

issue 41

april 2006

a forum for people grappling with faith and church issues

values being real  
supports faith stage transition  
respects and validates the journeys of others  
allows questions and doubts  
lets God defend God

## Prayer

In many of us there is a strong desire to connect with our creator or something we discern as bigger than us. This may be inherent and natural for some as for Anna in the book "Mister God this is Anna". For Anna, God just "is" and she and God are in continual communication and this is beneficial to Anna - it gives her direction. Prayer for her is unstructured and unbounded. For others prayer has been taught and modelled and often comes with guidelines as to how and what constitutes prayer.

However we have learnt to pray most of us would regard it as being or having been a cornerstone of developing our faith and central to our practise. What then when it seems to lose its efficacy and meaning, when it becomes empty and seemingly pointless and we are cynical of its value? And for some of us who dare to stop praying we realise that the sky doesn't fall in as we might have feared. The world doesn't stop and bad things don't happen.

And yet, down the track we realise something is missing ...

How do we re-frame prayer or revitalise it to have integrity with the beliefs we have and to give it meaning in a way that brings life and the connection we yearn for?

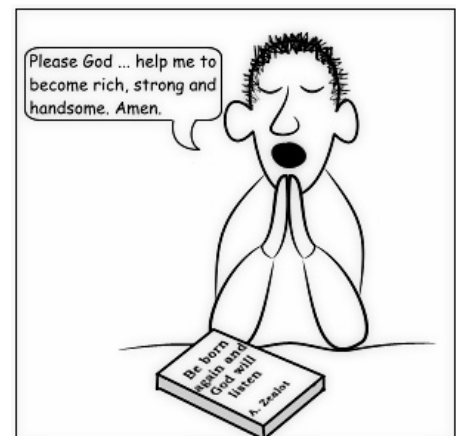
This issue looks at prayer in a number of ways. We include the prayers and quotes of people grappling with these questions and excerpts from the chapter on prayer in Alan Jamieson's book *Called Again*.

Heavily borrowed from "*Prayer in and beyond words*", in *Called Again* by Alan Jamieson.

For some people the issues of truth and meaning are far less pressing than the sense of a deeper personal reality to their faith; the knowledge that they are deeply connecting with God.

For those who have an EPC (Evangelical, Pentecostal, Charismatic) faith belief structure (within or outside of church involvement) prayer is typically a means of communication with God, it is seen as "*essential*" and is strongly focused on results and answers. Prayers are often very wordy, and full of clichés and Christian code, and can be so

disconnected from the rest of life and our deepest feelings and passions that they are to put it frankly, boring. I remember on more than one occasion sitting down to pray and finding some time into my "wordy" prayers that I



wasn't listening. And if I wasn't listening why should I expect that God would? The prayer had the "right" words in it but it didn't mean anything to me, it wasn't drawn from deep within me - I wasn't being honest.

In contrast those in the midst of the deconstruction of their own faith often talk of prayer as an "*occasional*" experience focusing less on asking for things and more on prayer as a connecting point with God.

Our image of God changes as our faith crumbles under the weight of questions, grief, pain, despair and failure. Unsure of who it is we are approaching we fearfully wait on the sidelines of prayer. Resentment can also hold us at a distance, God has let us down, and it can continue as an open wound that never heals. It takes courage to face God in our fear and vulnerability with our resentment and hurts.

This is often the beginning point of the psalms - the prayer book of scripture. The cry of David from two of the psalms conveys the pain:

"My God, my God, why have you deserted me?  
Why are you so far away?  
Won't you listen to my groans and come to my rescue?  
I cry out day and night.  
But you don't answer and I can never rest"

"Yahweh, don't shut me out;  
Don't give me the silent treatment O God"

These are the upfront and honest prayers of a struggle caught in fear, the silence of God and personal resentment.

Desert experiences (or as St John of the Cross puts it "dark nights of the soul") strip us of the unnecessary. We cannot move into new ways until we set down the old. Patterns of prayer that don't work are shown to be empty when the heat is really on and they have to be discarded; sometimes with a great deal of anger and frustration about the sense of being sold a dud.

