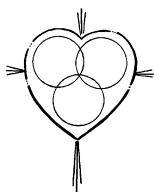


# EXPLORING CHRISTIAN FAITH



*No. 1*

## SOME WAYS OF EXPANDING PRAYER

### **Introduction**

1. Posture and place are very important. Find the right place to pray that fits what you need, e.g. quiet, still, etc.... Best posture is what leads you to be attentive and relaxed at the same time. This varies from person to person. Above all, adopt a posture you can keep still in. Some can lie down without sleeping; some use a lotus/half lotus, some sit on the heels or on a prayer-stool. An easy one is to take as upright chair, sit as far back as you can, with straight back and both feet on the ground, hands resting on knees or lap. And... keep your back straight!
2. All methods of prayer are means to an end. No one method works miracles. Find one (or more) that helps you. All methods need practice before you become at home in them. Therefore, be patient... don't be a butterfly!
- 3.
4. Give time to the preliminaries of prayer. Settle into posture, still your body and mind. Recognise you are in the presence of the Divine: offer the time to God; ask for light and openness.

## Stillness or Awareness Prayer

*Here are three methods among many. They can be just relaxing exercises; attentive preparations for other kinds of prayer; or, in themselves, a still, attentive, wordless prayer of presence.*

- 1. Awareness of the Body.** Starting from the crown of the head... pass through the body to the feet. Feel the various parts of your body in turn... feel the touch of clothes or chair, feet on the floor etc... Allow time (a few seconds) for feelings in each part to be apparent. Identify, be aware, and pass on. Try to concentrate your whole attention in turn on each feeling (this is easier in practice). So... head, face... neck... ears... etc... down to ankles... feet... sole... toes... each toe... Do this two or three times. More explicitly 'religious': recognise God's presence in your feelings... in your body... in you as a person.
- 2. Awareness of Sounds.** Identify each sound you can hear. Don't rush as many sounds only become apparent with attentive listening. Simply, without strain, concentrate your attention wholly on each sound in turn and move on. Sudden sounds, distractions etc., should be acknowledged, not fought against. Then, with effort, bring your whole attention back to where you were before. For a sequence seek the sound... move from outside to inside the room... finally yourself... your breathing... Again, repeat this several times.

Don't rush and don't strain. More explicitly 'religious'... recognise God's presence in the sounds and what they symbolise... people, nature (the wind as God's breath...). As with '1', this exercise might lead naturally to thanks and praise: also to a realisation of how dulled our senses have become... how little we normally hear or feel... how much more there is to be aware of.

- 3. Breathing.** Listen to your breathing. Don't alter the pace or depth (this is hard to start with)... just be aware... I am breathing in... I am breathing out... Try to concentrate all attention on this one action. If you get distracted, don't fight it, acknowledge it and gently pass back to the ting on which to centre your attention Possible religious dimensions:

- God is my breathing... God is as the air I breathe... all around... within me... source of life... I am breathing in God's life... I am breathing in God's love... and breathing out negativity and selfishness. Set up a gentle rhythm of breathing.
- Or – link with a significant work/phrase. Ignatius Loyola suggests the 'Our Father' word-by-word, or phrase by phrase linked to each breath. Others suggest; 'Jesus', 'Come, Lord Jesus...', 'Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the Living Lord, have mercy on me a sinner...', 'Maranatha'.

## **Praying with the Scriptures**

Before either of these, still yourself, perhaps using an exercise as previously described. Also, prepare your chosen passage by reading it and becoming familiar with it. During prayer, note any interesting intellectual questions, but shelve them and don't go any further into them! Leave that until after the prayer period.

### **1. *Based on traditional monastic 'lectio divina', a savouring prayer.***

Read slowly a passage of scripture until a word or phrase particularly strikes you. Savour the word/words by vocally or mentally repeating it or part of it until it fits your consciousness and you get to speaking spontaneously to the Lord in whose presence you are: *or*, keep an attentive silence in his presence. When you have found all you can, or are distracted, pass back to the slow reading until another word etc... strikes you.

*(N.B. You don't have to finish the passage – be content even if you don't need to go beyond the first word. )*

### **2. *Ignatian 'Gospel Contemplation' or 'Fantasy Prayer'***

The use of fantasy to bring us into contact with our inner person is used by some schools of psychology. In prayer, the use of imagination, prayerful daydreaming, has a long history from the early Cistercians and Franciscans, through the Carthusians to Ignatius Loyola. It is used to get in touch, NOW, with Gospel scenes. As a method it seeks to place you in the scene; no longer the observer, but meeting the living Christ NOW... the Word of God behind the Words of Scripture.

- Take a gospel scene. Read it carefully a few times to familiarise yourself with it. You may prefer to use the text while praying, or to work from memory, whichever helps.
- Place yourself in the scene. Take time: use your senses. (e.g. the Sea of Galilee: see it, smell the air, the fish... get into a boat... what's it like? Feel the motion, hear the sounds, words and so on...) When the scene is fully present to you and you are feeling at home, go on...
- Let the story play itself through with you in it. You may instinctively become a central character, e.g. Peter in the boat or someone asking for healing. Or you may be a bystander, an extra witness. Some people have even changed roles in the course of prayer. Fair enough, whatever is natural. Often the unplanned is an indication that you are really involved! Hear the words spoken; see the peoples' actions and reactions. Allow your own to happen without questioning them. Don't worry if your imagination doesn't follow scripture exactly and you find yourself as Peter unable to get out of the boat, for example. Any questions you may have, address them to Jesus.
- You may find that you converse with Christ and/or others quite naturally. In any case, when the 'scene' is over, take time to address Jesus face to face, or other characters in the story. Ask them their reactions and if there's something you don't understand, question them.

**(N.B.** You are not seeking to be an observer, but to be *IN* the scene. Don't worry if you have problems and difficulties to start with, e.g. the scene is not clear. Practice will help. Don't worry about historical detail or accuracy. This is imaginative and is only a means to an end, a present encounter with Christ. Is it a Real encounter? Enter with faith and no expectations and ask the Lord to show you beforehand what is helpful and to lead you where he wills.)