

29C

Yesterday was the feast of St Teresa of Avila. For her set hour of prayer in the morning 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 or four minutes. At times when the hour seemed to drag on endlessly she would shake the glass for the sand to go through more quickly – a futile exercise. Goes to show that prayer can sometimes be an uphill struggle even for the saints.

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'. Many years ago a woman told me she begged God for something she saw as important 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 one of the psalms it says: 'see how he flags, he whose soul is not at rights'. This flagging applies to prayer as much as to anything else.

But maybe there's an ingredient we've leaving out. 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 even the Hairy Bikers. 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 indeed 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 aside and give ourselves plenty of time to 'chew on' the message as it were.

But prayer isn't just a passive exercise but a clarion call to action. As St Theresa, whom I referred to earlier says, God wants us to be his hands, his feet, his ears, his eyes in conveying His love to the world. How are we all doing in that department? As Delia Smith says in her book 'a feast for Advent', "prayer is a journey into love". Saint John Vianney used to tell his parishioners 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. short-lived, and lacking any real depth. Praying without loving can be akin to mere naval-gazing – it's going nowhere. It's only authentic when the two are wedded.

Constancy in prayer will ensure that our spiritual life doesn't seize up. It will keep us close to God so that we can be worthy instruments in building up His Kingdom of love in this world whilst at the same time affording us a foretaste of world to come.