The process of walking through the times of questioning, doubt, failure, hopelessness, and despair, alters prayer profoundly and irreversibly. Prayer becomes about not only allowing contact with God, but enables ones "true self" to grow.

Somehow prayer seems to move from a focus on the details of methodology and finding "answers" to the simplicity of being with. Prayer is born in listening and is the response of deep listening. Listening to ourselves, others and the world.

Reconnections in prayer often begin in nature. Listening to the waves and wind, seeing the ocean in its various moods, observing the flight of a bird, climbing a mountain or laughing at the antics of a kitten can all be fuel for prayer. Gently and fully aware of all that holds us back we stop hiding and running to listen and watch. Over time we can begin to move from listening to nature to listening to our own inner selves, our inner truth or to unpacking our dreams and the messages they convey. From here we begin to listen to the pain and struggles of the world or even to the words of scripture and to bring the fruit of these listenings to our prayer.

St John of the Cross was imprisoned in a stuffy hole in the ground encompassed in darkness, solitude, stillness and silence. He faced the worst of all punishments; absolute solitude coupled with fear of the prospect of torture and death. He states that finding God is like sitting in a dark room on one's own. Then after some time we realise we are not alone. There is someone else in the room. God has always been there and a silhouette is slowly becoming clearer.



## PRAYER'S JOURNEY

*Prayer once was*

A formula to follow  
Head logic  
Self justified  
Lists of requests  
Words of a reluctant listener  
Duty bound

*Prayer then became*

A wrestling match  
Fiery "whys?"  
Angry ventings  
Despairing cries for help  
Stagnating into empty silences  
Giving into brokenness

*Prayer is now*

Renewed awareness  
Responding to the Divine  
Celebrating the ordinary  
Bursts of insight  
Jumps of joy  
Pictures in my mind  
Spirit's quiet breathing  
Cleansing tears  
Holy anger  
Deep compassion  
Healing solitude  
Creative expression  
Constant surprises  
A journey of the heart

Val Roberts

Continued from page two:

"There in the midst of obscurity, the presence, imperceptible, dark and gentle". In the darkness we cannot rely on our senses to lead us, we need to trust the journey/process/mystery/"that other"/God. It is, as John describes it, a journey into an unknown land where all the road ways are new and in which we have no prior knowledge or map. It is a journey into uncertainty - a journey of mystery, and requires faith and courage. "The fruit of the night journey will not be a soiree for a self-preoccupied spiritual elite but the realisation that the world's wounds are the spaces through which God enters." We begin to realise we are part of something much bigger than we had previously realised. Jean Pierre de Caussade described prayer as that moment when "our soul, light as a feather, fluid as water, innocent as a child responds to every movement of grace like a floating balloon."



## *A person contemplates a tree.*

*The tree sends its roots beneath the surface, seeking nourishment in the dark soil; the rich "broken down" matter of life.*

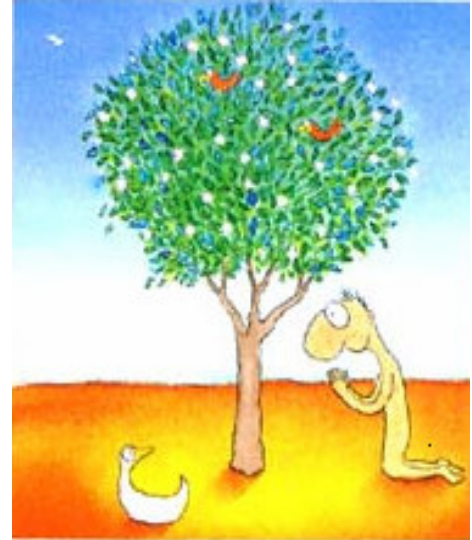
*As they reach down and search, the roots hold the tree firmly to the earth.*

*Thus held and nourished, the tree grows upwards into the light, drinking the sun and air and expressing its truth: its branches and foliage, its flowers and fruit. Life swarms around and into it. Birds and insects teem within its embrace, carrying pollen and seed. They nest and breed and sing and buzz. They glorify creation.*

*The tree changes as it grows. It is torn by wind and lightning, scarred by frost and fire. Branches die and new ones emerge. The drama of existence has its way with the tree but still it grows; still its roots reach down into the darkness; still its branches flow with sap and reach upward and outward into the world.*

*A person kneels to contemplate a tree and to reflect upon the troubles and joys of life. The person imagines mornings and evenings in a great forest of prayers, swarming and teeming with life,*

*The person is learning how to pray.....*



From the introduction of Michael Leunig's Prayer Tree.

