Brother Edward, preaching in Hilfield Friary Chapel many years ago, said that at the end of our prayer time we should not be wondering how well we had prayed, but wishing we had prayed better. I’ve never forgotten that, but, looking back, I wonder why it has taken me so long to unwind and act on it.

From the time I began, as a theological student, to experience the routine of daily prayer, the Daily Office (at first Morning and Evening Prayer as required by the Prayer Book) has been an anchor. But the half-hour’s ‘meditation’ (as we called our time of personal prayer) was another matter. ‘I will think upon God’ (only half quoting Psalm 77.3) was the agenda we were given. At my desk, with the Bible or another book at hand, I might attempt to think about God. But ‘meditation’ was a blank. How things changed I can’t recall, but can only say that I’m happy to have reached at last a point where I just want to be still, with few thoughts and words, and to let God do the rest. It helps me to delight in the Lord if I simply focus on one of the pictures in my room or look at the trees I can see through my window. (Leafless branches in winter form lovely patterns and at other seasons the leaves present a wealth of greens and bronzes which give pleasure. Just looking helps one to relax).

Somebody asked me once what God was doing in my prayer. Of course! If St Paul was right when he said we cannot pray as we ought, and that it is the Spirit who gives voice to our prayer (Romans 8. 26) then what we have to do is to step aside, give space to God and allow our deepest need and longing, which is for God, to surface.

When I was asked to contribute to this issue on the Spirituality of Ageing my first thought was about prayer. But spirituality has to do with our total response to God. It embraces the whole of life.

I am fortunate enough not to be able to speak for those who have lost their mobility or other faculties, or for those who live in constant pain. But I have begun to discover how memory functions - or fails to function - in old age. You forget obvious names and words and what somebody told you yesterday. But you remember, often all too clearly, things that happened years ago, and that’s not always pleasant. You recall mistakes, lost opportunities - ‘Was I so stupid, so thoughtless?’ - and people who have been hurt. What’s done is done and there’s nothing you can do to put it right, except to turn to the gospel. Jesus assures us of the immense joy there is in heaven over every sinner who repents. And the cross of Jesus - an empty symbol apart from his resurrection - assures us that the power and love of God which are bringing about a new creation can alone repair the damage that we humans do.
But there are good memories too. Perhaps I've not achieved what I might or ought to have done. But it's a bit late to change all that. Many years ago I chose to become a friar, and, rather than climb the career ladder, to be an itinerant - not necessarily wandering from place to place but engaging in a journey wherever SSF might want me to go. Of course that's had its ups and downs. But so much has been rewarding and enjoyable. So many opportunities have come out of the blue. To pick simply one or two at random: fifteen years in the Pacific (New Zealand, Australia, Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands); ten years as part of the clerical team at the annual music festival at Edington; at 70 (when the Church of England had pensioned me off) an invitation to be chaplain of Chichester Theological College - all this and so much else has provided interest, pleasure and led to valued friendships. Whatever lies ahead, I can delight, not only in memories, but in people, music, books and places (when I can get to them) and more.

I can only say 'Thank you' to God. But while I'm here there's something missing - questions to be answered, gaps to be filled. There's a longing which only the vision of God can satisfy, and that when God is ready.

Isaiah has encouraging words for itinerants. 'Those who hope in the Lord renew their strength, they put out wings like eagles. They run and do not grow weary, walk and never tire' (40.31). We may not be fliers or runners, but if we're only plodders we can continue to enjoy the journey. 

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