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# MEDITATION FOR THE FAINT HEARTED

A TOOLKIT TO EXPLORE OUR QUIETER SIDE

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## **Meditation for the Faint-Hearted**

### **The Space Within**

Meditation is popular at the moment. There are plenty of apps and internet programs aimed at getting us to slow down and reflect. This course contains many similar ideas and practices. What is different about this is that it is aimed at putting Christian language back into the practice of meditation and centering. All major faiths hold meditation and stillness as vital to our spiritual beings. Christianity is no exception.

From earliest times Christians have sought to withdraw from the busy world for moments, hours or days. We might know the names of some who inspire us, but the vast majority of those who find God in silence are not famous.

When we think about meditation, for most of us, Jesus' own pattern is the one which is probably most applicable to our lives. Jesus stops, refocuses and refuels for his coming ministry. Of course, it would be interesting to know what these conversations were about. I wonder more, what they were like - I wonder whether Jesus used a lot of words or whether he just was in the presence of the Godhead. Perhaps a mixture of both.

A mixture of both is what we all need. If we are having a conversation we have to both talk and listen - this a normal part of our prayer life - to speak to God and pause, allowing the breath of God to enter into us. If this is all we ever do - then we are in a daily and profound communication. As we go through life we might notice that even with this prayer in the rhythm of our life we are called to longer pauses between the words.

These pauses can catch us by surprise, we are used to being busy and might feel like sitting quietly is not doing anything. We might worry that our prayers become less regimented. At this point we may really try to fight ourselves by placing more and more demands on ourselves to have the sort of prayer time which we believe that good Christians should have. Then, if we are not careful, we can get into a cycle of self-judgement and begin to believe we are not good enough. This is made worse if we come from the sort of background where people have been critical of us or have belittled us.

In over 20 years of pastoring churches one of the saddest moments is when someone comes into my office looking exhausted and tells me their prayer life is dead, that God has gone away or that it doesn't mean anything anymore. These are not people with identifiable current trauma, they are often people who we see as "pillars of the church" but they are wrung dry.

The good thing about these conversations is that often I can ask people what their prayer life is like - they are often trying to keep up some sort of routine, then I ask how long they have been doing things that way. Often the answer is ten, twenty or even thirty years.

I still have a skirt which my mother bought in the 1950s. It got too small for her at some point and I inherited it. I wear it sometimes, it is a really good quality wool skirt and it feels nice, but it is not in what I would call my “everyday wardrobe.” In fact, my everyday wardrobe has changed dramatically over the past couple of years. I mention that to say that, for most people, clothes wear out, become the wrong size, or go out of style. We don’t wear the same things for all those years so if we try to say the same prayers in the same way, for most of us, things may gradually become a bad fit - to the point where we really just want to put a sack on every day.

Our prayers are the same. We change. Our understanding of the world and our place in it matures. Yet, somehow, we wonder why we feel like there is something missing when we have not moved the words and actions of our prayers to accompany the broader understanding we have developed. For those from liturgical backgrounds I am not suggesting that the prayer books hit the trash can, what I am saying is that it is healthy to examine and re-define our relationship with the words we say together week in, week out.

Much of this redefinition, both as part of a worshipping community and in private prayer involves stepping back and allowing ourselves to experience without the clutter of words. I am writing, I love words, but when we cling to them instead of allowing them to hold our deepest selves we are not doing language or form any favors.

To add to this a little. Many people who have experienced the closest one-ness with God say that there is a point where words simply run out. This is easier to understand than it might seem at first.

Most of us have had the experience of seeing something beautiful - perhaps you could think of something you have seen or experienced. Now imagine you are trying to explain that sight or experience to someone who was not there. Describe the scene but also try to describe your feelings and emotions, what made this so special for you. Even with the best writers this can be a hard task. Sometimes we are not even sure ourselves why we find something so moving, let alone being able to explain it to anyone else!

That is what the mystics are saying - there are just no words to describe the all encompassing beauty of the greater presence of God. Another example might be when someone asks you to explain that dreaded concept of all new preachers, the Trinity. Just how do the three persons of God glue together. We can come up with lots of analogies but when we drill down into them we usually end up finding some loose threads which systematic theologians would label as heresy.

Throughout the history of Christianity there have been movements which have focused on meditative practices. Many have heard of the Desert Fathers (there were Desert Mothers as well) who lived much of their lives in remote solitude. In caves and remote monasteries they spent their time in prayer and meditation. Some of their writings remain, a source of inspiration to modern day Christians.

During the eleventh century in Europe there was a massive growth in religious communities. Monasteries and convents were built quickly all over Europe. Sure, some of them would go on to get a bit too big and turn into political dynasties but in amongst them there were plenty of people who had given themselves up to a life of prayer. From about the fourteenth century we have many accounts of men and women who have

extremely deep experiences of God. Some found themselves caught up into God's presence so fully that there was nothing else around them, perhaps time felt like it was standing still.

This experience of being both inside and outside ourselves so completely that we experience a sort of perfection which is impossible to describe is called mysticism in many religions. There are a lot of different names for this unity - enlightenment. Others will say they are truly present in the moment. Whatever label is attached, there seems to be a longing within human beings for a place of stillness. In the Christian tradition this stillness is named as entering into God's presence.

