



Spiritual Disciplines

~ In the way of Jesus ~

*A Series to Engage with the Wisdom
and Practices of Spirit.*



Introduction:

A little while ago, I was attending a meeting of church leaders to discuss some structural and governance issues. It was held at a Catholic Retreat Centre and early on we gathered in the chapel for worship and Holy Communion. As I sat in the chapel, central on wall before me was a very large crucifix, Jesus on the cross. The cross was neat, polished wood and the figure was a large sculpture, of a Jesus with long flowing curls and neat features.

Initially as I looked, I found myself rejecting it. It felt unreal and culturally wrong, a whole lot of feelings. I continued to be drawn to it, looking away and then drawn back until I sat and really looked into the sculpture. I noticed the quality of the work, the definition of body and muscles – and pain. I began to look more deeply and recognised the intense feeling and experience of this figure on the cross, with nails breaking his hands and feet. His lungs gasping for breath. His muscles holding his weakening body up and his face held an intensity of pain and sadness and something else, something deeper.

As I looked, I was drawn into a deeper awareness and the whole scene became one of God holding all things in our pain, confusion, wonder, chaos, life. It's hard to convey in words, but in that few moments, I recognised and experienced the heart of God drawing and holding everything into infinite love and grace. Through my mind flowed the stories of the day, of individual pain and grief. The stories and realities of Gaza and the humanitarian crisis, of Ukraine and the endless pain of war. The world in all its struggle, challenges, arrogance, ignorance and naivete, along with the violence, greed and pain, was there flowing into and through this figure on the cross.

I recognised that the healing of the world flowed from the heart of this Trinity of Love, symbolised by a figure on a cross embracing death to embrace life for the world. This was God's mission of reconciling all things into the heart of God from where everything comes, belongs and returns.

In the challenging meeting that ensued, as I wrestled with questions of church, faith, life and being – and where God is in all this – this vision held me. More than that, I recognised that our only way forward is to understand that the only mission is God's and that is this reconciling of all people and creation into God's heart of love and grace. Our task is to confess this, that God is God and we are not, and to surrender into this infinite love, witnessing to the life, transformation, hope and healing we experience, and to do this in the midst of life with all its complexities. The life of the world.

How do we do this? How do we hold the vision and love of God, the centrality of God's Reign, in the midst of life with all of its challenges, compulsions, expectations, pressures, pain, confusion... How do I hold this love of God and give myself into it more fully and deeply and to live into the way of Jesus? With all my compulsions, attachments, addictions, expectations, fears, the pressures of society and the daily tasks and challenges I face – let alone those of a wider, struggling world?

The wisdom and teaching of the great spiritual leaders of our history can provide a guide for us in this chaotic modern world. Some of these spiritual people removed themselves from the world to



listen and engage with God in the deepest possible ways. They offered themselves in ways we are not able to do, with families, homes, work and the lives we live. In their deep sacrifice of much that we hold dear, they grew deep in wisdom through listening to the Spirit's voice and they share that wisdom for all of us – this is their gift.

Others have found a deeper spiritual path through incredible suffering and oppression, drawing strength from God to survive and grow, to advocate and act for justice and peace in the world. Spiritual disciplines, as they are generally called, have nurtured deeper faith and life in the way of Christ, despite the pressures and challenges of our world.

These spiritual disciplines are available to us, many refined from Biblical narratives through the crucible of human life and exploration, faith and spiritual connection – through encounter with the Living God.

Over the 6 weeks of Lent, you are invited explore and practice some of these spiritual disciplines of Christian Faith. These disciplines have nurtured faith, hope and love in many disciples over the centuries and continue to provide sustenance, growth and guidance in the journey of life as a disciple of Christ.

Each week a different discipline (sometimes more than one) will be introduced, providing some background and description, along with some steps to practice the discipline. As with everything, spiritual disciplines take practice. We cannot expect to master them from scratch. Many take a lifetime of practice to master, but also provide a great deal for the novice starting out.

Over the course of the next 6 weeks, we will be introduced to a range of spiritual disciplines and forms of contemplation and prayer. Not all of these will work for everyone, and we each need to find the forms that challenge us, nurture us and enable us to connect more deeply with God, for that is the ultimate aim. So, try what is offered and feel your way into the forms, practices and frequency that works for you. Start gently and build your practice up. You may also find that meeting in a group for mutual encouragement and support is a good way to both work through this material and provide ongoing support for one another. You can share your experiences, learning and try some things together to provide communal support.

These practices are not just for Lent or special seasons of the year but are intended to build our own practice of faith through which God can transform us and draw us more deeply into the life God promises through Jesus. It is the life that faithful disciples over centuries witness to. It is the hope for our world in all its conflicts, chaos, violence and pain. These these disciplines invite us to retreat from life and all its distractions, to nurture our relationship with God. This retreat is for a short time in the day and week and sends us back into life and the world to act for love, hope, peace and justice. Our living and praying will be towards the healing of the world through God's Spirit. The pattern is contemplation (spiritual disciplines) and action. These are held together, feeding and reinforcing the other and through our practice of life in the Spirit, they become more deeply embedded in God and God's mission in the world.

Spiritual teacher and author, Henri Nouwen says:

"The world in which we live does not know God - as John says (John 1), 'the Light came into the world, but the world did not know him. They preferred the darkness to the Light...' What does it mean for us to enter into the darkness of the world and offer the light of God's love, to make the light of Christ shine into the darkness? How shall we bring Good News to the poor, recovery of sight to the blind, release of the captives and the oppressed and announce God's new freedom. What will strengthen us for God's tasks? What will help us persevere? Where do we gain the strength and wisdom to cope with, and respond to, the events of life? Paul says, 'Do not be conformed to this



world but be transformed by the renewing of your mind that you may prove what God's will is: that which is good and acceptable and perfect.' (Romans 12:2)"

The material predominantly comes from spiritual teachers, Henri Nouwen and Richard Foster. There are many other great spiritual leaders, male and female to guide our paths. May God bless your journey through Lent to Easter and beyond into the life of resurrection hope!

One of the Desert Fathers received 3 words in response to his prayer to be used by God: *Flee*, be *Silent* and *Pray*. These are the 3 ways of preventing the world from squeezing us in and are, thus, the 3 ways of the Spirit. The first, *Flee*, is about Solitude.

Week 1: Solitude: Finding space in the busy-ness and activity of life

St Anthony (~250AD) heard the call of God to 'sell everything, give the money to the poor and come and follow me.' He retreated into the desert where he stayed in complete solitude for 20 years. When he emerged people were attracted to him as one who was a 'very healthy man.' He taught, healed the sick and was a source of deep Godly wisdom. At the end of his life he returned to the solitude of the desert and died, aged ~ 106. The wisdom of St Anthony is that we must be made aware of the call to allow our false compulsive self to be transformed into the new self of Jesus Christ. Solitude is the furnace in which this transformation takes place. It is out of this transformation that real ministry takes place.

