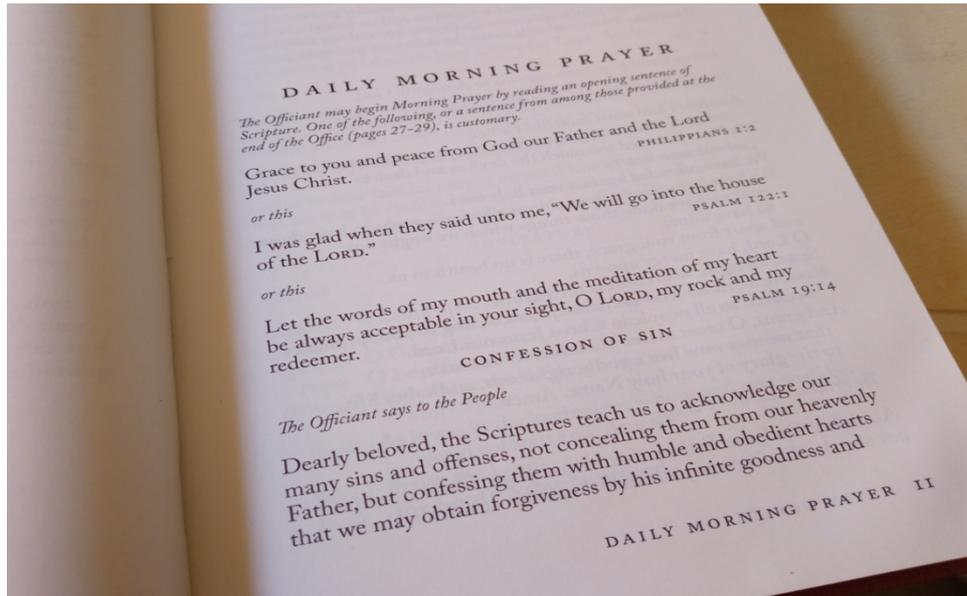


The Daily Office: Walking an Ancient Path in the New Normal



This is what the LORD says: "Stand at the crossroads and look; ask for the ancient paths, ask where the good way is, and walk in it, and you will find rest for your souls. (Jer. 6:16a, NIV)

Since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, the phrase "new normal" has been bandied about with much fervour as well as increasing tedium. Commentators and experts from all disciplines and professions have weighed in about the consequences of social distancing, local and national lockdowns, and global shifts in our way of life. It has become widely accepted that this ever-evolving state of upheaval brings not only great disruption but significant opportunities for rethinking, reformation and revitalisation. Yet, amidst all these changes and chances, most have focused on the *new*, the *unprecedented*, and the *revolutionary*. A novel set of affairs, it is often said or implied, requires novel solutions.

The startling prophecy in Jeremiah 6:16—a verse which I was led to begin meditating upon some weeks before the lockdowns began—breaks through such an obsession with novelty. Even as we stand, as his hearers did, "at the crossroads" of our present conjuncture, the voice of the Lord counsels us to "ask for the ancient paths." For these paths, declares the Lord, are "the good way," and in walking in them we "will find rest for [our] souls." In other words, we, as the People of God, are called to discover in our past the answers and solutions we need for our uncomfortable present.

Yet what exactly are these "ancient" or, in some translations, "old" paths? Biblical commentators have differed in their readings of this phrase. For the Victorian Anglican bishop J. C. Ryle, who wrote a book titled *Old Paths*, they are "the leading truths of Christianity which are 'necessary to salvation'." While I would not disagree with such a trustworthy voice as Ryle's, I believe that "ancient paths" can also refer not just to the unchanging substance of our faith, but also to the forms in which it has been practised since the days of the Early Church.

One such "ancient" Christian practice which I have been practising more than ever during the Movement Control Order (MCO) season can be traced not just to the Early Church but also to the practices of the Jewish people before the earthly life of Jesus. This is what is known as the Daily Office or canonical hours. These are forms of prayer which are used at specific times of the day, such as in the early morning, at mid-day, in the evening, and before bed. Acts 3:1, for example, records that "Peter and John were going up to the temple at the time of prayer—at three in the afternoon."

Such fixed hours of prayer, with specific prayers and Scriptural readings set for the day and time, have been the staple spiritual diet of many Christians for over two millennia.

Nevertheless, many Christians today, especially those within the Protestant churches, have never heard of the Daily Office and would probably regard it with suspicion. The idea of reading aloud prayers which have been composed by others, interspersed with psalms, sizable portions of other Scripture and translations of ancient hymns with Latin names, does not seem very attractive to many of us in an age which worships "authenticity." How could praying something written by another person, even if it is from the Bible, really express my heart to God?

