

Explorers in Prayer – Lesson Plan Four

The Place of Scripture and Icons in Prayer

The aims of this class are as follows:

- 1) To continue reflecting on ways in which we can focus our attention on God.
- 2) To introduce the students to icons.
- 3) To introduce the students to the first stage of Lectio Divina.
- 4) To begin doing the Lectio Divina through an exercise.
- 5) To offer other exercises to do at home.

Supplementary items to take to class:

- 1) Candles/matches.
- 2) Print off an Icon I have made available to download – one for each student to keep.
- 3) DVD “Into Great Silence” by Philip Groning. One place you can buy the film is at [lovefilm.com](http://www.lovefilm.com)
http://www.lovefilm.com/search/overview.html?search_keywords=into+great+silence&x=0&y=0
- 4) A DVD player.
- 5) Box of tissues.

Arrive - light a candle and wait in silence - opening prayer

Feedback from the previous weeks readings and exercise

Feedback from book:

Chapter 2 - The Prayer of the Forsaken

Richard Foster begins this chapter with a quote from St John of the Cross. John was a Spanish 16th century Carmelite monk who is particularly famous for the phrase ‘Dark night of the soul’ which comes from a poem he wrote entitled *The Dark Night*. In a conflict concerning the reform of his own community, John was arrested and locked up in a small windowless room for nine months, living only on bread and water. This experience informed his thinking about times when we feel that God has abandoned us. He concluded that since Jesus experienced this sense of abandonment on the cross (Matthew 27:46), it is quite likely that Christians will experience it too. He was keen to point out that this is not necessarily the result of any particular sin on our part, but rather it is a part of the process God may take us through as he does his work of transforming us into the likeness of Christ. He also drew a distinction between this kind of experience and the medical condition of depression. Whilst God could still use depression for good, this was not the same experience as the dark night of the soul.

Chapter 3 - The Prayer of Examen

Feedback on the prayer exercises:

Reflecting on the truth about ourselves.

End of Feedback

Main Talk (Ways of focussing our attention on God)

It was through reading the book *Celebration of Discipline* by Richard Foster that I discovered there was so much more Christians have done throughout the history of the church to facilitate their growing in spiritual maturity. Many have totally committed themselves to seeking after a deeper relationship with God and they have much wisdom to share with us today. So this is what the different forms of Christian spirituality are all about, enabling Christians to grow in spiritual maturity, to grow into the likeness of Christ, in order to become the people God made us to be. Just as the relationship between a father and son will change as the son grows and matures, so our relationship with God can grow deeper as we take on more of the likeness of Christ. It's a journey, and in one way or another it never ends! "For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known." 1 Corinthians 13: 12. We will now look at some useful techniques to assist this journey.

Section 1: The use of icons to help us focus, love and pray...

The word 'icon' means 'image', or 'representation', or 'portrait'. At the seventh Ecumenical Council of the Christian church in 787 AD, a debate took place as to whether Icons were a legitimate tool for Christians to use in their spiritual journey. The problem was that the Old Testament clearly stated that no image (picture or statue) may be made of God. So if Jesus is God, then was it not wrong to make any images of him? The conclusion was that with Jesus this rule had changed.

Note for the course leader

The icon, Christ Pantocrator (Almighty), from the St Catherine's monastery in the Sinai (550 AD) is available for downloading from the Prayer Eleven web site so that it can be shown or given out to the students.

In fact, Jesus was seen as the icon of God, "The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation." (Colossians 1:15). Since it would have been ok for someone to have sketched a likeness of Jesus as he preached to the crowds, so it was ok for someone to make a picture of him based on their imagination and, if possible, convey a godly message through their picture. So the Council decided that "Icons do with colour what Scripture does with words." When, through the Incarnation, God took on human form as Jesus, he demonstrated that the things of this material world are not in themselves evil, and can be of use in our journey towards God. This includes the use of icons. When the church divided into the Eastern Orthodox Church and the Western Catholic Church, part of that division lay in the way the two churches sought to connect with God. Whereas Western Christian spirituality was focussed on developing our relationship with God through listening, Eastern Christian spirituality focussed on the art of growing in love with God through gazing at him. (Gazing is a normal feature of loving. We can see this all around us – a couple 'in love' gazing at each other, a parent gazing lovingly at their child - more of this in lesson 6.) This gazing was then facilitated using icons, and so this is the way to approach Icons.

