

Practical input

Our top ten tips for praying with the headlines

We don't have all the answers on how to pray in response to the news and current affairs. But here are some of the invaluable lessons that we have gradually learnt as we've prayed with the headlines as a community on a daily basis for more than seven years. We hope you find them helpful in building your confidence and adding to – or confirming – your own experience. And if you have some extra tips you think we should include here, do let us know!

Ultimately, the best way to grow in prayer is not to read resources about it, but to go on an adventure with God into it. Still, we hope that some of the practical insights here will inspire, remove fear around engaging with 'heavier subjects' and encourage people to move forward in their own journey of engaging with God's world in his presence.

(This resource focuses on practical pointers exploring the 'how' of praying with the headlines, but you may also be interested in reading this blog article, which explores why praying in this way can be so rewarding – and surprisingly uplifting: <http://journey.thesanctuarycentre.org/2016/04/06/the-surprising-joy-of-interceding-for-the-world/>)



1. Always start from a place of worship

We don't believe praise and adoration are in any way some way a kind of *warm up* to petitioning prayer... as if somehow we have to get God on side by focusing on him a bit, before bringing up our requests.

God already knows – and cares much more – about any situation or person we want to talk to him about (even when it's us). He is already actively involved, and he knows when we need to talk about something urgently. A broken, contrite heart is the sacrifice he is looking for...¹ and if we've been reading the news, and we're turning to him in response, it's likely we have one of these already.

The reason worship is so important in this context is that, from our experience, to pray about the world's brokenness effectively and safely, we need the perspective that only worship can bring.

We need to fix the eyes of our hearts firmly on *who he is* – his character; his track record; his priorities; his power –

so that we can pray in a way that is rooted in the truth of this.

If we root our prayer in the *need of people*, rather than the truth of who God is and how he loves them, it's hard not to become weighed down in the heaviness of what we are facing. After a while praying in this way, it can become easy to grow discouraged, doubting that God really is sovereign, or good, or that his government is always truly increasing, as his word says it isⁱⁱ.

By contrast, praying from the place of worship is transformational both generally, and specifically. This is why it is often so helpful, not just to pray *after* praise or adoration, but to pray *with it*, or to *turn it around* into declaration or intercession. You can do this by using specific songs and scriptures (the latter is especially powerful) to pray, or if – like the Sanctuary – you focus on the characteristics and attributes of God a lot, pray into how you see these being needed within the specific situation you are lifting up.

But, as always with prayer – which is a two way connection and conversation – this is not a rule. There will be times where a news story is breaking and we turn straight away to pouring out our hearts in a desperate plea for help. And of course, recognising and turning to the only one who can truly help is an act of worship in itself.

2. Rather than just talking, take time to listen first; ask Jesus to show you how he is interceding for the situationⁱⁱⁱ; ask him to give you his heart for the people involved and show you how – or what – he wants you to pray for with him

We've all been at prayer meetings, or heard ourselves speaking out prayers, that make it sound as if we're informing God about what's happened; almost as if we thought we needed to fill him in – as well as the other people in the room – about all the details of what's going on.

We've also all probably found ourselves at some point praying in a way that suggests that, even at a subconscious level, we suspect God needs to be convinced or coerced that there is a legitimate need, or justification, for him to help.

But when we're coming to God in prayer about anyone who is in pain of any kind, or expressing our horror at an impending threat, we are not, in reality, *telling* God anything. Instead, we are catching up with him, sharing in the things we know are already on his heart; feeling only a small part of what he feels; seeing and understanding just a fraction of what he perceives. We are *joining* Jesus in interceding.

If we ask him, he will so often give us a new sense of connection to the people involved, or a specific insight, or sense of how to pray – and quite often, this turns out to be a surprising focus, or an extremely specific emphasis... not necessarily what we would naturally think of. He might even lead us to focus right down on one aspect or person rather than the whole situation.

The last few years have led us to believe that there is no such thing as an unanswered prayer, and certainly no rules for *when* something we ask for is going to happen as opposed to not. But we have noticed a very real pattern; when we are *led*, after listening, to pray for something very specific or unexpected, and there is just that sense that it is Spirit breathed, these are the times when we often discover a tangible, recognisable 'outcome' soon after.

