

However good a person's voice sounds, they can always be trained to sing better. However good someone's hand-eye coordination is, they can be trained to draw and paint better. Any athlete can be trained to run faster, jump higher and throw further. In each case, even a short training course will yield results.

In just the same way, Christians through the ages have taught that prayer is another aspect of our development that can be trained. To be sure, some people have a greater aptitude, a greater inclination, but the soul of anyone can be trained to pray.

When we say the word 'prayer,' we tend to think of intercessions in Church. They are often asking for help or comfort. This sort of prayer is often derided—people today even say, 'He hasn't got a prayer' meaning a complete loss of hope. Or we may be thinking of prayers embedded within the liturgy. These prayers have advantages and disadvantages: the timeless phrases sink so deeply into the soul that they surface at odd moments. But, conversely, if we're honest we know the words so well that we can find we haven't even heard them.

At root, prayer is an encounter with God. To pray, we must somehow tap into the spiritual Person that is God. That 'tapping in' is the goal of all prayer.

Prayer can be made to sound fiendishly complicated but in essence it's blissfully simple. It starts with three things. Firstly, we need to be comfortable (physically) so we are unaware of our bodies. We should be relaxed, with a straight neck and back, and the airways open.

Second, and more important, we need to relax mentally. We will never pray if we feel fretful and preoccupied. Meditation techniques can help here.

Thirdly, we need to centre our soul on God. In this context, some technical manuals on prayer talk of 'recollection,' by which they mean calling God to mind. To use the powerful phrase of Brother Lawrence, we must 'Practise the Presence of God.'

We all know that God is everywhere but the use of the imagination can prepare the heart before spiritual encounters. Some people when they start out in prayer find it helpful to picture God (or Jesus) in their mind's eye. When they feel 'in the mood,' they then speak to God or Jesus. That's OK for the absolute beginner, but we must reject such images, when we have moved on a

little, because such pictures become too small. They hold us back.

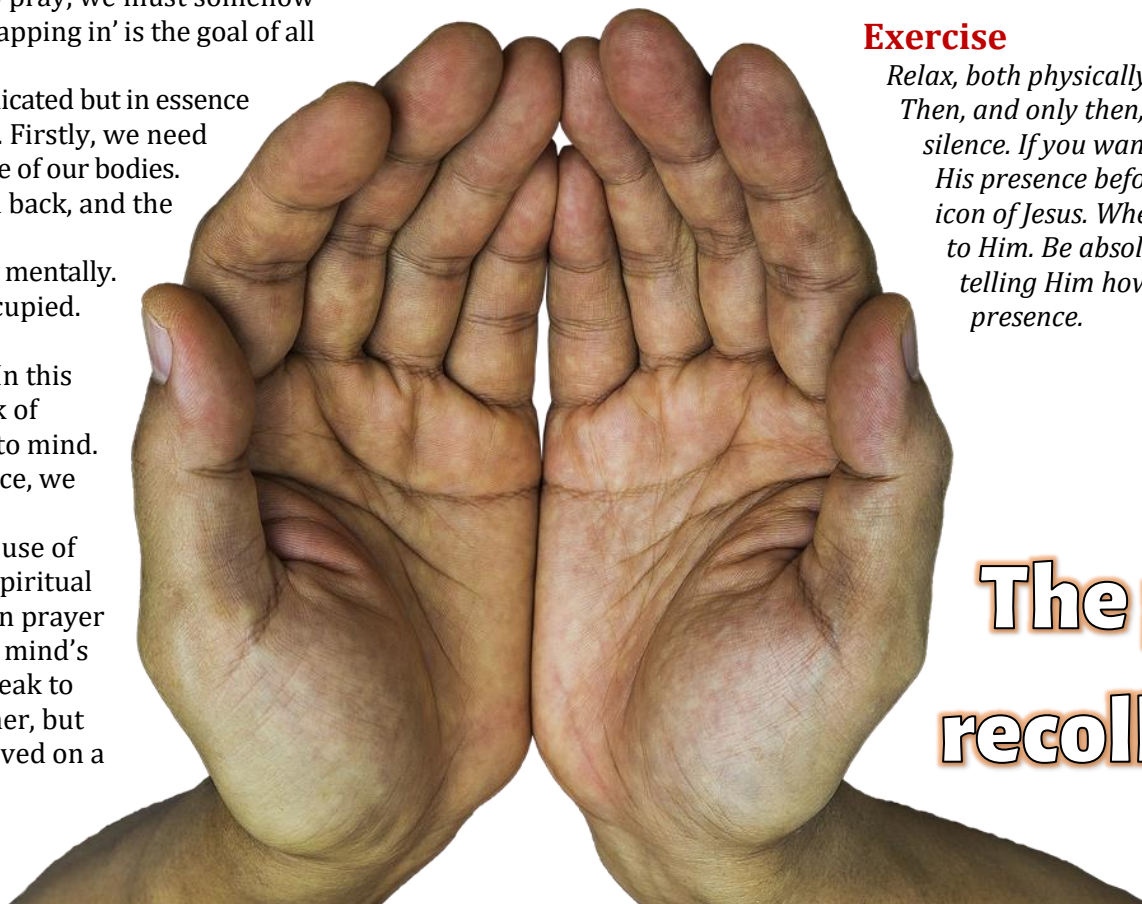
God knows everything. As the *Book of Common Prayer* reminds us, He is 'power infinite.' So there is no point in telling him details he knows already—'I have an appointment with Dr Smith at 9:10 tomorrow morning ...' But it does help to tell Him the things that matter to us. For example, honestly telling God our emotions and feelings can be both liberating and spiritually powerful. A conversation with God in prayer is more desirable and often more useful than using a series of set prayers.

But collections of printed prayers can be essential if we feel down and depressed, or just tired, . They do away with the need to invent new words. There is also the comfort of knowing these words have nourished countless Christians, sometimes over millennia.

Many people find the liturgy also speaks powerfully at such times, but others find that liturgy 'sparks no response' whatsoever. But do not worry: the giants of prayer all teach that while God may not feel close at these times, he is nevertheless present.

Exercise

Relax, both physically and mentally. Then, and only then, talk to God in the silence. If you want to, try to imagine His presence before you. Or look at an icon of Jesus. When you feel ready, talk to Him. Be absolutely honest with Him, telling Him how you feel in His presence.



The prayer recollection of