We are very busy people. Our agendas are filled with plans, meetings, social activities, work... We move through life in such busyness that we don't ever stop to wonder whether what we are doing, thinking or saying are really worth doing, thinking or saying! We go along with the many 'musts' and 'oughts' that have been handed onto us and we live with them as if they are the translation of the gospel of Jesus. These 'musts' and 'oughts' relate to work, money, church, faith, possessions, being liked, happiness and so on. Think about the 'musts' and the 'oughts' of your life - where do they come from? Do they serve God's Kingdom? Are they important?

Our lives have become dominated by the dynamics of the secular marketplace - even in the midst of our church life and seeking to be Jesus' people. We respond to the values and acceptable ways of those around us. Our compulsion is to be accepted, valued, liked. We (often unconsciously) manifest this compulsion, these desires in many ways. We seek to be liked, admired, praised - to be perceived well by the world. If work is valued as a sign of importance, we take on more and more or seek to move upwards. If money or ownership is seen as freedom or happiness, we accumulate more. If knowing many people grows our sense of importance, we will make new contacts. We fear failing and gather more of these things (work, money, friends...) to secure ourselves.

Solitude is the place where transformation can take place. Without solitude we remain entangled in the influences and priorities of our world; trapped by the things of this life. Jesus entered solitude in the wilderness and was tempted with the 3 compulsions of the world:

1. To be relevant - turn stones into loaves,
2. To be spectacular - throw yourself down,
3. To be powerful - I will give you all of these kingdoms.

In Jesus' solitude he affirmed God as the only source of his identity - to worship and serve God alone. Solitude is the pattern of life for many of the inspirational people of faith through the centuries. Solitude is the place of great struggle and encounter; it is struggle against the false self, its



compulsions and its worldly values. It is an encounter with the loving, renewing God. This place called solitude is where ministry and spirituality meet.

We have spoken of the importance of solitude but what, exactly, do we mean by solitude? The solitude of which we speak here is not to be equated with the notion of finding some space for ourselves in the busyness of our lives; space to think or rest. It is not privacy or the place to do our own thing. It is not only a place where we can recharge our batteries and gather new strength to continue on our way in life. The solitude of Jesus and the other great saints is bigger than this. It is the place of conversion where the old self dies, and the new self is born. It is the place where we become the person we were created to be.

In solitude we escape the distractions of life. It is the place of no TV, radio, devices, music, books, people... All it contains is ourselves - raw and naked - before God. It is the place where the truth of our lives, good and bad, is revealed before us; where we confront the reality of who we are. Henri Nouwen says that in the place of solitude he faces his nothingness. A nothingness so dreadful that everything in him wants to run to his friends, his work, his distractions so he can forget his nothingness. Solitude confronts him with his anger and greed. The old self wants to reassert itself, to dominate and carry on as usual. The daemons of life haunt us in solitude seeking to convince us of our virtuousness.

The struggle here is to die to the false self, to let go of the person formed in the image of the world with all its priorities and values and to be reformed in the image of God. It is beyond our own strength and the wisdom of the Desert is to give it all over to God; to surrender totally and unconditionally to Christ.

This ultimately means living our life in God, our whole life! Entering into solitude is about meeting Jesus and to be with God alone. It is to keep our eyes on Jesus for it is only in the place of healing that we will dare show our wounds; only in the place of grace that we will face our sin; only with the single minded attention to Christ will we give up our own clinging fears and face our own true nature. We come to realise that is not we who live but Christ who lives in us. He is our own true self and in him we can slowly let our compulsions melt away and live in the freedom of the children of God. We will look back and realise that we aren't angry or greedy anymore!

But what does it mean to enter solitude? Surely it is not practical for us to wander into the desert for 20 years like St Anthony? We probably wouldn't survive it anyway! The secular milieu in which we live offers few, if any, spiritual disciplines so we must develop our own, to fashion our own 'desert' which we can enter each day.

The first thing we need to do is to set aside a time and place to be with God alone. A time and place that we will visit regularly (preferably daily!). It is a place away from noise and the distraction of people, phones, devices, radios, TV's... It is time only with God; time spent in the presence of God - listening, struggling, encountering the living God.

The second thing is to develop our own spiritual discipline of solitude – the nature of this discipline will vary from person to person according to individual character, lifestyle, ministry involvement, the milieu of our lives... Such a discipline, however, is never vague or general but is as concrete as life itself.

The essence of solitude is to sit quietly in God's presence listening beyond the thoughts that distract, beyond the reminders of things left undone, the concerns of daily life, for the still, small voice. At first this seems, and is, an impossible task but persevere. Try it and don't run away when the struggle begins. As we encounter the holiness of God, the reality of our own self emerges, with its need to be transformed. All transformation is costly and hard work!



There are many distractions that keep us from coming to the place of solitude. There are many reasons (some good) that keep us from listening to God, that prevent us from being confronted by God. There is a very deep part of ourselves that doesn't really want to hear what God will say because we know it will be difficult to hear and will confront us with the reality of ourselves. Perhaps we don't really want to change in our being, in our lives! Solitude requires an act of the will - there are many easier and, superficially, more desirable things to do with our time. There are few, if any, more life-giving disciplines that we can engage in than that of solitude.

The wisdom of Jesus, the saints, the Bible is to spend time in solitude with God - it is life-giving and healing, it is the way to life. As we begin this Lenten journey, seek out a regular time where you can be alone in God's presence.

Some steps into solitude...

Take advantage of those moments of where solitude exists, perhaps early morning before everyone awakens and you can be quiet before the day begins – to begin in silence. Perhaps the trip to work or the coffee before you begin a task, to sit in solitude and silence and 'just be.' Go for a walk without music, phone or other distractions, or sit in the garden for a few moments. Practice being alone with just yourself.

As you enter the practice of solitude, what is it that you feel, think? What is happening in your mind? Can you put thoughts and thinking aside? Can you sit with feelings, sounds, presence and be aware of yourself, and gradually of Presence around and beyond you? Don't analyse your feelings, just let them be. Don't try to think through ideas, even religious ones, but allow your mind to slow down, rest and be in silence. This is hard and requires practice.

As we begin, there are many distractions of the mind, things we remember, things we've forgotten to do, thoughts of other people, experiences and expectations on us – worries, fears, anxieties, pressures... As we begin, we feel unsure what it is we need to do because all of our lives are about doing or being distracted. Is it difficult for you to do nothing, to refrain from thinking, and just sit in quietness?

It isn't easy at first because everything in you will resist and there will be noise and chaos in your mind as your ego wants to regain control. Letting go is very difficult for our society but it is the essence of spiritual growth. As we enter into God's presence and allow God to speak into our lives, we will gradually learn the discipline of releasing our anxieties, our fears, our need for control and entrusting everything into God's grace.

Richard Foster suggests that in solitude we will feel helpless because silence takes away our words and "we are so accustomed to relying on words to manage and control others. If we are silent, who will take control?" He goes on to suggest that God can be allowed to be in control but that requires us to learn deep trust and let go to allow God.

As we begin, try to find a few minutes in the day to be in solitude and sit in the quietness of the moment. You might like to record any feelings or insights that come to you in these moments. Don't try to analyse too deeply but allow the gentle practice to carry you through the moments and gradually it will become more familiar and a place you will desire to be more regularly.