### **The Lords Prayer**

(translated from Aramaic to English eliminating the intervening translations into Greek and Latin)

O Cosmic Birther of all radiance and vibration!!

Soften the ground of our being and carve a space within us where your Presence can abide.

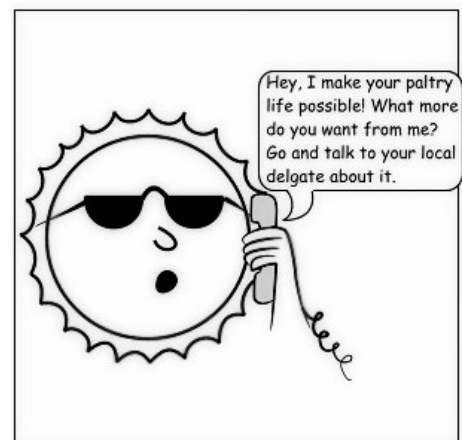
Fill us with your creativity as we may be empowered to bear the fruit of your mission. Let each of our actions bear fruit in accordance with this desire.

Endow us with the wisdom to produce and share what each being needs to grow and flourish.

Untie the tangled threads of destiny that bind us, as we release others from the entanglement of past mistakes.

Do not let us be seduced by that which would divert us from our true purpose, but illuminate the opportunities of the present moment.

For you are the ground and the fruitful wisdom, the birth, power and fulfilment, as all is gathered and made whole again.



**We sent out a prayer request – and got the most amazing response!!  
Here are what various “spirited exchanges people” & others have to say about prayer –  
please feel free to add your own for the next newsletter**

prayer is occasionally remembering  
to include god in your day (or week  
or month etc)

prayer is a continuing conversation

Pray as you can, not as you can't

prayer is listening, awareness,  
being open to life

prayer is a  
mystery

prayer is the refuge  
of the faithful and  
the desperate

*prayer to me is a 'wanting'. A wanting to express  
ones inner thoughts, a wanting to be heard by  
something bigger than ones self. It's a  
verbalization of ones self and ones feelings.  
Sometimes it's speaking aloud superfluous  
emotional energy in a prayer like fashion.*

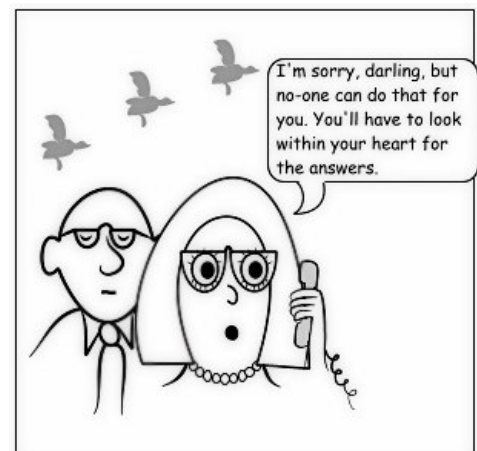
prayer is  
positive energy

prayer can also be a final resort and  
hope in times of darkness in ones life.  
For me it's a private verbal journal  
that only “God” and I are privy to.

*Prayer is a conversation between  
a good talker and a great listener.*

prayer is an attitude  
of life

prayer is seeking to be  
moved into the place  
where I can truly be who  
I am in prayer I'm in  
contact with my truest  
self and fully aware of  
who I am





## *Praise*

*Harry Smart, from the collection Fool's Pardon 1995*

Praise be to God, who pities wankers  
and has mercy on miserable bastards.  
Praise be to God, who pours his blessing  
on reactionary warheads and racists.

