

15. Gospel Meditation

Many people are helped to pray by entering imaginatively into a Gospel scene. Some find this easier to do than others, but many are surprised to find that, with persistence, they are able to use their imagination better than they at first thought, and that by using their imagination in this way they find that they are less locked into thinking and more engaged at the level of the heart.

It may help you to find a quiet place, perhaps a chapel or a special prayer-corner that you have set aside in a room in your home or a favourite spot in the garden, provided it is free from external distractions. Remind yourself that you are in the presence of God and that Jesus is with you. Read slowly the gospel text that is the subject of your meditation. Read it aloud if you find this helps. As you read it allow your imagination to create the scene.

It is good to have read the passage before the time set aside for the meditation (perhaps the night before). At the time of the first reading ask God's Spirit to inspire you to ask for the grace that God wants to offer you in your prayer. It may be the grace to realise more deeply what Jesus has done for you. It may be the grace to see where you are like the people in the gospel scene and to plead with Jesus for his healing love. It may be to have the courage to do something that you know God is calling you to do. When you come to the time that you have set aside for meditation, recall this desire and ask God earnestly to give you this grace.

Now go through the scene slowly, using your imagination to enter into it, seeking to enter into the heart of each of the people in the scene, especially into the heart of Jesus. Pray to be open to the wonder of the way in which God is revealing God's presence and God's love in the scene, especially, of course, in Jesus. When your heart is moved to speak to Jesus, allow it to do so, for it is this conversation and loving communion that primarily constitutes prayer.

Perhaps this way of praying is best explained by an example. It is a meditation based on a scene that we find in John's Gospel:

In Jerusalem by the Sheep Gate was a pool, called in Hebrew Beth-zatha.
It had five porticoes in which lay many invalids –
some blind, some lame, and some paralysed.

One man was there who had been ill for thirty-eight years.

When Jesus saw him lying there and knew that he had been there a long time,
he said to him, 'Do you want to be made well?'

The sick man answered him,
'Sir, I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up;
and while I am making my way, someone else steps down ahead of me.'

Jesus said to him, 'Stand up, take your mat and walk.'

At once the man was made well, and he took up his mat and began to walk (John 5:1-9).

The following is a guided meditation adapted from Anthony de Mello (*Sadhana*, Exercise 22).

- Imagine the pool ... The five porticoes (covered walkways) ... the surroundings ... What kind of place is it? ... Notice the architecture ... the weather.
- Now let the whole scene come to life. See the people near the pool. How many people are there? ... What sort of people? How are they dressed? ... What are they doing? ... What kind of illness are they suffering from? ... What are they saying?
- You are there. What are you doing there? ... Why have you come to this place? What are your feelings as you survey the scene and watch these people? ... What are you doing? ... Do you speak to anyone?
- Now notice the sick man of whom the gospel passage speaks. Where in the crowd is he? ... How is he dressed? ... Is there anyone with him? ... Walk up to him and speak with him ... What do you say to him? ... His reply? ... Spend some time getting as many details of his life and his person as possible ... What sort of an impression does he make on you? ... What are your feelings while you converse with him?
- As you are speaking with him you notice that Jesus has entered this place ... Watch all his actions and movements ... Where does he go? ... How does he act? ... What do you think he is feeling?
- He is now coming up towards you and the sick man ... What are you feeling now?
- You step aside when you realise that he wants to talk to the sick man. What is Jesus saying to the man? What does the man answer? ... Listen to the whole dialogue. Fill in the sketchy account of the gospel ... Dwell especially on Jesus' question: 'Do you want to be made well?'
- Now listen to Jesus' command as he tells the man to get up and walk. The first reaction of the man ... his attempt to get up ... the miracle! ... Notice the reactions of the man ... Notice Jesus' reaction ... and your own.
- Jesus now turns to you. He engages you in conversation. Talk to him about the miracle that has just taken place ... Is there any sickness that you are suffering from – physical, emotional, spiritual? ... Speak to Jesus about it ... What does Jesus have to say? ... Listen to his words to you: 'Do you want to be made well?' Do you really mean what you say when you ask to be cured? ... Are you ready to take the consequences of a cure?
- You have now arrived at a moment of grace. Do you have the faith that Jesus can cure you and that he means to cure you? ... Do you have the trust that this will happen as a result of the faith of the whole group here?
- Listen to his mighty words as he pronounces the words of healing over you, or lays his hands on you. What are you feeling? ... Are you certain that his words are going to have an effect on you, in fact have already had their effect on you, even though you may perceive nothing tangible at the moment? ... He knows the healing that you really need and is offering all the healing that the love of God can offer.
- Spend a while now in quiet prayer in the company of Jesus.

A simple variant on this form of imaginative exercise consists of three steps. Firstly, we focus on a scene from the Gospels: we look at Jesus and allow our hearts to go out to him

in wonder and loving adoration. Secondly, we place ourselves in the scene and unite ourselves to him in communion. Finally, we listen to him as he asks us to love others as he loves us, and we ask him to guide us to do to others as we have experienced him doing to us.