Sometimes, we hold people who give their life to prayer and meditation as higher up on some sort of holiness scale than we are. It is not, necessarily, that we long for a life in a convent or monastery and especially not in a cave in the desert. We forget that God calls people to all sorts of different ways of living but there is no rule about only monks and nuns (or even clergy) having the ability to experience the mystical.

Having said that, as those living the Religious Life (monks and nuns) will tell you prayer is often hard work and sometimes miserable. Even for those who are "professional pray-ers" every day is not a glorious and high flung experience of God. Anne Lewin captures this in her poem

"Waiting for the Kingfisher".  
Prayer is like watching for  
The kingfisher. All you can do is  
Be there where he is like to appear, and  
Wait.  
Often nothing much happens;  
There is space, silence and  
Expectancy.  
No visible signs, only the  
Knowledge that he's been there  
And may come again.  
Seeing or not seeing cease to matter,  
You have been prepared.  
But when you've almost stopped  
Expecting it, a flash of brightness  
Gives encouragement.

All of this can be strangely encouraging. Rather than entering into a practice which we can "get good at" or one which is linear in its progression we enter into an exploration. This means we have no way "to be good at it" but it also means that we are laying ourselves open to experience the Divine on a root level. That we are inviting God to a place beyond words and are travelling to meet God who is beyond all. This is not a practice for the faint-hearted. There is a very great difference between sitting still and quiet and sitting still and quiet with purpose, and that purpose being the contemplation of and realization of the presence of God.

Anyone who has spent a lot of time alone with their thoughts knows that for this to be productive, long term, mental rigour and honest self assessment is part of the process. As we move through a life of contemplation we will always have the choice as to whether to go deeper. Deeper involves being more honest with ourselves and with others.

Many of you who are reading are at or near the beginning of this journey, and you are in good company. You will discover whether this sort of quiet meditation suits you or not, but just be aware that you may have to push through some difficult moments where God seems absent or is a little too present and you do not want to hear what is being said to you.

There have been those who have held together remarkable stories of contemplative prayer and meditation alongside their stories of interaction with the world. Jesus himself, withdraws to pray at the end of the day. He takes time to refuel spiritually before embarking upon another day with expectations all around him.

This course is an invitation to begin to consider the ways in which we both relate to God and perceive ourselves as spiritual beings. We will learn about meditation as it relates to our lives. You may already have an established practice and would like some time to reflect on it, or this may all be new to you, or somewhere in between.

In all of this I am not claiming to be an expert. The real expert in your conversation and journey with God is you. In order to use those expertise, just like the Desert Fathers, you must build up mental resilience and a hunger for truth and self-awareness.

There is nothing wrong with the idea of simply stopping and breathing. When I teach yoga the first thing I ask people to do it to notice their breath. I ask them to notice the ground beneath them and their body in its peaceful places and where there is resistance.

You will notice I have used various terms - meditation, centering, stillness, silence, mindfulness. They all point in the same direction. Every so often someone or a group of people come along and tightly define one of these terms and then get grumpy when anyone tries to use them a different way. The truth is that there are many specific practices to lead us to God but we do not need to put rules around them.

I was at a big community rewards dinner a few years ago on a table labelled "faith leaders". A lovely group of people from all different religions. There was an older couple there who were in ministry together. This was a huge event and, presumably to save time and money, all the deserts had been laid out on the tables. Plates of food started arriving at nearby tables and the couple looked at each other and then announced to the table that they were starting with dessert. One of them said, "Well you never know at our age." I loved this, they found such great pleasure in having their dessert first.

Of course, we have already said that prayer and meditation are not all about pleasure but we do not need to keep tripping over a whole lot of rigid rules. If we look with an open mind we will find a place which suits the current season of our lives. If we pay attention we will notice when that season is changing.

What makes me want to begin this conversation with you is that I really feel as Christians we can so easily invite words of faith into this space. We can understand the Holy Spirit is breath, that the earth is God's creation and out of that so are we. Different folks have different paths to silence and to the unity with God which we all desire at the centre of our being. You are welcome to join this course and simply use words which make sense to you, as you need them, when you enter into stillness.

Meditation is not for everyone. Some personality types find themselves really distracted and, often, judged because stillness does not agree with them. Some folk are at a place in their journey where stillness is not available to them, at least not easily. Wherever you are, I invite you to come and explore. This is a Zoom class so you can attend in real time or I will record the material separately in an audio recording.

Come with an open mind, you will be greeted with one! You might discover a life giving space, or learn some new ideas to supplement your current practice. You do not have to use Christian words, either. I will because this is a church-based space - but feel free to translate these ideas to whichever words suit your journey. As a Christian I own and rejoice in the heritage into which I enter, but I do not own it. Even within a single religion God has many names, within humanity, God has many more.

## **Session 1: Breath of life.**

### **From the first moment**

*In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters*

*Genesis 1:1-2*

Right from the beginning there was breath. Ruah, the word for wind, can also be translated as “breath”. The wind of life, the breath, the life-giving force in the universe - swept across the waters and from that moment there began to be life.