Through Lent, we will add a variety of disciplines that can be practiced in this solitude to deepen our awareness and experience of God's presence and to allow God to more fully speak into our lives with grace and love.



Week 2: Silence: Listening for God's Voice beyond the noise of life

What did you experience in this last week as you tried solitude and in quietness? What did you feel, discover, hear, wrestle with? What was solitude, silence and quietness like for you and your, perhaps, busy mind?

Our focus moves to silence in our solitude. These are really inseparable – as we may have realised through our attempts to be quiet in solitude. For the most part we live in, are surrounded by and seek refuge in, noise. Solitude invites us out of the noise and into the silence. We learn to live out of silence rather than immense, confusing noise. We respond to people and questions and situations out of the silence of God's presence, the place of wisdom and life.

One of the Desert Fathers, a Roman convert, called out to God: 'Lead me into the way of salvation.' He heard a voice respond: 'Be silent!' Henri Nouwen says the silence completes and intensifies solitude.

Christians have practised silence as the way of self control. It is a discipline needed in many situations - our daily relationships, worship, prayer, visiting and caring for others, counselling, in teaching, learning... It is very concrete and practical for much of our life. It is like taking a portable prayer cell into all of life and ministry.

Our Wordy World:

Our lives are overtaken by a multitude of words; we are surrounded by words - loud, angry words, soft, gentle words; words spoken, recited or sung; words in books, on posters and walls; Devices, TV, and radio words; words in many sounds, colours or forms. Words are everywhere - they form the walls, floor and ceiling of our existence.

This has not always been the case. There was a time not that long ago when there were no devices, radios, TV's, bumper stickers, advertising signs, traffic signs... We have taken this overload of words for granted this competing of words for our attention.

Henri Nouwen says he was driving through Los Angeles and had this strange sensation that he was driving through a huge dictionary. Everywhere he looked there were words, words, words. It was a jungle of loose words all competing for his attention and trying to get him to take his eyes from the road. Each word seemed to cry out its own importance seeking him to 'buy me, smell me, taste me, drink me, use me, touch me, kiss me, sleep with me...' He says: 'The colours, movements, and changing sizes of the words turned my simple ride to a friend's house into a dangerous acid trip in which everything seemed so much more important than the green and red traffic lights. Words have gone wild. They have left the volumes of books where they could be studied carefully and now occupy every place available to them. Words are so common that we have little respect for them. Words have lost their creative power; their limitless multiplication has made us lose confidence in words. We hear people speak, teach, preach... and think of them as 'just words.' They are powerless, weak, ineffectual and boring.

The main function of words, which is to communicate, to create community, no longer happens. No longer do words provide the common language, the intercommunication, the place where people come together and build society.

Why do we expect our worship, prayer meetings and other gatherings to be filled with sound and noise and words? A Trappist Abbot once said: 'When a novice grows deeper in the spiritual life, he not only talks softer, he walks softer.' Silence is as indispensable today as it ever was because the Word of God is born out of the eternal silence of God. We are witnesses to this word.



The Meaning of Silence:

Silence is not a lack of words, a vacuum; it is the home, the origin, of the word. It gives strength and meaning to the word. Words can be said to disclose the mystery of the silence from which they come.

We are invited to begin to explore silence. Approach a new, busy day out of silence. Approach a difficult meeting or situation out of silence. Don't speak 'out of noisy distraction' but answer out of silence. Don't allow yourself to be distracted and confused by the multitude of words but draw wisdom and quietness out of silence. Pray out of silence rather than words. Spend time in silence each day, or many times each day. You will find strength and peace, a new balance and spiritual depth to your life. In the silence God is present and speaks the gentle, simple, loving, forgiving word of life.

The Letter of James in the New Testament speaks of the sin of what comes out of our mouths. He suggests that what comes from our tongues puts others down, is full of hatred, envy... We should control our tongues for they are a source of sin and evil. Henri Nouwen suggests that the best way to control our tongues is to be silent. Not speaking is the clearest way of staying away from sin is to be quiet. Speaking without sinning is very difficult! Therefore, silence becomes one of the central disciplines of the spiritual life.

Speaking is dangerous and easily leads us away from the right path - it gets us into trouble by getting us entangled in the mess of the world. If this seems very unworldly consider how often you have come away from a group gathering with much talk (a meeting, discussion, conversation...) with a bad taste in your mouth? How often have you felt that a lot of talk has actually proven unfruitful and unhelpful? How often have you said things that immediately you wished could be taken back? How often have you heard words come from another's mouth that were hurtful to you or another or simply just unedifying and a waste of time hearing?

Words can leave us with a foggy mind or slightly depressed. Words help us forget that we are pilgrims on a journey – they distract us from living, hearing and experiencing. Through silence, we are enabled to continue as pilgrims.

Silence...

Silence protects the inner fire; it protects the flame of the Spirit within us. It is through silence that the inner fire of God is kept alight, tended. When we talk constantly and always share ideas, thoughts... we are prone to be burnt out; the internal fire blown out in the wind of many words. Silence tends the flame and maintains the life of the Spirit of God within.

A word that comes forth with power, a word that bears fruit, is one which emerges from the silence! It is a word that reminds us of the silence from which it comes and to which it returns. It is not a noisy, chaotic word that sounds like a clashing cymbal or a noisy gong. The silence from which it emerges is not emptiness or absence but the fullness of God's presence. It is not the silence of shame and guilt but of Divine love.

Here we gain a glimpse of the mystery of which we are a part - it is the Divine word which went forth from God. This powerful, loving creating word spoke night and day, animals, plants, trees, rivers and mountains, birds and fish. It spoke forth humans and all of creation! When our speaking arises out of Divine silence and returns to it, we speak the powerful Word of God. Much can be said without much being spoken.

I remember a man I met. He was a member of a Church Council but spoke very little in meetings. He sat and listened and very occasionally spoke. When he did, everyone stopped and listened with



deeper intent because he was speaking, and his few words were worth listening to; they had wisdom. His few words grew out of silent listening – to people and to God. He spoke out of silence.

Practicing the Discipline of Silence...

Discipline is required. Jesus in all his ministry pointed away from himself to God. He spoke not to attract attention to himself but to point to God. That is our example - to point away from ourselves to God. It is to point beyond our words to the unspeakable mystery of God.

Silence, in our world, is often uncomfortable. It causes restlessness, hostility and we would much prefer to have words spoken. It creates anxiety in many people. But this is empty silence. We need to convert our restless silence into restful silence, our empty silence into a full and rich silence. We need a silence filled with God's presence and being!

Silence requires that we don't become over busy - perhaps one of the great temptations and sins of our society. Churches are very good at keeping us all very busy! Our call is to be silent to hear God speak; to enter God's silence where we can know ourselves before God and know what God is saying to us. This is the beginning of prayer. This is salvation - to enter into the presence of God which is made possible through the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus, the Word of God made flesh. Here we discover ourselves, kindle the flame of the Spirit and learn to speak.