We might be meditating on the last supper and the intimacy between Jesus and the Beloved Disciple (John 13:23). We begin by watching the scene. We then think of ourselves as the Beloved Disciple. Finally we ask Jesus to guide us to reach out to others with the kind of intimate love which he has for us. We might be meditating on the scene between Jesus and the leper (Mark 1:40-45). Firstly, we imagine the scene and allow our heart to go out to Jesus in whatever way we are moved. Then we enter the scene and put ourselves in the place of the leper, once again allowing our hearts to go out to Jesus as we enter into communion with him. Finally, we pray that Jesus will turn our hearts towards the outsiders to whom he may wish to send us, and pray to be instruments of his compassion. We can reflect on any of the Gospel scenes in this way.

If we find meditation conducive to prayer, we would do well to heed the following advice from Saint Teresa of Avila:

There are people who work almost continually with the intellect, engaging in discursive thought and meditation. And they do well because nothing further has been given to them, although it would be good if they spent some time making acts of love, praising God, rejoicing in his goodness, that he is who he is, and in desiring God's honour and glory. These acts should be made as far as possible, for they are great awakeners of the will. Such people would be well advised when the Lord gives them these acts not to abandon them for the sake of finishing the usual meditation (*Interior Castle* IV.1.6).

Thinking and reflecting can be done in a prayerful way, and can help us to pray, but we need to remember that we can think about God from the outside, as it were, without being in communion with God – and prayer consists in the communion, not in the thinking. Teresa reminds us that what matters is our love:

Not everyone has the kind of imagination that makes meditating possible, but everyone is capable of loving ... Progress does not lie in thinking much but in loving much (*Foundations* 5.2).

She warns us never to leave the humanity of Jesus behind (*Interior Castle* VI.7.5-15).

Care only about moving quickly so as to see the Lord (*Interior Castle* III.2.8).

The chief value of gospel meditation is precisely that it helps keep our focus on Jesus. It was not the discursive element in meditation that attracted Teresa, however. In fact she found herself unable to do it. When she reflected on a Gospel passage she was drawn to 'move quickly so as to see the Lord'. It was not thinking about Jesus that attracted her. It was being in Jesus' presence, being loved by him and loving him. She writes:

Since I could not reflect discursively with the intellect, I strove to picture Christ within me, and it did me greater good, in my opinion, to picture him in those scenes where I saw him more alone. It seemed to me that being alone and afflicted, as someone in need, He had to accept me. I had many simple thoughts like these. The scene of his prayer in the garden, especially, was a comfort to me. I strove to be his companion there. If I could, I thought of the sweat and agony He had undergone in that place. I desired to wipe away the sweat He so painfully experienced, but I recall that I never dared to actually do it, since my sins appeared

to me so serious. I remained with him as long as my thoughts allowed me to, for there were many distractions that tormented me (*Life* 9.4).

It is good to reflect for a time ... but we must sometimes remain by his side with our minds hushed in silence. If we can, we should occupy ourselves in looking upon him who is looking at us. Keep him company. Talk with him. Pray to him. Humble yourself before him. Delight in him (*Life* 13.22).

Anyone can learn the practice of Gospel meditation. The communion about which Teresa speaks comes, of course, from God. We should not try to force it. It ‘must come gently’ (*Interior Castle* II.1.10). For our part we must be careful not to be so caught up in our thoughts that we fail to notice the gentle call into communion. Teresa writes:

I am not asking you now that you think about him, or that you draw out a lot of concepts, or make long and subtle reflections with your intellect. I am not asking you to do anything more than look at him. Who can keep you from turning the eyes of your soul towards the Lord? ... In the measure you desire him you will find him ... He never takes his eyes off you ...

If you are experiencing trials or are sad, behold him on the way to the garden: what great affliction He bore in His soul. Having become suffering itself, He tells us about it and complains of it. Or behold Him bound to the column, filled with pain, with all His flesh torn in pieces by the great love He bears you. So much suffering: persecuted by some, spat on by others, denied by His friends, abandoned by them, with no one to defend Him, frozen from the cold, left so alone that you can console each other. Or behold Him burdened with the cross, for they didn’t even let Him take a breath. He will look at you with those eyes so beautiful and compassionate, filled with tears. He will forget His sorrows so as to console you in yours, merely because you yourselves go to Him to be consoled, and you turn your head to look at Him.

O Lord of the world, my true Spouse! Are you so in need, my Lord and my Love, that you would want to receive such poor company as mine, for I see by your expression that you have been consoled by me? Well then, how is it Lord that the angels leave You and that even Your Father does not console You? If it is true, Lord, that you want to endure everything for me, what is this that I suffer for You? Of what am I complaining? I am already ashamed, since I have seen You in such a condition. I desire to suffer, Lord, all the trials that come to me and esteem them as a great good enabling me to imitate You in something. Let us walk together, Lord. Wherever You go, I will go; whatever You suffer, I will suffer (*Way of Perfection* 26.3, 5-6).

Teresa suggests that an image of Jesus might help:

You will find it very helpful if you can get an image or a picture of the Lord – one that you like – not to wear around your neck and never look at, but to use regularly whenever you talk to him. He will tell you what to say (*Way of Perfection* 26.9).

The fruit of such meditations can extend over the entire day, especially if we can find a short phrase to capture the essential grace that we experienced during our time of prayer. This phrase can act as a mantra that we can carry on our breath as we go about our daily tasks. Teresa reminds us:

You need never withdraw from this loving communion ... Go within yourself even during your ordinary occupations (*Way of Perfection* 29.5).