Taken literally, the Creation Story is hard to reconcile with our understanding of evolution. There are all sorts of creative attempts to make the two work together but I prefer to see the story as myth. Myth is a wonderful thing because it stops us squabbling about literal truth and allows us to see meaning.

Within the Christian tradition, as within other traditions, the place from which this breath comes is often named God. Unfortunately this word has got burdened with all sorts of life-destroying baggage for many people. Find a word which works for you. Christians have three parts for God. God the Creator, traditional father but could as well be mother. God incarnate, that is God made human in the person of Jesus. Finally God the sustainer, the Holy Spirit.

The Bible gives us a lot of options; I am, king, messiah, light, bread, life, way, most high, everlasting one, all seeing, alpha and omega, daddy. You can find others. Notice the ones you like and the ones you do not.

When I was a teenager I remember a visiting priest turning up one Sunday and insisting we all call God “mother”. This would seem like a good thing for me, in principle it is. But the word “mother” meant to me both abandonment and terror - it shook me so badly I walked out - if I had to think of God as mother, I probably was not going to think of God at all. I had older and wiser people around me and so my disgust was short-lived.

It is incredibly important that we lean into images of and words for God which are life-affirming. The breath across the waters of Creation gives life. As we enter into stillness we need to learn to remember that breath. I know for some people the idea of “discovering the breath” sounds a bit odd. Imagine if you ran in from outside with an important message for me. You might be out of breath and speak in between gulps air in unintelligible snippets. “Catch your breath,” I might say, “and then tell me”. The economy of stopping to catch our breath is important.

As well as being a priest I am trained as a Yoga teacher. One of the great blessings of this training is that I have learned many things about breathing and meditation techniques which have added to my understanding of possibilities in finding quietness. This is not a course on yoga, nor on pranayama (the practice of yoga breathing), but if you are a practitioner you might notice a couple of breath exercises which are familiar.

Breathing is our life. We can also use it to calm our central nervous system, or to wake ourselves up. There is a reason why prenatal classes teach expectant mothers how to breathe.

### **Journal:**

What are my hopes? What are my fears?

What would you like to get out of this course and what are you afraid of coming into it. You will not be asked to share this unless you wish to.

### **Finding a space to breathe .....not too comfortable**

I remember I went to a workshop on keeping silence many years ago and the first thing we were taught was to sit up. This seemed counterintuitive to me. I didn't want to sit up on an uncomfortable chair, I wanted a couch or soft chair.

The balance between silence and sleep is best maintained by sitting up straight. This does not mean clenching every muscle, it does mean sitting on the sitz bones instead of rolled back onto your spine. This will somewhat restore the natural curvature of your spine. If your shoulders are rounded forwards or your chin is dropped or juts out, try to straighten up a bit.

On a chair, your feet should be flat on the floor and your hands can rest comfortably. On the floor you have a plethora of options for how you put your legs, but the principle of sitting up straight is the same. If you want to meditate for extended periods your body is going to have to learn how to be still - but little by little!

### **.....fits who and where you are**

I have been to several workshops where presenters said we needed a quiet corner with a chair and icon and candle - or some such thing. I stopped going to these because I felt like I was on a completely different planet with, at the time, four small children and assorted pets. I picture candle wax all over my chair, my icon decorated with markers and even the house burning to a crisp.

Space is important to some and if it is, see what works for you. Part of the idea of this course is to give you enough internal resources that you can meditate in Times Square if you want to. At the moment, for me, I have a cushion in my yoga room and shut my eyes.



The other thing with space is that there is often noise. That is life. Simply notice the noises when you come to meditate, acknowledge they are part of your life and move on. There is no need to get irritated - although, of course, there are noises which you might want to respond to.

### **.....works for your body**

What works for one person may not work for another. The same workshops which I attended always had a picture of a wing chair by a window. I have these great long lanky legs and weird joints which do not like sitting on chairs if I can't cross my feet up under me.

You know you. If you need to be on the couch, do that. I am typing this on the couch ( actually sitting with my feet on the floor for once) but I am rolled back on my lumbar spine a bit. So I am now sitting up much straighter. It helps that this is a relatively new piece of furniture and relatively firmly upholstered but you get my point. You can sit, lay, kneel, stand. Find a place which works for you.

### **Where is your breath?**

This will be a short guided exercise into noticing how and where we breathe in our bodies.

### **Journal:**

How did that feel? What did I like? What did I not like? What will I pay attention to next time?

### **Thomas Merton from "The Day of a Stranger"**

This is not a hermitage—it is a house. ("Who was that hermitage I seen you with last night? . . .") What I wear is pants. What I do is live. How I pray is breathe. Who said Zen? Wash out your mouth if you said Zen. If you see a meditation going by, shoot it. Who said "Love?" Love is in the movies. The spiritual life is something people worry about when they are so busy with something else they think they ought to be spiritual. Spiritual life is guilt. Up here in the woods is seen the New Testament: that is to say, the wind comes through the trees and you breathe it. Is it supposed to be clear? I am not inviting anybody to try it. Or suggesting that one day the message will come saying NOW. That is none of my business.