Why God involves us, or even to some small degree perhaps sometimes *requires* or *needs* believers to agree with him in prayer to release certain things, is a great mystery. Theologians can debate it all they like – and it's good to explore and search out more of God. But to the follower, in a way, *why* it matters is so very much less important than the fact that it clearly does. And if it matters enough to make a difference in life or death situations, then clearly listening to our Leader as to the emphasis or focus of our prayers becomes essential.

3. Prayer is all about who you know not what you know

Prayer is our lifeline; our communication and connection with God... a deep, and constant, way of experiencing our relationship and union with him. Sometimes it is spoken, sometimes it is not. But it is always about becoming more consciously aware of his Spirit with us and in us.

So, it follows then that the only thing to do to ensure we're doing prayer *right* – whether it's for ourselves or the most complex political situation in the news right now – is that we're showing up to be present to God.

Just like in any relationship, we will all develop traits and grooves in the way we listen and talk that are helpful for us specifically, but there is no such thing as a formula of what to pray or how to pray it.

Likewise, just as there aren't any techniques to learn (besides showing up and listening, which are more heart attitudes than principles) there also isn't a baseline on how much we need to be informed about a person, or the details of a situation, to be able to pray for them.

It's just not about what we know... if we don't understand anything about Southern Asian culture, it doesn't matter in prayer – God does. If we really don't know whether the news we're reading is unbiased or not, it doesn't matter in prayer – God knows.

We simply show up with a heart to connect with him about some of the people and places that are important to him and us, and that's the whole thing.

We don't need to worry about not getting quite what we mean across, or about praying *the wrong thing* either... God can translate and – we believe – even *transfer* our prayers where necessary. He is all about the heart and the Spirit they are prayed in. He is much less – if even, honestly, at all – interested in the accurate theology, eloquence or model they use.

One time a woman with quite severe learning difficulties joined us to pray. She prayed with a great sense of love and presence to God and to those she was praying for, empathising with the pain in their lives as she related their circumstances in quite a bit of detail. It was powerful. But the people she was praying for weren't actually real – they were characters from Coronation Street even though their stories were as real to her as the people she met in person. Surely, God took these prayers for the lonely and the broken-hearted and made them just that.

4. Too much – or the wrong kind of – knowledge can be unhelpful... so be careful about how much content you take in as context, and what sources you use for it

We live in a 24 hour news culture with the most incredible amount of content constantly being made available to us – often in real time and from all over the world. The amount can be overwhelming. And so can its nature.

We've found the most helpful way to engage with the news to actually be online on sites like www.bbc.co.uk/news because this means we can be much more in control of what we take in, than on TV or radio for example, where you're suddenly deep into seeing or hearing something you can't un-see or un-hear, without being given much warning.

Additionally, by checking different regions of the world, and by the fact that a webpage acts as a front page to much deeper content behind, we can actually get a much broader range of stories and countries than just the ones that are considered to be the most popular or important stories to our nation at any particular time.

Often, just the standfirst [opening paragraph] can be more than enough to contextualise the headline and give us a sense of the need. And certainly we almost always avoid films that are marked as graphic, or galleries of distressing images. We don't need these to connect, and if we see too many of them, we can start to feel too oppressed to pray

or, even worse, begin to experience compassion fatigue, or become de-sensitised to their horror, over time.

Equally, our news is not usually run as a service to those featured in it – even when it's delivered by a public broadcaster. It is often forced to be fickle because it is driven by multiple agendas – some of good, some neutral and some bad. Things fall out of the news way before they should, or never make it in at all because they are deemed of less interest to those receiving it... awful headlines are distributed and then the breakthrough or follow up story on them never is.

So we've also found it helpful, to source some of what we pray for from NGOs and others working for change such as the relevant departments of the UN. Often, if a situation is really dark or entrenched, it can be helpful to continue to pray for it for a while in a different way by focusing in on praying blessing and protection *for* those who are working to change it, rather than always praying *directly about* the situation itself, even if this means we fall behind on the latest updates for a little while.

We've also found it really helpful to use geographical and international prayer guides to cycle round praying for the nations – praying blessing on them generally, and celebrating the unique strengths and beauties (as well as the deep problems) they have.

Lastly on this, there is simply so much we don't know – even when we are well informed – and it is important not to get hung up on what we know being central in prayer... God is all knowing and all wise, we can trust him to make sense of the most complicated of situations and the most limited of understanding or garbled of prayers offered up to him.