As pictures, icons have a style of their own. They are supposed to look other-worldly as they serve the function of being windows on to eternity. Whereas pictures show us images of this world, icons are intended to reveal the invisible world of the Kingdom to come. In his book, *Behold the Beauty of the Lord* by Henri Nouwen, he looks at four icons and reflects on them. Icons are not objects of worship, they have no supernatural power. They are simply an aid to visualising God's presence in our lives more vividly. Nouwen writes,

“Icons are painted to lead us into the inner room of prayer and bring us close to the heart of God...They do not immediately speak to our senses. They do not excite, fascinate, stir our emotions, or stimulate our imagination. At first, they even seem somewhat rigid, lifeless, schematic and dull. They do not reveal themselves to us at first sight. It is only gradually, after a patient, prayerful presence that they start speaking to us. And as they speak, they speak more to our inner than our outer senses. They speak to the heart that searches for God.”

Exercise 1

The students should take five minutes to gaze at the Icon and then share anything that they may have noticed about it. Everything in the picture has a significance, so they should look at it carefully, but they should focus mostly on the man in the picture. He has been painted with the view to bringing out a response from the person who gazes at him.

Discuss what people got from the icon (if anything) at the end of the five minutes before sharing the information given about the icon below...

The *Christ Pantocrator* is giving a blessing with his right hand in the air and holds a Gospel in his left hand. Christ's face is intended to be individual and realistic so that the person gazing on him is more easily able to connect with him. This is an icon which is intended to be used for prayer. (Other icons are intended in a more general sense to call the worshipper to set their eyes upon a reality which exists above that of the ordinary.) The smoothness of Christ's face is evidence of his serenity and tranquillity, and the absence of any perceptible emotions. This reflects a particular view of prayer – that of someone sitting praying serenely in the presence of God.

The mysteries of God are not easy to see. What we can see has been revealed to us by the Holy Spirit and is just the smallest tip of the iceberg. Over the centuries people have spent a huge amount of time going deeper into the mysteries of God, and I doubt any have found it an easy journey to make. Because we are all made differently, we will need different tools or environments to help us on that journey. I, personally, like as much silence as I can get when trying to focus my attention on God. Others will find having something like an icon to focus on is very useful. Either way, the aim is the same, to expand our experience of relationship with God in order that it may grow deeper.

End of Exercise 1

(Main Talk continued)

Section 2: Another means of focussing on God through prayer is by learning to put the world to one side...

Some people get bored with their own company because they are so dependent on outside stimuli to excite their minds or lift their spirits. Working with recovering alcoholics and drug users, I have seen how these people have gone to extremes to satisfy a hole in their life by focussing on something from outside of themselves. But everyone does this to some extent or other as we fill our lives with family, work, entertainment, etc.

Question: How long can you be alone before you start needing the company of others?

The spiritual journey can be portrayed in different ways. One way is to see it as an inward journey to discover the riches God has placed inside every person. Those riches witness to the fact that we have been made in God's likeness and for relationship with him. The journey to discover those riches can be long and painful, and the second prayer principle of this course applies; that we journey like a long distance runner rather than a sprinter.

An example from a Carthusian monastery about putting the world to one side.

We're going to watch the first part of a DVD on life in a Carthusian Monastery in the French Alps. The Carthusian Order has been in existence since 1084 and seeks to combine the eremitical (from which we get the word *hermit*) life of seclusion with the cenobitic life which stresses community, but this Order puts a greater stress on the seclusion than other monastic Orders. Its name comes from the place (the Chartreuse Mountains in the French Alps) where the first hermitage was set up by St Bruno of Cologne. Each monk spends most of his day alone in his cell in study and prayer, and then joins the others several times a day for worship in the chapel, and for occasional meals. Their study has led to the writing of many significant books (perhaps the best known is *The Cloud of Unknowing*) which they see as being a part of their ministry to the outside world.

These people have chosen to give a lot of space and time, and use silence in order to be focussed and attentive to God.

Note for the course leader

Play the first 21 minutes of the DVD. The 21 minutes will end with the words on the screen saying: "Anyone who does not give up everything he has cannot be my disciple."