Thomas Merton was a hermit living in a house on the grounds of his monastery. In this essay his wit is dry and even sarcastic. He is reflecting on his life in the woods and comparing it to the life of those in the outside world and those he interacts with during time in the monastery.

What is your reaction to the passage and what can we learn from it?

### **Breathing in peace**

## Breathing exercise #2

### **Journal:**

What have I learned? What questions would I like to reflect on this week? What would I like to share with the group?

### **Conversation:**

Depending upon time and interests we may be able to have some conversation

### **Closing meditation.**

A short led meditation with some silence.

### **Homework:**

*This week's homework will be to pay attention to your breath. See if you can catch yourself when you are tired or tense, just for a moment, and notice which part of your body is hauling in the oxygen.*

*I say hauling in because one of the things we do when we get out of sorts is to breath short, shallow breaths. Simply taking a moment to take three, longer, nourishing breaths can calm our nervous system. See how it goes. You might only remember once - once is great - and if you don't remember, try it now if you are reading over this section trying to remember what the homework is!*

*Write yourself some notes in your journal if that helps - it might be good to note any questions or things you want to remember or try out next time you notice your breath getting ragged.*

## Session 2: Being here and now

After I started writing this course I came across an article which was about the perils of Mindfulness. It went on to say that mindfulness, when overdone, can lead to introspection, anxiety and depression. For some it is more useful than for others.

We mentioned in the introduction that the ascetic Desert Fathers would train and toughen up before they went out into solitude, a place fraught with the danger of self absorption.

It seems to me that there is an outward sort of mindfulness. A mindfulness where we remind ourselves of the present. We notice, we smell, we taste, we feel, we really see. We find God in all sorts of places and all sorts of ways. This sort of mindfulness can be as short as the snatch of a breath, or as complicated as long hours in meditation. Start with the snatch of breath.

Then there is another sort of introspective mindfulness. This is part of the Christian tradition as well but we have to be careful not to tip into self-obsession. One of the most useful things I was taught was that pride cuts two ways - we know about wanting to be best at everything but the inverse, convincing ourselves we are worst at everything is not healthy either.

Of course, there are times when we get stuck in cycles and loops. Sometimes these are of spiritual origin but when they have a deeper psychological root they will need a different sort of conversation. I am not a clinician but I know enough to say that if any of the practices in this course are deeply unsettling, please talk to someone about it and do not continue causing yourself distress by forcing your way through.

Back to the positive. Stopping to notice, to calm our breath, to find something small which we want to look at, those are things which will help our health. That can be hard to do, especially when we are busy. You know the sort of day, one thing after another after another and then we plough on through it all, often pushing aside the things which could be pleasant places of respite.

As we get more used to looking and noticing we might find it easier to stay more calm, to assess a situation more carefully. Where is God in this? Perhaps a quick prayer, God help me or God, what do I say? That latter one I say a lot. Just handing over whatever is going in is a huge relief and usually enables me to have the courage and presence to keep going.

Being present is one of those sorts of things which we think about while we are brushing our teeth in the morning and then remember as we are putting out the light at night. So thank God for the light, for the

convenience, for your bed, for your room, roof, family. You don't have to do them all. Just noticing one little thing is practicing presence.

In this session we will begin in a practice loosely based on the Examen. This is a chance for you to reflect back over your day and to notice where you felt at ease and where you did not, where you noticed God. We will review anything which anyone wants to discuss from experiences in week one. No one has to speak if they do not want to but some people might find it helpful to have a few minutes of reflection with the group. There will be a time of led silence.

### **The Examen**

Ignatius of Loyola lived in the seventeenth century. He began his career as a mercenary but, after he was seriously injured, he had time to think about his life's purpose and decided to head in a different direction. He set up a religious order which would be loyal directly to the Pope, the Jesuits and they have been hugely influential in the world of education and missionary work. He also wrote extensively about spiritual discipline and practice.

Some people might have heard of his "Spiritual Exercises" and perhaps even of the 28 day retreat which people do to work through them. Not going there - don't worry. In the US schools like Gonzaga, Loyola and Marquette are some of the 28 Jesuit Universities which span the nation. Ignatius would probably never have dreamed his brand would get so big.

The Examen is a way of looking back at the day and noticing. There are various versions which take various lengths of time, this one is fairly adaptable. Try and cover all the main parts. Finishing this exercise with Compline is a nice thing to do. We will use one of the Compline prayers for our final meditation.

Come into the presence of God

What am I especially grateful for in the past day?

(ideas: being alive, someone's kindness or love to me, something I have done, something that happened)

Ask for grace both to know God and to see myself as God sees me.

Where have I felt true joy today?

What has troubled me today?

What has challenged me today?

Where and when did I pause today?

Have I noticed God's presence in any of this?

Response: What is my response to the call God on my life?

(this response might be saying sorry and figuring out how to walk more closely with God in future. It might be as simple as offering God the next day, noting any challenges and asking blessing, it is your response!)