This week let us add more moments of silence into our day, alongside our time of solitude. Practice keeping silence, rather than filling space with words. Practice not speaking simply for the sake of speaking, but to speak out of a moment's silence, allowing ourselves to be present in the moment and engage the moment out of full awareness through silence.

1. Practice the art of being silent, even in your prayers. It is difficult to listen when we are talking. This includes silencing the mind, which is a challenge and requires practice and discipline. We won't readily hear God's still, small voice if our minds and beings are filled with words and noise. Silence is the space into which God's Word is formed and heard. Listen quietly without speaking, even in our mind.
2. Mantra or Chant: In our times of solitude, it is a challenge to maintain focus and keep control of our minds as they race off in every direction. Henri Nouwen describes it as like a troop of monkeys in a banana tree fighting for the fruit. Some simple exercises we can try to keep the mind occupied and enable our hearts and beings to be quietened is to recite a brief phrase or word over and over.

Week 3: Silence and Contemplative Disciplines – Meditation

In the last 2 weeks we have taken time to find space for solitude away from the pressures, distractions and busyness of life. We have begun to practice silence, seeking to speak and live out of silence rather than the noise, busyness and pressure of expectation. We have tried different methods to help still and calm our busy minds, especially as they go into overdrive seeking to regain some control over thoughts and life. It is now time to delve into some of the ancient practices and disciplines that people of Spirit have practiced for millennia.

Richard Foster says, "If we hope to move beyond the superficialities of our culture, including religious culture, we must be willing to go down into the recreating silences, into the inner world of contemplation." He states that the Hebrew Bible contains many references to what we might call meditation or contemplative prayer. These references have various meanings such as, listening to God's word, reflecting on God's works, rehearsing God's deeds, ruminating on God's law, and more, but they seem to be grounded in an encounter or experience of God. He suggests that in each case the focus is on a changed (transformed) behaviour as a result of our encounter with the Living God.



The word often used is repentance, turning our lives around. Repentance is a reorientation of our life towards God and the Reign of God and that is the aim in our contemplative, meditative silence.

What is Meditation?

Richard Foster suggests that “Christian meditation, very simply, is the ability to hear God’s voice and obey God’s word. It is that simple. I wish I could make it more complicated for those who like things difficult. It involves no hidden mysteries, no secret mantras, no mental gymnastics, no esoteric flights into cosmic consciousness. The truth is that the God of the universe, the Creator of all, desires our fellowship.”

There are many stories across the Hebrew and Christian scriptures of people who engage in the journey into meditation. Their journeys suggest that whilst there is a simplicity to it, we are challenged and take steps forward and back again. Moses, for example, saw God face-to-face but such experience of holiness and grace is discomfiting and deeply intimate. Moses’ story is of moving close and backing away, of listening and following God, and doing his own thing. The people around him learned to listen to God but found that confronting and challenging in the holy intimacy they encountered.

John’s gospel gives us a deep and profound sense of this intimacy as experienced and expressed through Jesus. He constantly speaks of the unity of God and himself – we are one. There is the convoluted language of oneness – I am in the Father, and the Father is in me and I am in you and you in me... In the ministry and life of Jesus we can recognise the profound importance of meditation and prayer in directing his ministry and life, sustaining him as he swam against to flow of his world, and in strengthening him to stand firm against those who opposed him with violence.

There are many inspiring practitioners and teachers of spirituality and the gentle art of meditation. History is filled with the writings and teachings that point us to such experience and grace: Julian of Norwich, St Theresa of Avila, Meister Eckhardt, John of the Cross, St Francis and St Clare, Thomas Merton and many, many others whose lives and teachings are worth reading and learning from as we engage in the spiritual life.

Thomas Merton (a great spiritual teacher of the 20th century) for example, says: “Contemplation is life itself, fully awake, fully active, and fully aware that it is alive. It is spiritual wonder. It is spontaneous awe at the sacredness of life, of being. It is gratitude for life, for awareness, and for being. It is a vivid realization of the fact that life and being in us proceed from an invisible, transcendent, and infinitely abundant Source. Contemplation is, above all, awareness of the reality of that Source. It *knows* the Source, obscurely, inexplicably, but with a certitude that goes both beyond reason and beyond simple faith... It is a more profound depth of faith, acknowledged too deep to be grasped in images, in words, or even in clear concepts... For in contemplation we know by ‘unknowing.’ Or better, we know *beyond* all knowing or ‘unknowing.’”

The Purpose of Meditation (and Contemplation)...

The purpose of meditation and contemplative practices is to draw us into a deeper, transformative experience of God. Richard Foster says “we are sinking down into the light and life of Christ and becoming comfortable with that posture. The perpetual presence of the Lord moves from a theological dogma into a radiant reality. ‘He walks with me, and he talks with me,’ ceases to be pious jargon and instead becomes a straightforward description of daily life.”

He goes on, “In meditation is we create the emotional and spiritual space which allows Christ to construct and inner sanctuary in the heart... Meditation opens the door and, although we are engaging in specific meditation exercises at specific times, the aim is to bring this living reality into all of life.”



This practice is transformative of our being. We cannot encounter God in depth and intimacy and remain the same! This is the yearning of the human heart, the existential longing of our being for the One who can fill us with love, grace, forgiveness and healing of spirit and being. Meditation and contemplation move us from dualistic thinking – ‘us/them,’ ‘in/out,’ ‘right/wrong’ to a non-dualistic way in the world, open to the other who is different, able to engage, listen and include. Surely a world riven by conflict and division needs this transformative way of compassion, inclusive love and justice grounded in the way of Jesus and the Reign of God. It is confession and surrender into God.

There are often questions and misconceptions around meditation. Firstly, meditation and mindfulness are different. Both have their place and can be of value to those who practice. Mindfulness, generally speaking, is about awareness of the moment, our feelings and thoughts, what is happening around us. It is being still and quiet to be in the moment. Some of the experiences we engaged in over the first couple of weeks had a mindfulness element of being still, quiet and aware in the moment. Christian meditation, that we are describing is, is a communion with God and an opening of our being, our spirit, to the Spirit of God.

Secondly, the plethora of mediation practices, especially through Eastern thought and philosophy. There is a great deal of connection and commonality in the practices of mediation in its various forms. In the forms of meditation and contemplation we are proposing, there is detachment from the world and an emptying of our minds and being in order to be filled with the grace and life of God. It is opening of the self to the deep Presence of God who is the Source of life and love, grace and peace, hope and healing.

Meditation invites us into the deep experience of God’s presence. This is not just for ‘special’ or particular people but is open for all of us! As we yield to the inner yearning of our own being to encounter the very Source of all things, the love at the heart of all things, we are drawn into the place and practice of meditation and contemplation. It is a gift of grace and the grace we experience continually draws us deeper and enables us to engage in the life-giving and transforming practice of communion with God.

How to meditate...

