



Lesson Two: When you meet with God...start by meeting him alone.

Reflection/Discussion

Did you find sitting still for 10 minutes difficult? If so, why do you think that was?

How do you think God feels about you dedicating some time especially to him?

Before or during the exercise, did you find that there were other things you would have rather been doing than spending those 10 minutes with God? If so, reflect on why this was the case.

To pray is to open up our world to God's world - our reality to the reality of God. Centering prayer is a way of disengaging from all the clutter of this world which constantly demands our attention, so that we can focus on the One who is not blown around by events and circumstances. God is the constant amidst the chaos, the stillness in the apex of the storm, the source of all peace, and the Lord of all creation.

Teaching

Matthew 6: 6 *"But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you."*

Being alone with God...

In a world full of people, entertainment and activity, it can seem strange for someone to leave all this behind and find a place where they can be solitary and un-distracted. I remember when I first went on an eight day silent retreat. My friends at work could not understand why I should do such a thing, and there were plenty of Christian friends who struggled with the idea of an eight day silence as well. Imagine how people later reacted when I decided to do the thirty days of silence required for the Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius retreat!

The problem we have with long periods of silence and inactivity, or just being alone, is that we fear becoming bored or depressed. I was struck by this phrase in a book on Christian spirituality, "Boredom is an encounter with our own emptiness."¹ Society is geared up to fill that emptiness with every kind of conceivable activity, and the more fun the better! Yet when we look at Jesus we see one who willingly spent long periods of time away from people and other worldly distractions.

¹ "Spirituality Workbook" by David Runcorn, 2006, page 147

But actually, as he sat (probably in a cave) in the desert for his forty days and nights of fasting he had the faith to know that he was not alone. He lived in the presence of the Holy Spirit (who had led him out into the desert) and his heavenly Father, who had just spoken those words to Jesus that would have pleased any son to hear, *"You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased"* (Luke 3: 22).

A retreat is not a place where you go to be alone, it is a place where you go to be with God, whether it's a retreat that lasts thirty days or ten minutes each day. We need to spend time alone with God if we are to grow in our friendship with him. Whilst our ultimate goal should be to live in unceasing communication with God (1 Thessalonians 5:17, Ephesians 6: 18), the way to get there is to begin by having a dedicated time each day especially for him. So whether we go out of our homes to find a solitary place to pray, or we close the door of a room in our house to create that temporary solitude, there is a need to let go of the many distractions of life in order to focus our attention exclusively on God.

Hiding and seeking...

I wonder if you ever played 'hide and seek' when you were a child (or even as an adult)? In the game you take it in turns to hide and to seek. So when you are the one who is hiding, you find a place around the house (like a cupboard for example) and climb in, shut the door and wait to be found. As you sit there alone in the dark you have to believe that the other person is trying to find you. If they are not then the game doesn't work! Most games are played with a number of people and they are both fun, and they bring people together. Our relationship with God can seem like a game of 'hide and seek'. See Luke 15: 3-6, *"Then Jesus told them this parable: 'Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Doesn't he leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it? And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbours together and says, "Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep."'"* The message in the parable of the lost sheep is that God seeks us out when we have gone off on our own. But then in Luke 11: 9 *"Seek and you will find"*, the roles are reversed and we are told that we too need to be seekers after God; and we are given the assurance that if we do this then we will find him. Notice that in the game there are two solitary figures – the person hiding on their own and the person searching on their own; but both are ultimately driven by a desire to be together.

Sometimes it can take a while to find someone who is hiding, and occasionally a child playing the game will give up seeking and go off to do something else more fun, leaving their hidden friend still waiting on their own to be found. Through the parable of the lost sheep God promises us that he will look for us until he finds us – we are that important to him! However, when it comes to seeking God, many people give up the search very quickly and they do not find him. For Jesus, seeking out his Father was his first priority every day, as we see from Mark 1: 35 *"Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed."* The way he did it was to find that place where he could be alone with his Father. Jesus' motivation for doing this was love, not duty or guilt or feeling that he ought to do it. But just as those who love each other long to be alone together, so Jesus wanted to be alone with his Father. Notice the anguish in his words on the cross when, for the first time, Jesus senses the lack of his loving Father's presence and cries out, *"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"* (Matthew 27: 46)!

A growing desire...

Whilst some people seem to find this sort of thing easy, for many of us that sense of love or need to spend time in the Father's presence is not so strong and, anyway, life gives us so many other things to love or need! For us the spiritual journey has to start with a decision, and we will find that desire grows over time. However, there are things we can do to help that process along. Using our imagination in prayer can be really helpful. Jesus certainly involved people's imagination when he preached to the crowds using parables. He would tell a story and those listening were immediately engaged in it, not necessarily knowing where the story was going. In the same way we can read the stories in the Bible and imagine ourselves there, observing all the details of the events as they unfold. We can be there at the birth of Jesus and reflect on what he would have been like as a child. We can witness his baptism and then sit with him in the desert as the hours and days go by. We can experience the ups and downs of his three year ministry, and follow him as he is led off to be tried. We can witness his execution, and then be in the garden when Mary first sees the risen Jesus. When we do this, the story of Jesus in the Bible becomes much more the story of a friend, whom it will feel natural to spend more time with.

Going deeper into silence...