For he knows what he is doing; the healthy  
have no need of a doctor, the sinless  
have no need of forgiveness. But, you say,  
they do not deserve it. That is the point;

that is the point. When you try to wade across  
the estuary at low tide, but misjudge the  
distance, the currents, the soft ground and are  
caught by the flood in deep schtuck,

then perhaps you will realise that God  
is to be praised for delivering dickheads  
from troubles they have made for themselves.  
Praise be to God, who forgives sinners.

Let him who is without sin throw the first  
headline. Let him who is without sin  
build the gallows, prepare the noose,  
say farewell to the convict with a kiss

## **spirited exchanges groups for 2006**

### **Wellington:**

- Student spirited exchanges group meets fortnightly on Thursday evening (during term time) around a meal beginning at 630pm at 10 Glasgow St, Kelburn. For further details please contact Peter McKenzie-Bridle [peter@spiritedexchanges.org.nz](mailto:peter@spiritedexchanges.org.nz).
- Young adult (roughly early 20s through mid-thirties) meets fortnightly on Monday evenings at 730pm. The next meeting is at J J Murphys in Cuba Mall on April 10<sup>th</sup>. For further details please contact Donia Macartney [donia@central.org.nz](mailto:donia@central.org.nz)
- Spirited exchanges (all ages) meets fortnightly beginning Monday 27<sup>th</sup> March at Wellington Central Baptist Church at 630pm. The topic being explored on the 27<sup>th</sup> will be "the place of authority." For further details please contact Craig Braun [cjbraun@xtra.co.nz](mailto:cjbraun@xtra.co.nz) or Sarah Hill [sarah\\_hill007@hotmail.com](mailto:sarah_hill007@hotmail.com)

### **Auckland:**

- Will be on the first Friday of each month. Meeting at 14 Erson Ave (Disability Resource Centre rooms) at 730pm. For further details please contact Jocelyn Grantham [JG@dilworth.school.nz](mailto:JG@dilworth.school.nz)

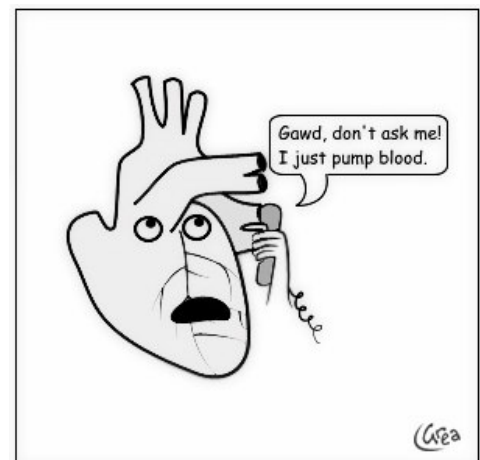
### **Christchurch:**

- A new group begins in Christchurch on Friday April 28<sup>th</sup>. For further details please contact Elizabeth Taylor [candet@paradise.net.nz](mailto:candet@paradise.net.nz)

### **Palmerston North**

- If you live in / near Palmerston North and are keen to gather with others in a similar space, from time to time, please contact Jenny: [jenny@central.org.nz](mailto:jenny@central.org.nz). There are one or two interested in doing this. Perhaps the beginnings of a Spirited Exchanges group in PN?

If you would like to contribute an article, suggest a topic for discussion, comment about the newsletter or come off the mailing list please write to the Editor: Jenny McIntosh at P.O. Box 11551, Wellington or email: [spiritex@central.org.nz](mailto:spiritex@central.org.nz) or [jenny@central.org.nz](mailto:jenny@central.org.nz) or Donia Macartney [donia@central.org.nz](mailto:donia@central.org.nz). For Alan Jamieson: [alan@central.org.nz](mailto:alan@central.org.nz) or [aj@paradise.net.nz](mailto:aj@paradise.net.nz) Website: [www.spiritedexchanges.org.nz](http://www.spiritedexchanges.org.nz)



"The Prayer"

Series of 6 cartoons taken from  
[sangrea.net/rijidij/ cartoons.htm](http://sangrea.net/rijidij/cartoons.htm)