John Main OSB was a Benedictine monk and spiritual teacher who introduced many Christians to contemplative practices and meditation. His meditative practices have helped many engage in this discipline and it has spread across the world through the World Community for Christian Meditation. John Main summarises mediation as: *“The all-important aim in Christian meditation is to allow God’s mysterious and silent presence within us to become more and more not only **a** reality, but **the** reality which gives meaning, shape and purpose to everything we do, to everything we are...*

*Sit down. Sit still and upright. Close your eyes lightly. Sit relaxed but alert. Silently, interiorly begin to say a single word. We recommend the prayer-phrase **maranatha** (‘Come Lord Jesus’). Recite it as four syllables of equal length. Listen to it as you say it, gently but continuously. Do not think or imagine anything spiritual or otherwise. If thoughts or images come, these are distractions at the time of meditation, so keep returning to simply saying the word. Meditate each morning and evening for between twenty and thirty minutes.”*

The essence of meditation is simplicity. Stay with the same word during the whole meditation and in each meditation day to day. Don’t visualise but listen to the word, as you say it. Let go of all thoughts (even good thoughts), images and other words. Don’t fight your distractions: let them go by saying your word faithfully, gently and attentively and returning to it as soon as you realise you have stopped saying or it or when your attention wanders.



What is the mantra?

John suggests *Maranatha* as a mantra for meditation, expressed in four equal syllables ma-ra-na-tha. This is an Aramaic word that essentially means 'Come, Lord Jesus'. You can choose any mantra (word/phrase) that works for you. John urges us to 'listen to the word with total and deepening attention and in a growing simplicity and humility', learning to say the word 'is a great training in humility'.

Silence. Stillness. Simplicity: The Elements of Meditation

The WCCM suggests that Silence, Stillness and Simplicity are the three elements of meditation: **Silence** means letting go of thoughts. **Stillness** means letting go of desire. **Simplicity** means letting go of self-analysis.

This week try the practice of meditation. Start simply with a shorter time, perhaps 5-10 minutes, and build up as you practice. You might like to meet with others, especially with someone practiced in this discipline, and encourage and support one another. There are several congregations who have meditation groups that you can join, if there isn't such a group in your own church.

Week 4 – More Contemplative Disciplines – Walking Meditation and Fasting

Over the last 3 weeks we have moved from finding solitude, in the midst of life, into silence out of the noise and wordiness of our world and explored the practice of mediation. These disciplines have the simple goal of quietening our mind and being, to focus on listening to and experiencing the presence of God. We have been practicing disciplines that help us be quiet before God and hear the 'still, small voice' of wisdom amidst the confusion and demands of life around us.

As we continue to explore these ancient disciplines of faith, adding to our experiences and practices, we are reminded that the focus, the goal, is a deeper encounter with and experience of God. Through this encounter we experience transformation and the restoration of our souls in God's love and grace. We are moved from the distractions, attachments, worries/anxieties, fears and compulsions/addictions of life in this complex world, into a place of deeper peace and inner wholeness grounded in God's grace.

Some of us struggle with sitting in stillness and our bodies want to move as we pray and contemplate. Various forms of movement can be combined with forms of meditation.

If you find that sitting still is difficult, at least in the initial stages and you may find other forms of contemplation where a part(s) of the body is engaged is more effective. Some people find repetitive actions, such as knitting/crochet where the repetition doesn't require concentration but allows you to contemplate whilst your hands/arms are active, is helpful.

Other people find contemplation through art (drawing, painting, sculpture...) or music enables you to engage in a contemplative process, helpful. These activities draw on the right brain and many find such activities facilitate forms of contemplation. Another example is Contemplative Walking.

Practice: Contemplative/Meditative Walking

We begin by centring ourselves by being still and quiet. Relax and be attentive to the sounds and world around you. Be aware of the earth beneath your feet, the breeze on your face and body, the sun's warmth...



Begin with some gentle stretches, being aware of your breathing, slow and deliberate. Take time and be gentle. Allow thoughts to come and go as you move and breathe. Don't hold onto them nor try to stop them, let them flow in and out as you breathe.

Begin your walk. For the first few minutes focus on your body and its movement, the swing of your arms, the path on which you are walking and the movement of your legs and feet. Be aware and maintain your breathing.

As you walk, find the pace that is right for your body on this day. As you walk, continue to be aware of what is around you – trees, flowers, birds, sky, people... Don't focus too deeply on any particular thing, allow yourself to observe gently and with gratitude. See the beauty and wonder of the world. Feel it in your body, through your breath, and your feet on the path. Continue to avoid thinking but allow any thoughts to pass gently through your mind.

You may want to try adding a mantra to your walk, a simple word or phrase, such as we used in meditation. It may be line of a poem or a chant, or simply to hum a tune that is gentle and gives your restless mind something to focus on, allowing you to remain in the moment and aware. A good timeframe is about 20-30 minutes.

We are also invited to engage in a form of Contemplative Walk in nature. Richard Rohr, summarising author Christine Valters Paintner, says: "Contemplative walking does not necessarily mean walking slowly, although at its heart it is not a rushed activity. When we walk contemplatively, we give ourselves over to the experience. This is not walking for fitness. It is walking to immerse ourselves in an encounter with whatever is calling us in the moment.

As you begin a contemplative walk, allow a few moments simply to breathe and connect to your heart. Set an intention for this time to be as present as you can to what is happening both within and without. Begin walking but see if you can release any expectations or destination. As you walk, imagine that with each step your feet are both blessing the ground and being blessed by it. Let your breath be long and slow. Bring your awareness to the earth monastery all around you. Notice what draws your attention. Look for what shimmers Listen for the sounds of life around you. Even if you are walking through a city, pay attention to the rustle of the breeze, the caw of crows, or any subtle elements of creation singing their song.

Pause regularly simply to receive this gift. Breathe it in. Let it have some space in your heart. Then continue on until something else causes you to stop.

The Practice of Fasting

Richard Foster invites us to practice the ancient discipline of fasting. Though fasting has a long history as an important Judeo-Christian spiritual discipline, it has faded from broad Christian practice in more recent times.

Fasting is a way of disciplining the hunger for food and drink. It is a way of quieting those desires by not responding to them immediately, so that the deepest desires emerge. When all of our cravings are satisfied, it's difficult if not impossible to determine that which truly rules our heart. Fact is, unless you fast you might never realize how hungry you are for God.

Fasting in this way can lead to other powerful, grace-infused changes in our life as well. Saint John Chrysostom once said "The fast of Lent has no advantage to us unless it brings about our spiritual renewal. It is necessary while fasting to change our whole life and practice virtue. Turning away from all wickedness means keeping our tongue in check, restraining our anger, avoiding all gossip, lying and swearing. To abstain from these things; herein lies the true value of the fast."



Thomas Aquinas states in his epic work of Catholic theology, the *Summa Theologica*.: “For we fast for three purposes:

1. To restrain the desires of the flesh;
2. To raise the mind to contemplate sublime things;
3. To make satisfaction for our sins. These are good and noble things, and so fasting is virtuous.”

During Lent we deal with our passions: food, drink, sex, and other pleasures. In moderation, none of these are bad, but often they are like whining children, vying for and demanding our attention. They need discipline, otherwise they will become juvenile delinquents and eventually overpower us.