Going forward:

What comes to mind?

How am I going to approach tomorrow?<sup>1</sup>

I am starting the process of presence with this because it puts our efforts into a context. The context of being day to day with God. It is not random wondering but a solid and prayer based exercise.

### **A bit of quiet**

We are going to spend a few moments with this text from Psalm 63. You will need to be sitting comfortably.

Psalm 63:1-8

<sup>1</sup> O God, you are my God, I seek you,  
my soul thirsts for you;  
my flesh faints for you,  
as in a dry and weary land where there is no water.

<sup>2</sup> So I have looked upon you in the sanctuary,  
beholding your power and glory.

<sup>3</sup> Because your steadfast love is better than life,  
my lips will praise you.

<sup>4</sup> So I will bless you as long as I live;  
I will lift up my hands and call on your name.

<sup>5</sup> My soul is satisfied as with a rich feast,\*  
and my mouth praises you with joyful lips

<sup>6</sup> when I think of you on my bed,  
and meditate on you in the watches of the night;

<sup>7</sup> for you have been my help,  
and in the shadow of your wings I sing for joy.

<sup>8</sup> My soul clings to you;  
your right hand upholds me.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.xavier.edu/jesuitresource/online-resources/prayer-index/ignatian-prayers>

**Journal: practicing the Examen** Please return above to the Examen and work through it. You can do this with or without writing. For many it might be easier to write at first - you can throw the page away! Sometimes I even tell people to draw simple little doodles - it can help if your brain is wired that way. You will have 10 minutes for this.

### **Pied Things**

This poem is one of my favorites - you might have heard it. It is a poem of noticing and observation. That is what we have been thinking about today. Noticing as God notices. This is a poem of noticing God's hand and imagination in the perfectly ordinary.

Gerard Manley Hopkins was born in 1844 in England. He had written poetry from a young age but at some point during his studies at Oxford he seems to have decided that the party life of a poet was not what he wanted. He decided to become a Roman Catholic and entered the Jesuit order. Throughout his life he had battles with himself over whether he should not should not write poetry, given his new profession. He stopped here and there, but finally felt it was a calling he could honor. This poem was written in 1877 but was not published until 1918. Hopkins was not popular until well after his death.

### **Pied Things by Gerard Manley Hopkins**

Glory be to God for dappled things –  
For skies of couple-colour as a brindled cow;  
For rose-moles all in stipple upon trout that swim;  
Fresh-firecoal chestnut-falls; finches' wings;  
Landscape plotted and pieced – fold, fallow, and plough;  
And áll trádes, their gear and tackle and trim.

All things counter, original, spare, strange;  
Whatever is fickle, freckled (who knows how?)  
With swift, slow; sweet, sour; adazzle, dim;  
He fathers-forth whose beauty is past change:  
Praise him.

Journal: Write yourself a brief note, thoughts, questions or challenges for the week ahead. How have you found this session? What did you like? What was difficult? What did you learn? And what would you like to try next time?

### **Closing Meditation**

We will share a led meditation and some silence

Guide us waking, O Lord, and guard us sleeping; that awake

we may watch with Christ, and asleep we may rest in peace.

## **Homework**

*Take the experience of the Examen and to try to bring that sense of noticing into the present moment as we go through the week. It is perfectly usual to decide to do this and then get to six o'clock in the evening and realize you have not done it once. When you remember, don't beat yourself up about forgetting, go ahead and notice. Noticing simply means being present in the moment. What do you see, what do you hear, what do you smell and feel? If the Examen speaks to you, paying attention during the day may make it a deeper experience as you come to the evening.*

*Notice your feelings around things and then, step back a little, and remember what is important to you - even if the dog is driving you crazy barking. Try to find one thing you have noticed which you may not have noticed before.*

### Session 3: Words and Pictures

I remember I once went to a Centering Prayer workshop and the woman leading it said, think of a word and use that to concentrate on. People seemed quite happy with this. I was squirming. Holding words as the center of meditation for me does not come naturally, I am a picture person, at best. Apparently about 15% of people are.

If you are an educator this will come as no surprise to you. Learning styles come in three main flavors - visual, auditory and kinesthetic (doing and touching). Our relating to God is no different.

I used to think that some people did not need space or silence, that there were some personalities which were not suited to quiet. I am not sure I think that any more. But I have also learned that there are many paths to an inner quiet.

In today's session we will look at a way to interact with Scripture and then try the same sort of exercise with a picture. As with anything in these sessions it may ring true with you and it may not. The great thing is that there are no rules. We are talking to God not trying to learn the driving code.

It may be that, instead of the Bible, you choose to look at a poem or a part of the liturgy. It may be that instead of a painting you pick up a rock or look at a flower. Play with it. A sense of lightness and exploration is necessary for you to find the places where you most easily encounter God. "I can't do it," means very little in this setting. Find what you can do at the moment, find where you are comfortable and move from there. You are not working up to a spiritual 5k - stop beating up on yourself and, definitely, let go of any competitiveness.