5. ... but some types of learning are rooted in – and grow more – love and insight

If we truly care about someone, somewhere or something, we will of course seek to understand more – especially if it's an ongoing relationship. And in turn, knowing a bit more can increase our empathy, connection and love even more.

Undoubtedly, we will grow in love and insight if we put the time into learning more about the people, places and situations we are praying for. Their history can often shed a huge amount of light on current events and motivations. Sometimes, whilst not agreeing with or condoning things that are incredibly dark, we start to see some of the trauma that has led to them, and our hearts are broken for perpetrator as well as victim. All this will lead us to pray from a much more Godly place of love than we could have done had we not learnt what we have taken the time to discover.

There is a deep *honouring* that takes place when we seek to understand the things that matter to the people we are praying for, and the people and world that God so loves. And this honouring (rather than the knowledge itself per se) starts to deeply hone our perspective and our hearts to be more in line with Christ's.

There is also a growth of connection and solidarity that comes from love-led enquiry and study. And a deeper sense of connection is undoubtedly a huge gift for fuelling prayer. But this connection can come from other forms of deeper engagement besides knowledge; this is why we have often found it incredibly helpful to pray for leaders whilst looking at their photographs, or to use symbols, visuals and other creative prayer tools. All of these things do nothing to enhance the effectiveness of our prayers in themselves, but they do a huge amount to increase the effectiveness of us as pray-ers, because they deepen connection, presence and engagement.

It's important to make it clear, that being informed is not a bad thing – quite the reverse! It can be incredibly helpful to pray from a place of knowledge and understanding, as well as from empathy or connection. Facts are in no way the enemy; truth and understanding are hugely important.

But ultimately, we do also learn – and perceive – more about places, people and situations directly through praying for them too. Wisdom, which undoubtedly includes knowledge, is found in listening to – and hearing – God^{iv}. Much

knowledge and insight about any given thing is always available to be discovered during prayer, as we are present to the one who knows all things, and the motivations of all hearts.

6. Praying with other people brings huge strength, especially when we are responding to a situation that seems particularly dark or entrenched

There are some situations that are so horrific, such as trafficking or sexual abuse, or so devastating, such as a brutal, long-term civil war, that it's just simply wiser and better to pray with other people about them.

Again, it's not a rule. Why wouldn't we cry out to God whenever we come across any need? The more brutal the situation, the more we often instinctively turn to prayer, perhaps especially when we're on our own, rather than with someone we might start talking to about what we have discovered, rather than immediately praying.

But when we are seeking to engage in consistent, strategic or deeper prayer about an issue or place like this, there is undoubtedly more strength and safety in numbers.

In a similar way to how praying from a place of worshipping God helps us have the right perspective, praying with the people of God strengthens this perspective. We each bring different insights and scriptures; we can encourage each other and hold each other up when one or more of us feels weary; when one person doesn't feel a heart connection, another will; the Spirit is somehow more there when two or three are gathered^y, even though he dwells in each one of us and is with each of us when we pray with him alone.

None of us can fully understand why this is, but again it's a pattern we've often seen work positively when we follow its lessons (and negatively when we don't). We've come to learn to choose quite carefully the timing, and the company we keep, as we fight certain battles. And we've also discovered it's wise to be careful about how many things of a dark or entrenched nature we pray about together at any one time.

7. Pray for individuals, or 'types of individuals', wherever you can

Some situations feel so vast – or so dry – that they can feel overwhelming or impersonal.

God has given us rich gifts in imagination and empathy, enabling us to glimpse something of what it's like to be in another's shoes. And it's often easier to connect with one specific individual – even if that's a sort of 'type' such as how a mother with a young baby might feel, or someone trying to make ends meet for their family, or a young person unsure of what the future might hold – than it is to feel connected to a whole country or continent's worth of pain or responses to a natural disaster or the growing threat of climate change.

So honing in on individuals, by name where we know it, or in this imagined, representative way, is incredibly helpful. What's beautiful too is that again, God can surely *translate* and apply this to specific circumstances or individuals that he does know the name of... we can often be agreeing with the general area, if not the exact specifics, of what he knows fully and is already interceding for.