Thomas Merton, in his book [*The Way of Chuang Tzu*](#), says: “The goal of fasting is inner unity. This means hearing but not with the ear; hearing, but not with the understanding; it is hearing with the spirit, with your whole being. The hearing that is only in the ears is one thing. The hearing of the understanding is another. But the hearing of the spirit is not limited to any one faculty, to the ear, or to the mind. Hence, it demands the emptiness of the faculties. And when the faculties are empty, then your whole being listens. There is then a direct grasp of what is right before you that can never be heard with the ear or understood with the mind. Fasting of the heart empties the faculties, frees you from limitations and from preoccupations.”

Fasting – How and What...

Richard Foster warns that we should take smaller steps into fasting – let it be a progression. He suggests beginning with a 24 hour fast that involves missing two meals – perhaps moving from lunch one day to lunch the next. In early practice, perhaps drink some fruit juices as well as water – water is important in any fasting!

He notes that there will be different physical aspects to fasting but that we should focus more attention to the inner attitude of our heart and being. Outwardly, we carry on life as normal. There is no need to retreat from daily activities, including moderate exercise and we don't bring attention to our fasting. The only people who need to know are those who need to know. As we fast, we inwardly dedicate ourselves to prayer and the awareness of God's presence in everything. As we refrain from food, and the time we invest in thinking about food, what we will eat, preparing that food, and eating, we will invest in contemplation. We will become more aware of other things in life and the world and God's presence. Even our daily work will take on extra meaning. Richard Foster describes them as a sacrament. Be aware of God's inbreaking word as you fast and pray. Richard Foster suggests breaking the fast with a light meal.

Repeat this over a few weeks and then prepare to attempt a normal fast, with only water over the 24 hour period. As you fast, there may be hunger pangs and discomfort. This is your stomach trying to tell you it is time to eat – don't give into this grumbling stomach! These feelings will pass. Try giving the time you normally set aside to eat, to meditation and prayer. Gradually the fasting will have an impact in other areas of your life, especially the compulsions and addictive lifestyles our culture nurtures.

Richard Foster suggests a progression to a 36 hour fast (missing three meals), following the same guidelines and giving time to prayer and meditation. It is very important to keep drinking water throughout any fast! These fasts are general and encouraged to be regular parts of our lives of contemplation. Longer fasts at specific times can provide deeper spiritual insights and experience. Such fasts should be undertaken with the support of an experienced person to provide guidance and support.



Fasting extends our contemplative practice and extends spiritual discipline to our broader life and especially interactions of mind, body and spirit. It is a way of deepening our experience and relationship with God.

Week 5 – Silence and Contemplative Disciplines – Engaging Scripture: Lectio Divina and Study.

This week we will begin to use of Scripture more centrally. In previous weeks, a word, phrase or even a verse of Scripture may have become the basis of a mantra that is repeated and helps our mind focus and be still. Now we begin to use Scripture passages as the basis of our prayer and spiritual formation.

The first discipline is quite common but has a variety of forms that suit different temperaments and either personal or communal gatherings. Some groups use this as a form of worship that begins in quiet contemplation and moves to a group conversation around what the Spirit has spoken to them through the contemplative time. In this description I draw upon the work of *'The Contemplative Society'* led by Rev Dr Cynthia Bourgeault, an Episcopal Priest and teacher of spiritual practice. The following is from their website: <https://www.contemplative.org/contemplative-practice/lectio-divina/>

The Practice of Lectio Divina

Lectio Divina is a contemplative practice with its Christian roots in the Benedictine tradition. It combines slow, conscious reading of a biblical or sacred text with contemplation and silent prayer. It is meant to promote communication with God and a deeper knowledge of Christ, in our lives today.

During *Lectio Divina* we put aside thoughts of studying the text. This is not the time to consider the historical or theological meanings of what we are reading. We read with a willingness to enter into text in a felt sense. The purpose of this practice is to hear, in silence, the word of God, in this moment. What, through this reading, is God saying to me right now? What do I hear that helps me know what it means to walk the Christ path today?

Lectio Divina has traditionally been a communal practice; that is, one shared when in a group but it can be done when alone.

LECTIO DIVINA is divided into four movements:

- **READ (LECTIO)** Read a small section of Scripture, or sacred text, slowly and deliberately. Read the text, aloud at least twice with a slightly different emphasis each time. In the traditional Benedictine manner a passage is read four times.
- **MEDITATE (MEDITATIO)** Pay attention, ponder, allow words to penetrate your awareness through use of faculties such as imagination, senses, visualization, and feelings. Remain open to receiving a meaning rather than assigning one. What is the inner meaning of the text? What is the Holy Spirit saying to me right now?
- **PRAY (ORATIO)** Respond to text using language and the received sense of text to enter into silent prayer; pray in response to stirring that arises out of interaction with the text. In a group individuals may say aloud, out into the group, one or two words that have come to mind. It doesn't matter if two or more people speak at once.
- **CONTEMPLATE (CONTEMPLATIO)** Rest in silence, the presence of God, and allow what you have heard and felt to be absorbed into your being. Let go of reasoning, thinking, feeling. This is the time to rest in love and grace. Silence is the ground in which this prayer takes root.



This is a simple and effective way to pray Scripture and to listen to what the Spirit may be saying to us. The significant part is to stop trying to analyse, think it through, try and bring other knowledge to the story. It is about listening gently to the story or text and being open to the Spirit's voice to us. There are a variety of other tools that can be used in entering into the text and listening in different ways to the story. Some possibilities might include:

Contemplating the Story from Within: We enter into the life event or story we are reading, perhaps assume the role of one of the characters in the story – what do they do, say, feel? Try different characters and experience their life in the story. Perhaps we are an observer in the story, observing and experiencing the whole event – what do we feel, see, hear...? We may even move beyond the story and begin a conversation with one or more characters, perhaps Jesus. What do we ask? How do they reply? What do we experience and learn from this encounter?

Journaling: Again, there are many techniques and forms for journaling. The important element is to be free to hear through our writing, to allow ourselves to be in the flow of the prayer and the Spirit's leading. For example, we may begin with contemplation within a story, exploring it from the perspective of a character. We may wish to continue in conversation with the character, with Jesus, with Spirit and we can do this through journaling. Write the questions as a conversation and listen for the answers – don't try and think through it but allow the words to flow from deep within you. Allow the Spirit to speak to us through the pen. Journaling can be a flow of words that originate from deep within and speak to the depths of our being.

The Discipline of Study:

Richard Foster reminds us of Paul's words in Romans 12:2 – *“Do not conform to the pattern of this world but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.”*

Until this point, we have deliberately sought to quieten and still our minds, to move deeper into our being in order to hear the Spirit speak to our spirit. Spiritual disciplines recognise that our mind is also a significant place where the Spirit communicates, and we hear God speak. So now we turn to study and how we might open our mind, prayerfully, to listen and learn. Where, in *lectio divina*, we sought to listen into the story without analysis or thinking through the history, culture, linguistics, theology etc, in study we will pick up these and other tools to shed light on Scripture passages.