As a person with a personality that prioritises uniqueness and authenticity, I can identify with such concerns and protests. Nevertheless, I am faced with the fact that Jesus himself, at key moments of his life, turned to Scripture to find the right words to say. When tempted in the wilderness by Satan, he did not respond with fresh arguments but simply quoted passages from the Old Testament to repel the Tempter. Most significantly, his final words on the cross were not a spontaneous new utterance but rather a direct quote from Psalm 31:5, "Into your hands I commit my spirit." Perhaps these examples from Jesus' life indicate that the words of others are most relevant and helpful to us in times of great distress and difficulty. When I feel crushed by the confusion and messiness around me and my own powers of eloquence falter, I can turn to the treasury of Scripture and the historic worship of the Church to find what I need to say to my Heavenly Father. That has been, at least, my experience during this period of pandemic and pandemonium.

For example, there is no morning or evening in which I am not in need of the words of confession which the Anglican Daily Office* provides me with:

Almighty and most merciful Father, we have erred and strayed from your ways like lost sheep. We have followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts. We have offended against your holy laws. We have left undone those things which we ought to have done and we have done those things which we ought not to have done...

(Morning Prayer and Evening Prayer, ACNA BCP 2019)

Having confessed my shortcomings and failures to God, I can then be strengthened by this prayer:

Grant to your faithful people, merciful Lord, pardon and peace; that we may be cleansed from all our sins, and serve you with a quiet mind; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. (Ibid.)

As I pray these words, I am reminded that God does not only forgive and cleanse me from my sins, but also provides the peace of mind and serenity which I need to carry on with the rest of my day. Indeed, these words, prayed in English by Anglicans since the first Book of Common Prayer was published in 1549, actually come from the Gelasian Sacramentary, a Latin liturgical book compiled around 750 A.D. Hence my words do not just resonate with other believers in the world today who are praying them as well, but also the prayers of the communion of saints through time in eternity. The startling truth is that I may be *just* one voice, but I am *still* one voice in the company of voices addressing God through the ages, even if I am rarely conscious of this while praying the Office.

Putting aside these weighty thoughts, I must say that the practical effects of the Daily Office are what keep me coming back to it. Although I am a very poor practitioner who normally only manages either Morning *or* Evening Prayer on an average day, I often find that the days in which I am not nourished by the Office are days where my character flaws come to the fore and the "new man" goes into hiding. I am more easily flustered and I find it more difficult to forgive. My thoughts focus on the fears which circle like vultures inside my head and I find it harder to rest and trust in God's mercies and sovereignty. The best expression of this dynamic that I have found was by Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who

was inspired by his visits to Anglican monasteries in England to practise the Daily Office both personally and corporately at the underground seminary of the Confessing Church which he led:

The morning prayer determines the day. Squandered time of which we are ashamed, temptations to which we succumb, weaknesses and lack of courage at work, disorganization and lack of discipline in our thoughts and in our conversation with other men, all have their origin most often in the neglect of morning prayer. ("The Blessing of Morning Prayer")

As I write these final words, it is 28 August, the day upon which the Western Church remembers St Augustine of Hippo, bishop and theologian. In his autobiographical *Confessions*, he writes, "Late have I loved you, O Beauty ever ancient, ever new, late have I loved you!" Although addressed to God, Augustine's phrase "ever ancient, ever new" captures, I believe, the spiritual power and sustenance I have found in praying to God using the Daily Office. Hence, I wonder, if we were to hear today the aforementioned words of God in Jeremiah, urging us to walk in the ancient paths, will we respond audaciously like the prophet's hearers, "We will not walk in it"? (Jer. 6:16b)

* *There are numerous versions of the Daily Office, and each has its unique place within the tradition of canonical hours. Popular options include the Church of England's "Time to Pray" app, the Northumbria Community's Celtic Daily Prayer, and the Roman Catholic Divine Office. I have been using since the beginning of this year the Book of Common Prayer 2019 of the Anglican Church in North America (ACNA), mainly due to its delicate balance of fidelity to traditional Anglican liturgical prayer, on the one hand, and adaptation to the language and context of today, on the other. Helpfully, another user of the ACNA Prayer Book has created a wonderful website which makes it really easy to pray the office on one's computer or mobile phone:*
<https://www.dailyoffice2019.com/>



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