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Last Tuesday was the feast of St Teresa of Avila. For her set hour of 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 instead of three minutes. At times when the hour seemed to drag on endlessly she would shake the glass for the sand to go through more quickly. Goes to show that saints are human like the rest of us.

As with St Teresa when our prayer becomes tedious we might be tempted to hurry things along as well. Sometimes when people don't get what they pray for, they can be tempted to shelve 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 she begged God for a pressing need in prayer but nothing happened. But then she added "Well, I knew at the start 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". This lagging applies to prayer as much as to anything else.

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

If we want to improve our culinary skills there's a myriad of recipe books around these days to help us, from Mary Berry to Jamie Oliver to Delia Smith. But to help us with our praying skills we have none other than the GOOD BOOK itself. St Jerome, who translated the whole Bible from Greek into Latin in the 5th century, said that "ignorance of the scriptures was ignorance of Christ Himself".

Nutritionists tell us that, if we want to stay healthy and lose weight we should eat smaller meals and chew the living daylights out of every mouthful 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 down and give

ourselves plenty of time to 'chew on' the message.

But prayer isn't just a passive exercise but a clarion call to action. God wants you and me to be his hands, his feet, his ears, his eyes to convey His love to the world. Constancy in prayer sets us up for this task. As Delia Smith says in her book 'a feast for Advent', "prayer is a journey into love". If not, it's going nowhere. Saint John Vianney used to tell his congregation that there are only two things we need do in life in order to get to heaven – to pray and to love. Loving without praying can be shallow and short-lived, Praying without loving is a futile exercise – it's going nowhere. It's only authentic when the two are working in tandem. Then everything changes for the better in our lives and in the lives of those we normally interact with.

Constancy in prayer will ensure that our spiritual life does not seize up. It will keep us close to God so that we can be worthy instruments in building up His Kingdom of love in the world in which we live.