As Foster suggests regarding all the spiritual disciplines, the spiritual discipline of study has the intention of the transformation of one's self (transformation through the renewing of our mind). It is a movement from mind to heart. It involves reading, meditating, and memorizing, and can be applied to any subject, including books, nature, or the self. Study opens us to new knowledge and insights, especially from the wisdom traditions, so that we are changed in how we think and act. Through study, our minds are opened to new wisdom. We can study through reading, videos/podcasts, lectures and formal study

This is important to understand because the subject of our study and the manner in which we study will be transformative in one direction or another. In reflecting on study as a spiritual discipline of the Christian faith, the content or subject of our study is significant. Our primary focus will be Scripture and the deep traditions of the faith that reflect wisdom from Scripture. In the course of study, we can seek to understand the original context and history of the story or event. We delve into the cultural elements and assumptions contained within the story/text and how they inform our understanding. What is the theological meaning and significance contained within the story or text? There are other questions and tools that can help us deepen our understanding and scholars who



have the gifts to teach us from their wisdom. Read broadly and listen deeply to the wisdom of the broad community of Christian scholarship.

Richard Foster suggests four elements important to study:

1. **Repetition** – In order for new ideas and learning to take hold within our mind and impact our life and actions, we need repetition. We need to hear it several times from different perspectives and repeat the learning until it embeds within our mind and being.
2. **Concentration** – In a world of distractions and multiple messages, we need to focus our mind on the subject we are studying. Concentrated study will bring deeper understanding and therefore assist us to learn, remember and be transformed in mind, being and action.
3. **Comprehension** – We are encouraged to know the truth and that truth will set us free (John 8:32). Comprehending what we are studying leads to new insights and understanding. Sometimes we read something over and over. We may remember things we've read but don't truly comprehend what we are studying. There comes a moment when we suddenly understand, comprehend, and we have a new level of awareness and understanding. This is an important step.
4. **Reflection** – Having understood the essence of what we are studying, a new learning, reflection leads us into a deeper awareness of how this new learning applies to our lives, the life of our world or how God is acting in the world. We are drawn into a deeper awareness of God's perspective. We will have ears to hear and eyes to see. Reflection will also help our newfound knowledge become wisdom for life and faith.

Studying Scripture and the wisdom of the Saints facilitates our own growth in understanding, helps renew our mind and worldview, reorienting our life and will towards God's will. Learning is important and fun. It is exciting to learn new things and experience deeper understanding and awareness of God's Word and the Reign of God in our lives and world. As we learn and grow in knowledge, it is normal to feel we are growing, achieving and there is the temptation to see ourselves as 'better' because we know more. This is not God's way! Study, as with all spiritual disciplines, should be engaged in with humility. We learn and understand by the grace of God. If we are given the gift of learning and understanding, that comes with responsibility, the responsibility to share our new insights with others. Such sharing should be done gently, humbly and with love and grace, recognising that we also receive from others!

This week, spend some time with Scripture. Find a story or passage that speaks to you, challenges you or makes you curious. Work with it in different ways, lectio divina, using tools of study and write down things you discover and learn. What is God saying to you and what response can you make in your life?

Week 6: Prayer

We have moved through solitude into silence, with several disciplines, and now we move into prayer.

Silence is not the last word. When the Desert Father asked God to 'lead me to the way of salvation,' a second time, the voice that spoke said: 'Be silent. Pray always.' To pray always is the purpose of the Christian life – cannot separate silence and solitude from constant, unceasing prayer. When solitude might be an escape from a busy job or life, and silence an escape from a noisy world, they could become self-centred disciplines. Solitude and silence are for prayer. Therefore, when we are alone, we are alone with God. When we are silent, not speaking, we are listening to God. Solitude and silence are the context in which prayer is practised.

Most of us would agree that prayer is important, perhaps very important, maybe the most important thing we can do. At the same time, we do so little of it – some none at all! We know we should take time to pray. We know we should not forget to pray. We know that prayer should be a priority in our



life. But all these should do not have the power to take us over our activism, our busyness and activity. There is always another phone call, visit, book, task...

For most of us prayer means speaking with God which, in reality, becomes talking to God. This approach can be filled with uncertainty. We state a proposition, and we expect a response; we ask a question and want an answer. When we don't hear a response or an answer it leads us to wonder whether our dialogue with God is more of a monologue! Questions arise within our mind regarding whether we have prayed correctly or said the right type of prayers. It seems so much more real to speak with people who respond to our words than to God who seems expert in playing 'Hide and Seek'.

Another view of prayer is thinking about God. We are encouraged to think thoughts about God and about God's mysteries. It requires deep reflective thinking and is hard work. In our scientific world we scrutinize and analyse everything. This intense thinking about God can make God into another subject or object to be studied. Therefore, when prayer is 'thinking about God,' successful prayer is discovering new intellectual discoveries about God. In the same way that scientists come to have a better understanding of an animal, a plant, a geological structure etc through intense scrutiny, study, thought and analysis, so we assume that we will know God more fully by discovering all there is to know about God. Where, ultimately, does this lead us? At best it helps us gain a deeper understanding of what God is like – and this can be helpful in our faith journey. Understanding and learning new things is important. Reflecting and thinking about the mysteries and wonders of God is an important part of the faith journey for many of us. This is not the totality of prayer. Prayer as thinking about God will ultimately lead to frustration in prayer. It does not lead into experience and relationship with God anymore than thinking about another person leads us into an experience or relationship with that person (many teenage boys and girls would wish that this were true!).

Therefore, we should not confuse prayer with the activities of reading books on God, attending courses on faith, discussing God in Bible Study, preparation for groups or services and worship, and other activities that talk about God or cause us to think about God. They may be important, but they are not prayer.

We are slowly beginning to realise that we need to move beyond thinking about God; that our intellect is not the only part of our being that can, and needs to, interact with God. We need to experience God. The charismatic movement is one obvious response to people's need and desire to experience God, to pray differently. Forms of meditation (often sought within other religions) are another response to people's need to pray differently and to seek an experience of God. Suddenly the Christian Church finds itself in a milieu in which people are asking to learn how to pray and we don't really know the answers because we haven't been praying. There is growing desire from people beyond the church for spiritual meaning; a hunger to experience something beyond the rational, stressful lives they live. There is a hunger to experience God and we, as Christians, are not really prepared for these questions. We are talking to God and thinking about God but are we experiencing God? Are we praying unceasingly? Or are we just plain busy with God's, and our own, work?

Nouwen suggests that 'the crisis of our prayer life is that our minds may be filled with ideas of God, but our hearts remain far from God.' Real prayer is from the heart. It is about this prayer of the heart that the Desert Fathers and Mothers teach us.

The Prayer of the Heart

The restful prayer we spoke of earlier is the prayer that leads to rest where the soul can dwell with God. This is the prayer of the heart. For us who are so focussed in our minds it is important to learn to pray with and from the heart.



One Russian mystic embraces this spiritual tradition of prayer when he says: 'To pray is to descend from the mind into the heart and there to stand before the face of the Lord who is ever present, all seeing within you.'

