

Last week we celebrated the feast of St Teresa of Avila. At prayer she often used an hour glass – which is the same as an egg timer except that it takes an hour for the sand to go through. There were occasions she said, when the hour seems to drag on endlessly and she would try and shake the glass for the sand to go through more quickly. Saints are human like the rest of us.

Like St Teresa when our prayer becomes tedious we shouldn't give up on it. It also happens that when people don't get what they pray for, they can be tempted to drop it. Jesus says: "when you pray for something, believe that you have it already, and it will be yours". A few years ago a woman told me that she prayed hard for something but nothing seemed to happen. But then she added "Well, I knew I wouldn't really get it anyway" - so much for expectant faith. In the psalms it says: "see how he flags, he whose soul is not at rights". That applies to prayer as much as to anything else.

But maybe we're not going about it the right way. The second reading today emphasises the importance of Scripture and how it can teach us how to be holy.

There are a myriad of recipe books round these days to help us improve our culinary skills. So also scripture reading will help put us in the right mood for praying. In fact I would say that it is a vital ingredient. St Jerome, the 4th century scripture scholar, said that "ignorance of the scriptures is ignorance of Christ".

Nutritionists tell us that, if we want to stay healthy and lose weight we should eat smaller meals and chew every mouthful of food very thoroughly before swallowing. The same applies to the Word of God in prayer. It's best to read only a small portion of scripture, then put the book aside and give ourselves plenty of time to 'chew on' the message. This will help us raise our minds and hearts to God.

If we persist in the prayer, as the gospel says, it will bring us

closer to God. But prayer isn't just a nice feeling. God wants you and me to be his hands, his ears, his mouth, his mind in bringing his love to the world. Constancy in prayer sets us up to achieve this task. As Delia Smith says in her book 'a feast for Advent', "prayer is a journey into love". Blessed Mother Teresa of Calcutta insisted that before her sisters set out for the slums each day to care for the poor they had first to spend an hour in prayer. Only by doing this would they see the face of Christ in the poorest of the poor. Perhaps people working in care homes and hospitals could take a leaf out of her book. At the end of our lives we'll be judged on how we treat others.

Constancy in prayer will ensure that our spiritual life does not seize up. It will put us in tune with God so that we can be his instruments in building up His Kingdom in the world.

QUESTIONS

- 1. Delia Smith says, in one of her religious books, that prayer is a 'journey into love'. Comment or Discuss*
- 2. How do you feel about using the Scriptures to nourish your prayer life? Discuss*
- 3. Prayer is 'the raising up of the mind and heart to God' according to the old catechism. Discuss*
- 4. Does prayer lead us to a closer union with God and help us see his image in other people especially those in any kind of need? Discuss*