

Here are some snippets of Brother Lawrence's prayerful wisdom:

"We should fix ourselves firmly in the presence of God by conversing all the time with him.....We should give ourselves utterly to God..... and find contentment in the doing of his will, whether he takes us through sufferings or consolations..... There must be faithfulness in those times of dryness..."

"He quite expected..... that he should have his share of troubles and sufferings, but he knew well that since he could do nothing for himself, God would not be lacking to give him the strength to endure them."

"He gave thought neither to death, nor his sins, nor paradise nor Hell, but only to do small things for the love of God. 'Great things', he said he 'was not able to do.'"

That remark of Brother Lawrence isn't a bad place to finish this reflection on praying at difficult times. Do small things (and offer small prayers perhaps) for the love of God. Don't think that you have to do all the big stuff yourself.

These times are hard in many ways but don't stop praying. Come to God with honesty and devotion, and when you're hanging on by your fingernails, just do the small things for the love of God.

Further reading should you want it...

"Letters and Papers from Prison" by Dietrich Bonhoeffer

"The Practice of the Presence of God" by Brother Lawrence.

PS the picture on the front is from a mural painted in Bromley Parish Church while I was Vicar there. Alison Hodson, the artist used members of the congregation to model for it (I did the hands of God!) This image showing prayer at difficult times is of Maria, a Rwandan lady who started a charitable trust to care for survivors of genocide.

Praying at difficult times

A reflection by the Revd Michael Camp

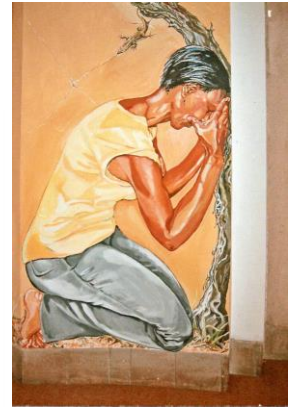
A very holy Abbot was once asked how much time he spent in personal private prayer. He said he spent an hour a day in prayer, unless he was really busy. Then it was two hours.

That sounds a bit counter intuitive but it's really important. Busyness puts us under pressure and can so easily become all consuming at the expense of other important stuff, like prayer. The Abbot knew that his relationship with God was his priority; that whatever he was busy at was part of his discipleship, and that the two were not in conflict. His prayer and his busyness needed to be in harmony.

What is true of busy times is also true of difficult times. Stress and worry and pain are powerful forces that can so easily overwhelm us and push everything else out. I've known a number of people who, in the aftermath of a bereavement, have stopped coming to church because the grief has pushed everything else out of them. I can well understand how and why that happens but it is a shame because it is in our grief that God cares most deeply and wants to hold us. Our stresses and our prayers are, together, part of our discipleship.

Where, then, can we find some resources to help us to continue to pray even when times are hard?

We begin, of course, with Jesus at his most difficult time, in the Garden of Gethsemane, contemplating his imminent, painful, humiliating death. At that moment he prayed for it all to go away. Wouldn't we all? There's a real honesty about that. There's no shame in being honest with God about our fears and anxieties; our anger and our hopelessness. You don't have to put on a show in your prayers to show God that you've got it all sorted. You haven't, so tell God how hard it is, it's not a secret.



Detail from a mural in Bromley Parish Church in south east London, painted by Alison Hodson.

Jesus went on to commit himself to God's will. "...remove this cup from me; yet, not what I want, but what you want." That's another basic message about prayer. Prayer is not about getting God to do what we want; it's about enabling us to want and, to do, what God wants.

Jesus was firmly rooted in the Old Testament, as you'd expect and prayer in the OT is nothing if not honest. We read of Moses and others railing against God and really questioning Him and, in the Psalms (for instance) we see genuine misery set alongside genuine devotion. Nowhere are these two more effectively combined than in Psalm 42.

Deitrich Bonhoeffer



Many Christians down the centuries have left us examples of how to follow Jesus, and pray at difficult times with honesty and devotion. One such is Deitrich Bonhoeffer.

Bonhoeffer was one of the most important theologians of the 20th century but he lived at a time when his country, Germany, fell into the grip of Fascism. Bonhoeffer was part of what

became known as "The Confessing Church". That is to say those Christians who courageously refused to bow to the Nazis. Bonhoeffer was implicated in the so-called "July Plot" to kill Hitler and he was imprisoned and then hanged in Flossenbug concentration camp.

He left so much that is powerful and relevant to us. Here's a purple passage in which Bonhoeffer confronts Christ's demand to love his enemies: "It is only.... When one sees the anger and wrath of God hanging..... over the head of one's enemies that one can know something of what it means to love them and forgive them."

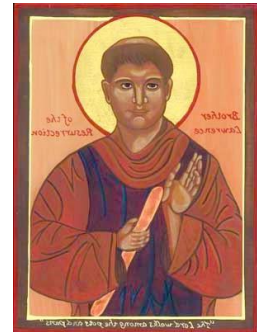
Here are some words from a prayer Bonhoeffer wrote which reflects both the honesty and the devotion to God shown in Jesus' Gethsemane prayer:

"O God, early in the morning I cry to you. I can't do this alone.
In me there's darkness, But with you there's light;

I'm lonely, but you don't leave me;
I'm feeble in heart, but with you there's help;
I'm restless, but with you there's peace.
In me there's bitterness, but with you there's patience;
You have granted me many blessings;
Now let me also accept what's hard from your hand.
You will lay on me no more than I can bear.
You make all things work together for good for your children.
Give me such love for God and men as will blot out all hatred and bitterness;
Give me the hope that will deliver me from fear and faint-heartedness."

Brother Lawrence

Another helpful example of praying at difficult times can be found in the 17th century French monk, Brother Lawrence. Lawrence was illiterate but a friend who was so moved by his wisdom noted down his words and published them in a book called "The Practice of the Presence of God" (come to think of it, that very title is probably the best definition of prayer you'll ever find).



Lawrence was partially disabled and suffered almost constant pain. He spent most of his time working in the monastery kitchens, which he didn't enjoy at all and, on one occasion, he tells of a trip by barge to take barrels of wine to market. His pain and his gammy leg made this really tough for him. The thing was that Lawrence consciously practised the presence of God all the time. He lived with an intentional awareness of the presence of God with him in everything he did, and he was able to find a deep and abiding satisfaction in whatever he was called upon to do. It didn't matter whether he liked it or not, it didn't matter whether it hurt or not; the important thing was that every moment, every action should be lived with, and for God. He didn't say that was easy or came naturally, he knew it required perseverance.