Prayer embraces thoughts and feelings; it is standing in the presence of God with mind in heart. It is the point where we are not divided, mind here, emotions, body there. We are one whole being before God. There God's Spirit dwells and the great encounter takes place. There heart speaks to heart because there we stand before the face of the Lord all-seeing within us.

The prayer of the heart is a prayer that directs itself to God from the very centre of our being. It effects the whole of our humanness. One of the Desert Fathers said: 'The chief task of the monk is to enter into the heart.' It is now clear that this does not mean to try and fill the prayer with feeling but to allow the prayer to remodel the whole of one's being. The Desert Fathers and Mothers believed that entering into the heart was to enter into the Kingdom of God. Another way of saying this is that the way to God is through the heart. Jesus said: 'The Kingdom of God is within you.' (Luke 17:21)

The prayer of the heart, then, is the place of true rest. It is the place of communion with God, where Spirit encounters spirit and we dwell in the presence of God. If God is in us then prayer will be listening to the voice within, the voice of God.

The prayer of the heart is about communion with God - it is us in God and God in us. It is life! Such prayer moves us from the mind, where God can so easily become another problem in search of a solution or rational thought, to the heart. Real prayer touches the very centre of our being and leaves nothing untouched. 'The prayer of the heart,' says Henri Nouwen, 'does not allow us to limit our relationship with God to interesting words or pious emotions. It is a prayer that by its very nature transforms our whole being into Christ[likeness], precisely because it opens the eyes of our soul to the truth of ourselves as well as to the truth of God.' We come to see ourselves as sinners embraced by the mercy of God. This prayer encourages us to hide nothing from God but to surrender everything to God's mercy.

When we are opened up to God; when our heart is focussed on God, we see ourselves as we are and we recognise who God is. Our prayer becomes: 'Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the Living God, have mercy on me a sinner.' Such prayer unmask the reality of our lives - sinful people before the Holy Creator God in whose mercy we rest, live and hope. We are led into the true relationship between the sinner and the merciful God.

Through such prayer we find our rest and the strength to overcome the distractions of life that lead us away from God and true living. We are enabled to focus more fully on the lord of our lives and the Lord of the universe.

How do we practise the 'Prayer of the Heart in the midst of restless lives?

There are 3 characteristics of the 'prayer of the heart' that will help us develop this discipline:

- 1. The 'Prayer of the Heart' is nurtured by short, simple prayers.*
- 2. The 'Prayer of the Heart' is unceasing.*
- 3. The 'Prayer of the Heart' is all inclusive.*

The 'Prayer of the Heart' is nurtured by short, simple prayers.

The Desert Fathers and Mothers discourage us to pray with many words. God knows what we need and shows us mercy - we do not need lengthy prayers with many words to convince God. We are



encouraged to pray with the short repetitious phrases of a little child; phrases that come from the deepest centre of our being rather than our mind! Many words and fancy words leads our minds to distraction and takes the prayer out from the heart. It becomes rational discourse and, ultimately, monologue.

The Prayer of the Heart is Unceasing

We can pray this type of prayer into, and through, our busy working day. Wherever we are, whatever we are doing we can have this prayer on our lips and live in the presence of God. Nouwen suggests that we spend 20 minutes in the morning in God's presence with a phrase, such as 'the Lord is my Shepherd', 'these words may build a little nest in our heart and stay there for the rest of our busy day.' In this praying, the discipline is not to come to a deeper understanding of God as our shepherd but enter a deeper experience of God as our shepherd in the whole of our life. Our praying can also be observed in our actions - the way we love, live compassionately, our attitudes...

This unceasing prayer continues to pray within us. It is the active presence of God's Spirit guiding us through our lives. We are encouraged to pray without ceasing so that all we do is done to the glory of God.

The Prayer of the Heart is All Inclusive

This prayer includes all our concerns. When we enter our heart from our mind and stand in the presence of God then all our thoughts, preoccupations, concerns are embraced within our praying. Thus, the power of the 'prayer of the heart' is that all that which is on our minds becomes prayer. So, when we say to someone, 'I will pray for you' it doesn't (as so often is the case) become a well intentioned offer that is easily lost or forgotten in the busyness of life. All those people and situations that are part of our lives and our thinking are embraced in the prayer which is centred deep within our being, our heart. All these people and situations are brought into the presence of God and opened to the flow of the healing, life-giving power of God's Spirit.

The mystery here, that words are unable to speak of adequately, is that our heart, that deep inner centre of our being is embraced within the heart of God and all of our concerns, cares, worries and fears, joys, hopes and wonder are received into God's heart which is large enough to contain the universe and everything within it!

Through prayer we can carry all the pain, fear, worry, warfare, anxiety, stress, conflict... into the heart of God where it can be left for God's grace to deal with. 'Come unto me who labour and are heavy laden,' says Jesus, 'and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.' (Matthew 11:28-30) Jesus invites us to accept his burden - the burden of the whole world - but this burden is light when our hearts are transformed and embraced within the heart of God.

Have you noticed that we have moved from prayer to ministry - the two are inseparable. We live, we pray; we pray, we live. As we live we glorify God for that is our calling, it is the purpose for which we are created. Ministry arises out of prayer, is prayer and leads back to prayer - it is life lived in the presence of God. It is to bring other people into God's holy presence.

This can only be done when we are living in this holy presence! Our ministry in the world is God's ministry in the world - it is God's through us, not some great burden that we carry alone. We do not have to save the world because that has been done, we are invited, encouraged to live in God and bring others into this holy presence.

Final Thoughts...



We have journeyed through Solitude to Silence, with a variety of possible disciplines, into prayer. We have tried different disciplines, all with the ultimate goal of growing more deeply in our experience and relationship with God. We have been seeking to learn how to listen, through a world of noise and chaos, pain and distraction, to the still, small voice of love.

We have probably had a mixed experience, some things clicking and other practices frustratingly hard, as our minds are filled with myriad thoughts and distractions. We may have been tempted to give up. The wisdom of the Saints is to persevere, to practice, try and try again. It won't all come together first go. Some days prayer, meditation, and contemplation are hard work, and we feel lost in our efforts. Other days it all comes together and are filled with deep wonder and grace.

Whether we feel we are making progress in hearing God's wisdom or not, the practice of finding space and being silent, will deliver well-being to our body, mind and spirit.

Lent offers us a suitable time and a recognised season to begin practicing these disciplines. As we begin to learn, some of these disciplines can become regular practices in our lives, delivering deeper spiritual awareness and growth, a deepening experience of God's presence and a transformed heart, mind, spirit and life. Keep going. Keep exploring. There are many other disciplines or ways to develop those you have experimented with. The clear aim is a deeper relationship with God.

Much of the input of these 6 reflections comes from a series of 3 tapes by Henri Nouwen called 'Desert Spirituality and Contemporary Ministry' (The Modern Cassette Library, Ave Maria Press, Notre Dame, Indiana.)

Richard Fosters book, 'Celebration of Discipline' (Revised Edition. Hodder and Stoughton, 1989) was another resource.

Meditation information was from the World Community for Christian Meditation - <https://wccm.org/>



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