation, a pattern and example that can periodically remind us of the values we forget.

In Scotland, the administrative seat of our government is St Andrew's House: an imposing 1930s Art Deco building on Calton Hill in Edinburgh; and if you're ever passing by, take a look at the magnificent bronze outer [doors](#), with their array of patron saints, and at the [centre](#), Saint Andrew by his fishing boat, as Jesus [says](#): "And I will make you fishers of men."

Andrew was the first-called of the disciples, and in John's gospel, the first words that Jesus said to him and his companion were these: "*What seek ye?*"

What is our deepest yearning?

Here we see, on centre stage, the question of spiritual discernment: what [T.S. Eliot](#) called: "the purification of the motive / In the ground of our beseeching."

And here too, we see a message for a nation; for all nations, and for COP 28.

O God who gives us vision of the heart,

Bring our troubled world to prayer of deepest yearning.

With Andrew, and United Nations:

"What seek ye?"

Amen

Prayer for the Day – Alastair McIntosh – Friday 1 December 2023

Good morning.

There is a poem by my friend, the Reverend Kathy Galloway of the Iona Community, called *Wrestling with God*.

She says: “Get off my back, God. / Take your claws out of my shoulder. / I’d like to throw you off!”

But she continues: “... actually, being honest, I know in my heart / I’d miss you if you weren’t there.”

Here we see what’s often the discomfort of encountering God, but also, an emergent sense of letting go, of coming to know, inwardly.

The Hebrew [Psalms](#) say, *try it out!* “O taste and see that God is good.”

[Another](#) Psalm suggests - “Be still, and know that I am God” - for this can be both searched out experimentally, and waited on, experientially.

What then, is prayer? To let go into prayer, can be to break out of our egotistic bubbles. To maybe taste a greater sweetness, and to come to know a deeper music. A cosmic chilling out, in which our eyes become accustomed to the source of inner light.

This helps us to relax the fist that may be clenched around our hearts. It helps us get a life worth living, even in a troubled world. It invites us to a realm where, as the Hindu-Christian scholar Raimon [Panikkar](#) put it, “Only forgiveness breaks the law of karma.”

Only forgiveness, can end the knock-on cycles of war and ecological destruction that trap the world in endless spirals of repetition.

And so - “Be still, and know ...” - and I invite you, if you wish, in the Quaker manner, to close this sharing with me in silent prayer.

[Inwardly counts to 5 seconds]

God, hold us this day in you.

Amen.

Theme - *Exploring Prayer* – Designing the week’s structure

I’ve included this to let others who might be interested see how I structure and build up a sequence like this. First, over the preceding days I think of stories I’d like to tell or quotes to share. I wanted to bring out both the discomfort (for some) and the significance around “prayer”. Then, I start grouping them into themes, and because it’s radio, around current events if possible. So, where I wanted to use the Bhagavad Gita, I searched to find Hindu festivals that week. Monday looked suitable, but my BBC editor Mo McCullough validated it with a Hindu consultant. Finally, after much juggling, I pull the structure together and, usually do so iteratively as I’m drafting the pieces, again in consultation with my editor. These ones were recorded 3 days before the first broadcast. However, with Wednesday’s, we originally had it that the Pope *was to* address COP 28. When on Tuesday evening the news broke that he was ill and had cancelled, my editor rapidly invoked Plan B, and sent HQ a suitably tweaked version that we’d also recorded just in case something like that should come to pass.

| Outline – using these sessions to explore the discomfort & possibilities of prayer in our times | | |
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| <p>Saturday 25 November</p> <p><i>What is prayer?</i></p> <p>Overall context – one where folks’ faith in life and humanity knocked, so need to see themselves as being part of something bigger.</p> <p>Discomfort – the Christian cringe, etc..</p> <p>The story of the hermit nun praying for the tortured – “holding them in God”.</p> | <p>Monday 27 November</p> <p><i>The whole-life setting of prayer</i></p> <p>Bhagavad Gita, springboarding off this day being the final day of the Bhishma Panchak festival of salvation (see also). (But check.)</p> <p>3 levels of reality: “On the field of Truth (1), on the battlefield of life (2), what came to pass (3), Sanjaya?”, Gita 1:1, tr. Mascaró.</p> <p>The Hebridean cup of tea – “If that will be your prayer”.</p> | <p>Tuesday 28 November</p> <p><i>Prayer as divine imagination</i></p> <p>Wishful thinking versus Henry Corbin on Ibn Arabi = “Prayer is the highest form, the supreme act of Creative Imagination.”</p> <p>Draw on context of walking / writing Poacher’s Pilgrimage</p> <p>Prayer as poetry, poesis, Genesis 1:3.</p> |
| <p>Wednesday 29 November</p> <p><i>Prayer as love’s deeper magic</i></p> <p>COP 28 opens tomorrow in Dubai . Quote IPCC AR6 on climate change imperative and Pope Francis, Laudate Deum.</p> <p>Home in on <i>community</i> as a basis for creating sufficiency, via the miracle of the feeding of the 5,000 – is it the magic of literalist wizardry, or the deeper magic of love?</p> | <p>Thursday 30 November</p> <p><i>Payer as our deepest yearning</i></p> <p>St Andrew’s Day, start COP 28 - IPCC chair = Jim Skea of Dundee.</p> <p>Patron saints as archetypes: the 1930s Art Deco administrative seat of the Scottish Government St Andrew’s House, inscription on outer doors: “And I will make you fishers of men” (see detail).</p> <p>John 1:38 KJV: “What seek ye?”</p> | <p>Friday 1 December</p> <p><i>Prayer as absorption into God</i></p> <p>Quote Kathy Galloway on wrestling with relationship to God, yet still a yearning.</p> <p>Hebrew Psalms: “O taste” (34:8) and “Be still” (46:10).</p> <p>Spiral of violence: “Only forgiveness breaks the law of karma” – Panikkarji.</p> <p>Out on Quaker stillness.</p> |