Words: Lectio Divina

I remember at school being given a giant sheet of paper and being told to fill the whole thing. I know that many children will draw a little person in the corner but soon become more adventurous. Adults, on the other hand, are likely to demand something smaller. Looking at meditation can be like looking at a very large sheet of paper and being given a small paintbrush. A few will jump at the opportunity, but for most it is daunting. Now, imagine someone had split the sheet up into squares and outlined a pattern on some of them. They then give you a whole selection of paints, pens, crayons and even some stickers to begin on the sheet.

Learning meditation is not so different. There can be lines on the page and there are all different sorts of paint and color. Most people cannot randomly sit still and quiet for an hour. Even those who have a natural



proclivity to meditation have to train their bodies to be still. In some yoga traditions all the things we look at with awe in terms of poses are simply preparation for hours of sitting still in meditation.

## Lectio Divina

“Lectio Divina” in Latin means “holy reading” in English.

Lectio Divina formally comes from around the 6th Century, at least in the Christian tradition. St. Benedict has had huge influence in terms of daily prayer contents and form and it is from his monasteries that this practice emerged.

I have heard Lectio described in various ways. I will give two examples here - one of an individual practice and one you can do in a group.

### Individual practice:

For this find a quiet spot and give yourself 30 minutes (you can make it in 15 or 20 but your listening time will be cut short).

Your Bible passage should be moderately short 5-10 verses, or so. You are going to read it multiple times so don't make it hard on yourself.

Read the passage through. Notice what jumps out at you. Take time on this.

Read the passage again, this time you might find yourself pausing on certain words or clauses. There is no hurry, this is the work of prayer.

On the third reading (and resist the temptation to skip through, even though you know what it says) notice what God might be saying to you, what call Jesus is making on your life. Explore the taste and texture of the words or word which stand out to you.

You may want to journal or you may want to go into silence. Remember we have already learned about posture and breath - they can help you here.

If you journal, then spend a few minutes in silence - you may find yourself talking - that is fine - if you find yourself babbling, or distracted by the grocery list, just gently pull your attention back. I usually say “Thank-you thought, I will get to you when I have finished here” - this probably sounds a bit strange but it works for me - you can find your own place.

There is a very good article with more detail [here](#)

### African Bible Study

This is a group version of Lectio which you may come across. The really important thing about this is that everyone in the room imagine a table in the middle. Anything anyone says is laid on the table and honored. However, no one picks up anything on the table and examines it or tries to fix it if it is broken. This is really hard. No advice, no leading questions. Occasionally someone will say something you just do not understand,

it is OK to ask about that, or to say you did not hear but stop there. This method is not interested in your Uncle Freddy going through the same thing and what he did.

The same three readings happen but this time three members of the group read. Three different voices from, if possible, three different versions of the Bible - preferably intelligible ones. The work is very similar.

Someone reads the passage, don't hurry. Take a couple of minutes to digest. Everyone says a word or phrase which jumps out to them (I say everyone, but leave space for people not to speak if they do not want to). No one comments

Then another person reads the passage and take time to digest. Then people have the chance to say where the passage intersects with their life. Lay ground rules about the length of answers.

Finally a third voice and a different translation, if you have one. Digest again. Then everyone says what they feel God is calling them to through this study. Again no comments.

Finish the session with prayer.

These methods can be adapted. You can write, draw or act out responses. You will see, when we get to the picture, that it is the same method but will feel different. For some it will be challenging.

Gathered time:

Begin with your journal: how am I right now? Where am I? What can I see, hear, smell, feel, taste? How do I feel? Stop and take a few moments to check in with you in your journal.

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Practice The African Bible Study Method.

The passage we will use is from Psalm 119. Some people will find it useful to follow along with the words, others will want to listen - or a bit of both. I will lead you through.

Find your comfortable space and let's take a moment to get ourselves settled and into a meditation space.

Psalm 119: 105-112

<sup>105</sup> Your word is a lamp to my feet  
and a light to my path.

<sup>106</sup> I have sworn an oath and confirmed it,  
to observe your righteous ordinances.

<sup>107</sup> I am severely afflicted;  
give me life, O Lord, according to your word.

<sup>108</sup> Accept my offerings of praise, O Lord,  
and teach me your ordinances.

<sup>109</sup> I hold my life in my hand continually,

but I do not forget your law.

<sup>110</sup> The wicked have laid a snare for me,  
but I do not stray from your precepts.

<sup>111</sup> Your decrees are my heritage for ever;  
they are the joy of my heart.

<sup>112</sup> I incline my heart to perform your statutes for ever, to the end.

Journal: We will have a few minutes of quiet at the end for you to digest and write any notes in your journal. How was that for you? What would you try next time? What did you learn?

This week we are going to turn to Art instead of words for our inspiration. Art can be used in a very similar way to how we used words in the previous exercise. We will do this together as a group.



This painting is called “Christ and children” and it is by German/Danish painter Emil Nolde. I am far from an expert on Nolde but there are a few things I find interesting.

Nolde grew up in a Christian household and knew the Bible well, he had read it cover to cover. He was struggling to find his own place and style until about 1906 when he shifted from Impressionism into using color to interpret the emotional meaning of a moment.

This was amplified when he nearly died in 1909 from drinking poison water. This painting was done in 1910. As he got older Nolde changed his style again and, for many, became too morose.

Look at this painting. What do you notice? Think about this in contrast to a more traditional Icon of Jesus.

What can we learn from Jesus having His back to us? What questions is Nolde forcing us to ask? Is this about what we have made Christianity of how we deal with the responsibilities which we undertake as Christians? Are there issues of love and power? How are we to love?

What else does this painting say to you? Sit comfortably and spend a few moments looking at it.

**Journal:**

What have you learned? What would you change? Did you find the words or the art worked better for you? Is there another sort of thing that might fill that space for you? Any other thoughts.

**Meditation:**

We will close with a themed meditation, there will be space for silence.

*Assignment: Next week we will be thinking about our senses. As you go through the week try to start collecting things which you like the scent or taste of, which you like to touch or hear, things which you like to see. Perhaps, write a list, or snap a phone picture. Make yourself a treasure chest of things in any way which works.*

*Let me give you an example of what I am thinking as I am writing. We have a chest of drawers which was in my grandmother's house, I have no idea where it was before that. We keep papers in it so it does not have the constant in and out of clothes. This means when I open it I can smell my Grandmother's house, the sort of exotic smell which comes from furniture which lives in a room where children are not allowed to go. Of course, it is only exotic in my mind - my guess is the scent is old lavender, soap and, perhaps, a mothball or two. Whatever it is it has hung around for over 50 years.*

*Whatever suits you, really. Again, you may have the chance to share but do not have to. Try and find things for different senses.*

*You may want to have a candle close by.*

#### **Session 4: The Toolbox**

If words and pictures are a way to start in meditation there are also plenty of tools to remind us what we are doing and keep us going when our mind wanders. There are many, many more than I can mention here.

There are as many ways of finding God as there are people. We need to be a little bit careful when we are trying to meditate to be very deliberate about what we are doing. It is easy to think that we are going on a hike to meditate and be present. All too often, in reality, we will end up thinking about a million other things. Of course, we will appreciate God in nature and the beauty of creation but unless we are careful we will end up with a walk with God slotted in here and there rather than a meditative walk with God. On the meditative walk our attention will wander but our primary purpose is not to get somewhere or finish the trail, it is to enter into a deeper awareness of God, self and place.

This is just one example. If we are truly open to the present and to God's presence we might find that what we thought would be a three mile hike turns out to be half an hour sitting on a riverbank watching a stream. When we enter into meditation we are not doing so with any aim except to open ourselves to God.

The Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh says:

“My dear friends, suppose someone is holding a pebble and throws it in the air and the pebble begins to fall down into a river. After the pebble touches the surface of the water, it allows itself to sink slowly into the river.

It will reach the bed of the river without any effort. Once the pebble is at the bottom of the river, it continues to rest. It allows the water to pass by.

I think the pebble reaches the bed of the river by the shortest path because it allows itself to fall without making any effort. During our sitting meditation we can allow ourselves to rest like a pebble. We can allow ourselves to sink naturally without effort to the position of sitting, the position of resting”. (see “The Miracle of Mindfulness”).

Whilst this is not from a Christian source I think it points to a universal truth that we cannot meditate unless our busy-ness is stilled. This means that if the way we meditate, whatever it is, keeps us so busy that we cannot move beyond the physical action we might want to try something else. The walk was one example. Imagine that you sit on the floor and it hurts after five minutes because you have not taught your body to sit on the floor. Perhaps you decide to use a candle but you are worried about your cat getting too close. We had

a cat with long hair a few years ago who jumped over a lighted candle - not realising her fur was pretty long. Luckily we were right there but burning cat hair is a bit scary.

What I am trying to say is that tools can become un-tools if we are not careful how we use them. I am sure many of us have been to churches where things have to be “just right” or everyone is grumpy. How on earth can people pray when they are all scrunched up and holding their breath in case there is a mistake?

There are a few things which always make me raise my eyebrows when I hear them. The biggest one is when people say they do not need to stop to pray or meditate because they can do it as they go. This is possible, but keeping in the present and mindful of God when everything else is happening is really hard. For nearly everyone this is an advanced practice and I don't think I have met anyone who has the ability to maintain consistent awareness of God and does not also have some quiet meditation time. Just be careful with that one. Theresa of Avila states God gives to whom God wills. The Examen and some of these other centering practices might show us all where our growth points are.

Another one is that meditation is boring or takes too much concentration. It can be. Even if we love it most of the time, sometimes it is just hard work. Knowing yourself and, perhaps, recruiting a spiritual guide or spiritual director, can help. Pay attention to the times when you struggle. If you have the Flu or a migraine, be kind to yourself. Our culture tends to demand that we “tough it out”. Perhaps if you are sick you can spend a few minutes looking at your hand and marvelling at it, or noticing the softness of your sheets, or simply allow yourself to be sick.

Meditation can take getting used to. Take baby steps. If you make a daily rule then make it simple. Perhaps you can stick a post-it above your coffee pot to remind you to stand still for a minute or two (time it). Perhaps you want to put something near your toothbrush inviting yourself to spend a few minutes before bed. Getting into a routine can be tricky with a busy life so start small. If you keep going with something easy for a few weeks you may find that you are more easily able to find time for longer sessions.

Another part of this is that you need to know yourself well enough to decide whether you need to meet with a group. There is something about the accountability of a meditation group. You can't pretend and you can't cheat on the time. Some of you are reading this wondering why on earth I would say such a terrible thing, others are nodding their heads.



I suppose the other thing I head sometimes, although not so often, is that meditation is not Christian. Some of this is language. Change the word and do the same thing and it is OK. Some traditions just do not explore silence. Part of the problem is that if you Google “meditation” and look at images you get a lot of

pictures of people sitting cross legged with their fingers in Gyan Mudra. Your search may not be as skewed as mine, I read a lot of Yoga articles!

As we saw at the beginning of this course meditation is deeply embedded in the Christian tradition. More than that it is deeply a part of our common humanity across nations, traditions and faiths.

This session is about some of the things which can aid our meditation. We will concentrate on the senses. There will be things which you associate with God and things you do not. I grew up in a church which used incense and the smell takes me to some of the times when I felt closest to God. The smell of wood polish will do the same, because sitting in the quiet church after school when the church ladies had cleaned, that was the smell. Now, I am not suggesting that you inhale furniture polish whilst you meditate but your mind and body can associate, or come to associate, things which arouse the senses with this action.

You may already have such things, or you may want to develop them. The key is to appreciate the power of your senses but not to be ruled by them. By that I mean that we do not need to get to the point where we just cannot pray or meditate at all without that certain brand of lavender candle. Having a collection of things in your toolbox is always good, as is the commitment to try new things. Have fun - meditation is not all seriousness. It should not give you frown lines.

Journal: think about the collection that you have made during the week. What is in your treasure chest and are there any common factors between the things. Perhaps you have a lot of scents, or tastes or pictures. Perhaps a lot of nature or animals. Just note that in your journal. We will not use it so much today but you can come back to it as you develop your own meditative practice.

#### Meditation 1: Candles

Candles appeal to both sight and often scent. They, usually, have positive associations. If they do not then imagine a source of light which does not upset you.

As we are not in the same room I will share a video. If you have a candle you would like to light, please feel free, you can just listen and not look at the screen.

Journal: How was that? Are there other visual objects I would like to try, or I know that work.

#### Sound: Music

There are so many different sorts of music out there. We will experiment with a little bit of chanting - very simple. Your microphones will be off!



One thing with chanting or singing things like the Psalms is that it forces you to slow down and, perhaps, you can digest better.

What sorts of music have you found that help you?

Taste:

We are just going to mention this and move on. One of the things which we can do around food is to pay attention while we are eating. For most this means slowing down and chewing carefully. Someone said to me, recently, that they were aiming for 40 chews. Not sure that is happening in my world, but you get the idea.

There is a story about a Dominican and a Jesuit. Someone asked them whether you could smoke (it is an old story) and pray at the same time. The Dominican said no, the Jesuit said you could not smoke while you were praying but you could pray while you were smoking. Food is not a negative thing, unlike smoking. But the point is similar. I am not sure I am comfortable recommending eating itself as a form of meditation, we live in a world of excess and over-indulgence and this could be heard very strangely. I am happy to suggest that eating mindfully and in the presence of God is a good practice.

Smell

Smell as we mentioned above can provoke strong reactions in us. It is part of our basic survival mechanism and, as such, some smells are hard wired into the very primitive fight or flight response. Others will have found their way to that same basic pattern of response as we have experienced different situations in life.

The other thing to be very aware of in any sort of group setting is allergies and migraines. It is generally not a good idea to use scents in any sort of group where there might be guests unless it is clear that that is part of the group.

Journal: What are the smells that you love and why? How might this help you in your meditation practice.

Those who would like to share, may share, if we have time.

Touch

There are so many ways we can incorporate touch into meditation time. One of the big advantages of giving our hands something to fiddle with is, for those of us who are more hyperactive, it can allow a deeper stillness to develop.

A few ideas:

- Find a rock or stone and sit quietly with my eyes closed and explore its texture with my fingers
- Use prayer beads or a rosary
- Have a piece of modelling clay and move it around your hands
- Hold an animal - if it is amenable
- Have a piece of tree bark or a leaf, feel its texture and temperature.

Our longer meditation this evening will be one which can use prayer beads but we will use our hands. As many of you know the traditional Rosary is five sets of ten beads, the Anglican Prayer Beads are four sets of seven. Despite the fact that we associate the Rosary with a very narrow set of prayers there is no reason why either set cannot be adapted to your needs. The key is with prayer beads of any sort that it is not only the prayers which you say which make the meditation, almost more important are the spaces in between those words.

Find a comfortable place to sit and we will get going on the exercise. If you have a set of ten beads in any form, go for it.

The first part of this meditation will be led and then we will drop into a longer silence.

Journal: As the course draws to a close what have I learned? What did I find helpful and what will I try again? What things were not covered which I am curious about.

If we have time we can finish with conversation.