Similarly, even the most complex of societal or international issues come down to the actions and views of individuals. Praying for individual hearts to soften and change is almost always the key, even at the level of shaping new or different policies or practices at a high corporate or governmental level, which will then go on to affect huge numbers of people, because even then, it is usually a handful of key people who make the decisions.

8. Pray for public figures, and even perpetrators of injustice or crime, with love and respect, using their first names wherever possible

We all bring our own opinions, world views and particular bias to the situations we pray about – some of which we

may well be objectively, completely right about! But this, together with the effects of the kind of media culture we live in, can lead to us inadvertently partnering in dehumanising those we are praying for.

Consistent perpetrators of an unjust viewpoint or actions whose rhetoric, policies or behaviour impact other people – and especially the vulnerable – get us (often righteously) angry. But we must be careful not to slip out of love and into judgement, which is not ours to give. For if we don't have love, our prayers stop at the level of expressing our feelings to God (important but not the whole picture) and fall short of joining his work of love-led transformation^{vi}. In short, we become clanging cymbals. And worse than this, we ourselves can become part of the very problem we're praying about ending – failing to see, respect and act in response to the true worth of a unique, infinitely loved person, made in the image of God.

Politicians, powerful business people, celebrities, dictators, traffickers... each one is first and foremost a unique and beloved child of God. Let's not talk about – let alone think we can *pray for* – any of them as if they weren't.

We've found using first names, or at the very least full names, helps enormously with this, rather than reducing people to a sort of label through just their surname or job title. Sometimes, where we can – if it's a leader we're praying for a lot, such as our Prime Minister, we'll try to find out more about their life story, or what their name means, all the while looking for touch points of things we can celebrate or empathise with in their experiences, background or even hobbies.

Again, it's all about honour and connection.

Controversially, sometimes the least of these^{vii} may not be limited to who we think they are. And even if they are, our battles to protect them are never truly against flesh and blood, but against the powers, principalities and rulers of the age^{viii}. We do not want to inadvertently partner with these by judging, devaluing, dehumanising, or even cursing, other people, even if these people are exploiting others.

9. The more you pray with the headlines, the better...

We've found that the more regularly you pray with the headlines, and other situations of need we are aware of in the world that are on God's heart, the more natural it becomes to do so and the more effective we become at listening and praying from the heart on these matters. Like anything, outward focused prayer is a muscle we develop; we get stronger as we exercise it more.

Additionally, the more we're present to it, and approaching the world's context as an active agent for change, rather than a passive receiver of news content, the more hopeful and positive we become. Yes there are awful things happening, but there are also incredible, new-mercy breakthroughs, and we start to see the larger strength, connections and repeating patterns of the latter more and more.

Then, just as worship informs our prayer, prayer inspires deeper and greater worship. We find our view of God grows and grows. He feels much bigger to us – as well as much closer – than he did when we started out. We know now that he's even more compassionate, inventive, involved, wise and faithful than we thought he was; so much more of all that is good and pure and wonder-filled than we could even imagine. We start to more fully believe that he really is in charge.

10. ... but remember to rest frequently from this kind of prayer, and related content, too

We've found it really helpful having a largely five (occasionally six) day a week rhythm for engaging deeply with issues in the headlines. Equally, we usually try to detach completely from news sources when we're on holiday, to ensure there's time and space to detox a bit, and replenish our strength.

This is another safeguard against compassion fatigue and overwhelm and an important discipline for remembering –

especially if our prayers are in some way tangibly *effective* – that it is God not us who is the care taker of the world, and that he has a global church and a host of angels at his disposal alongside each one of us!

It's a privilege to partner in his work, to share the things that matter to him, to both celebrate and grieve with him in equal measure over what is happening in the world today... but it is also an honour to just rest at his feet and focus on him for a while, or to spend some time playing, working and praying about things that reflect the eternity we were made for, where we will no longer need to cry out in desperation over heartbreak.

We are not God. We are limited creatures, easily tired or disheartened and our Father knows that, and wants to restore us from yesterday and equip us for tomorrow as well as encouraging us to embrace more of what we can do with and for him today.

ⁱ Psalm 51:16-17

ⁱⁱ Isaiah 9:7

ⁱⁱⁱ Romans 8:34

^{iv} 1 Kings 3:6-15

^v Matthew 18:20

^{vi} 1 Corinthians 13:1-4

^{vii} Matthew 25:45

^{viii} Ephesians 6:12