However, when we pray, or just try to read and concentrate on the Scriptures, mental distractions of all kinds - thoughts, ideas, dreams, songs, etc., can get in the way of us being able to focus on God. When Jesus talked about prayer involving us going into a room on our own and closing the door, he undoubtedly meant this in a literal sense; it is good to spend some time physically alone with God. But I believe that he also meant it in another sense. There is one place that no one else can penetrate, where we can be truly alone with God, and that is in our minds. Some people literally cannot be anywhere on a regular basis where they are physically alone, but actually we can learn to close the door to all the distractions in our own minds and be alone with him there. As Archbishop William Temple said, *"Bring the needs of the world and the problems of life before God; then leave them with him and wait for a while in silence not only from speech, but as far as possible from thought. There is no limit to what God will do by means of us, if we train ourselves to trust him enough."*² This, again, is what Centering Prayer is about, which leads us nicely on to this weeks exercise.

Exercise

Centering Prayer is not only a form of prayer; it is also a way into prayer. Everyone will have their own way of preparing themselves for prayer. Reading a few verses of scripture is a popular way, or listening to some worship music. Others might find focussing on a view of the countryside or a picture on their wall helps them find their way into prayer. At different times I can find any of these methods, and others besides, useful preparation for talking with God. But I suppose the method that comes most naturally to me is the exercise below which I use to quieten my mind. It is, however, important to note that the ultimate aim of this exercise is not a mental vacuum, but a focused mind.

² "Prayer and Contemplation" by Mark Gibbard, 1985, page 171.

As with the last exercise, you need to find a quiet solitary place where you will be undisturbed, and you can sit and be still for ten minutes. You may find it helpful to be in a dark room. Again, like last week, you need to begin the exercise by telling God that you are offering this time as a gift to him, and thanking him for the opportunity to grow in your sensitivity to him as you do these exercises. When you have done this, close your eyes and (if you find it helpful) try to imagine that you are playing a game of 'hide and seek' with God, and that you are actually hidden from God somewhere in your house. So now all your attention is going to be focussed on listening for the sound of God seeking you out. In reality, you may hear other people walking round the house, or cars driving past the house, or birds singing, etc. It does not really matter what you hear. The important thing is that you are using the sounds to help you focus your mind.

So this is another way of doing Centering Prayer. The difference between this exercise and the last one is the point of focus. In the last exercise you focussed on your body, and in this one you will focus on what you can hear. Either way, the reason for the focus is to enable you to quieten down and centre your mind in on one thing, in this case the sounds that you can hear. You will be using the sounds to refocus your mind away from its own thoughts. Other thoughts will still come, and you will need to acknowledge them and then put them to one side, but with practice this method of quietening your mind does become easier. When I first started doing this I found that I needed these sounds to distract my mind from its many thoughts, but in time I found that even listening to silence was all I needed in order to do this. At the end of the ten minutes remember to thank God for the time you have had with him.

Exercise in brief:

- 1) Pray – give God this time you have set aside for him.
- 2) Sit still and comfortably for ten minutes.
- 3) Close your eyes and focus your mind on the things you can hear.
- 4) Relax.
- 5) Close the exercise with a prayer of thanks.

Encouragement

John (Praying) Hyde 1865 – 1912

The son of a Presbyterian minister, John Hyde heard the call of God to the mission field - in his case India. His attempts at learning the language were hampered by his poor hearing, and his failure to win converts drove him to his knees in prayer. Prayer then became his principal calling and the focus of his work for God. He soon began spending nights in prayer. At the 1904 convention for missionaries in Sialkot (now in Pakistan), Hyde and his friends formed the Punjab Prayer Union and committed themselves to spend a half hour each day praying for renewal and revival in India, and Hyde decided to pray that God would win one soul every day for the next year. To qualify, they would have to be baptised and publicly confessing Jesus Christ as their Saviour. When more than 400 people were converted during that year, Hyde decided to double his request for the next year. When his prayers were again answered with over 800 people converted, Hyde doubled his request again for the following year. Revival was beginning to break out in India! John Hyde had become known as "Praying Hyde" and the "Apostle of prayer".

John Hyde later spent some time in England where one missionary, Dr Wilbur Chapman, met him and later wrote to a friend... *"I have learned some great lessons concerning prayer. At one of our*

missions in England the audiences were exceedingly small. But I received a note saying that an American missionary...was going to pray God's blessing down upon our work. He was known as 'Praying Hyde'. Almost instantly the tide turned. The hall became packed, and at my first invitation fifty men accepted Christ as their Saviour. As we were leaving I said, 'Mr. Hyde, I want you to pray for me.' He came to my room, turned the key in the door, and dropped on his knees, and waited five minutes without a single syllable coming from his lips. I could hear my own heart thumping and beating. I felt the hot tears running down my face. I knew I was with God. Then, with upturned face, down which the tears were streaming, he said 'O God!' Then for five minutes at least he was still again; and then, when he knew that he was talking with God...there came up from the depth of his heart such petitions for men as I had never heard before. I rose from my knees to know what real prayer was."

Sayings of the Desert Fathers/Mothers

Abba Anthony, "Just as fish die if they stay too long out of water, so the monks who loiter outside their cells or pass their time with men of the world lose the intensity of inner peace. So like a fish going towards the sea, we must hurry to reach our cell, for fear that if we delay outside we will lose our interior watchfulness."