

Explorers in Prayer – Lesson Four Notes

Note from Last Weeks Reading

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.

The Place of Scripture and Icons in Prayer

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.

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.”

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.

Section 2: Discovering hidden treasure by putting 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.

Section 3: Introducing the Lectio Divina as a tool for developing our prayer lives

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**.

Home work

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.

Here is an extract from a book by Henri Nouwen, *Adam - God’s Beloved*. It tells the true story of Adam Arnett, a severely disabled young man who lived in a *L’Arche* community called *Daybreak* in Ontario, Canada. Adam could not speak, he was prone to seizures, and was able to do almost nothing for himself. Nouwen met Adam when he joined the community in 1985.

“About a year after I had become the full-time pastor of Daybreak and had moved into our little retreat house and chapel called Dayspring, a middle-aged priest arrived for a sabbatical. Father Bruno had just finished his eighteen-year term as abbot of the Camaldolese monastery in Big Sur, California, and he needed a time away from his

community. He was a tall, thin man with a short beard, gentle eyes, and a peaceful disposition, very soft-spoken, but mostly silent and a little shy. A true monk. Why had he come to us? He had heard about Daybreak and thought it might be a good place for him to make the transition from carrying authority to being an ordinary monk again. He wanted to share in the life of handicapped people. During his three months with us he lived in the New House. Soon after he arrived I saw him often on the lane and on the public road pushing Adam in his wheelchair. Since he was not an ordinary assistant but a long-term guest, he had lots of extra time and had decided to spend much of it with Adam. The two of them seemed to enjoy just being in each other's company.

As I saw them together I thought, 'What better companion could Adam have than this quiet, peaceful monk! Isn't Adam's life similar to his? Peace is speaking to peace. Solitude is greeting solitude. Silence is dwelling with silence. What a grace!'

One day Bruno dropped by my room for a visit. I asked, 'How are you doing with Adam?' Bruno looked at me, full of wonder and delight. He said, 'Adam is truly a gift to me. He is teaching me how to be a better monk.' I answered, 'I think I know what you mean but please try to explain it to me.'

Bruno wasn't a great talker. He felt things deeply and preferred to remain silent about them. Nevertheless, he wanted to explain what he was experiencing with Adam. He said, 'For many, many years I have tried to live a spiritual life and have tried to help others live it as well. I always knew that I had to become empty for God, gradually letting go of thoughts, emotions, feelings, and passions that prevented the deep communion with God I desired. When I met Adam, I met a man who has been chosen by God to lead us deeper into that very communion. As I spend long hours with Adam, I find myself drawn into an ever deeper solitude. In Adam's heart, I have touched a fullness of divine love.'

I couldn't avoid thinking about Adam and how his truth and his life had been cause for Bruno's extraordinary spiritual experience. An abbot, a father of monks, had found a guide, a spiritual master in the person of Adam."