Question: How do you react to this film?

In the world of drug/alcohol rehabilitation there is a debate about the virtues of treating people at a residential rehab, which can be quite intense, or in the community where problems are dealt with as they arise in normal everyday circumstances. The conclusion seems to be that some need the help of a rehab, but most are better off staying in the community. It is the same with prayer – most of us will forge our relationship with God through our lives in the community. But perhaps there are things we can learn from those who live their lives in the intensive prayer environment of a monastery.

Section 3: A third way for developing our prayer lives is through the Lectio Divina...

We are giving God space and time as we read the scriptures, but there are different ways in which we can read it. We can study it academically. We can read it like we read any other book. But we can also read scripture in a way that leads us into prayer. Here are some quotes from a famous writer on prayer:

"As God's house is called 'the house of prayer' because prayer is the most important of its holy offices, so by the same token the Bible may be called the Book of Prayer. Prayer is the great theme and content of its message to mankind." E. M. Bounds

"The Word of God is a great help in prayer. If it be lodged and written in our hearts, it will form an out flowing current of prayer, full and irresistible. Promises, stored in the heart, are to be the fuel from which prayer receives life and warmth, just as the coal, stored in the earth, ministers to our comfort on stormy days and wintry nights. The Word of God is the

food by which prayer is nourished and made strong. Prayer, like man, cannot live by bread alone, 'but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.'" E. M. Bounds

Over the next few weeks we will be doing the Lectio Divina in three parts. In this part we will be **Reading** the scriptures and praying out of them. Next week we will be looking at the second part - **Meditation**, and the week after we will look at part three - **Contemplation**.

Note for the course leader

Read section on "Lectio - reading/ listening" from *Accepting the Embrace of God: The Ancient Art of Lectio Divina* by Fr. Luke Dysinger, O.S.B. (Order of St Benedict). This document is also on the **Explorers in Prayer** web page.

End of Main Talk

Exercise 2

Read about Solomon asking for wisdom: 1 Kings 3: 4-15

Question: How did people find doing this prayer exercise?

Note for the course leader

Students should get into groups of no more than six people. One person in the group reads the passage slowly, perhaps several times, whilst the others just listen for a word that speaks to them from the passage. Each person then takes that word and turns it into a prayer to pray out loud in the group.

End of Exercise 2

So to summarise this week's lesson:

1) Both icons and Scripture continue to be used by Christians as a way of focussing on God. In today's exercises we have tried using both to see how they might be helpful to each of us in our individual prayer lives.

2) With both icons and Scripture, for them to be an effective means of connection with God, there is a need to detach ourselves from the concerns and activities of this world in order to focus our attention on him. In the DVD on life in a Carthusian monastery we see people who have committed themselves to seek out God in a detached world of silence, prayer and study. Whilst this lifestyle is clearly not for everyone, perhaps there are things we can learn from those who live like this.

End of Summary

Home work

Distribute the handouts. Draw people's attention to the story on the back of the handouts.

Individual Exercise: Use a different prayer each day from the following list of Scripture passages. Read the passage and listen for the words that speak to you, then let these words lead you into your own prayer. **Alternatively**, spend the 15 minutes gazing at the icon you have been given (or another icon if you have one) and allow what comes out of that time to lead into a prayer.

Day 1 - Jacob wrestles with the Lord: Genesis 32: 22-30.
Day 2 - Moses forbidden to cross the Jordan: Deuteronomy 3: 21-29.
Day 3 - The Lord appears to Elijah: 1 Kings 19: 9b-18.
Day 4 - Nehemiah's prayer: Nehemiah 1: 4-11.
Day 5 - Jeremiah's complaint: Jeremiah 20: 7-18.
Day 6 - Daniel's prayer: Daniel 9: 4-19.
Day 7 - The believers prayer: Acts 4: 23-31.

Read chapters 10 & 20 of the course book.

Prayer Triplet Exercise: Each person in the triplet will read out loud the prayer of David: 2 Samuel 7: 18-29. You should allow a few minutes gap between each reading. Again, listen for the words that speak to you, then when the half an hour is coming to an end let these words lead into a time of prayer.

And finally...

The class will end with a time of open prayer.

After Class Notes: