

Spiritual Exercises 3: Meditating on God's word

"Meditate: to consider deeply, reflect upon; to turn over in the mind (from the Latin, probably linked with the word "to heal")." [taken from entry in *The Chambers Dictionary*]. These notes seek to describe the aim of Christian meditation and to offer some exercises. At this point, I must come clean and admit that, unlike Delia, I have not tested these "recipes" to the point of exhaustion. On the other hand, I am convinced that "There is gold in them thar hills", as proved by the long (but now nearly lost) tradition of Christian meditation, and I want to encourage us to find that gold.

Some of you reading this may be wondering if any form of meditation is within your grasp. But think for a moment of the home cinema in your mind that you use to replay hurtful or embarrassing conversations and then re-shoot the movie to your satisfaction. Let me encourage you to slip in a different reel and use those extensive facilities to fill your mind with God's word!

A newly-formed acquaintance described the time of her conversion: when she drove to church, she felt as excited as if she were meeting her lover. Those of us who have been Christians a while may have lost this sense, and may be feeling that meditation is a difficult art, and requires concentration and practice. This is true, but how do we rate the lover who fails to get to the rendez-vous because of a spot of rain, or the gold prospector who gives up on his stake after the first day?

Meditation offers us the possibility of a detachment "from the confusion all around us [] in order to have a richer attachment to God and other human beings" (page 15, *Celebration of Discipline*). We may experience "ecstasy, but it is far more common to be given guidance in dealing with ordinary human problems." (page 17). In meditating, we are concentrating on scripture with the aim of meeting God, entering "into the living presence of God for ourselves." (*Celebration*, page 19).

Having tried out these exercises for myself, I would say that the difficult part (apart from getting started!) is continuing to concentrate on what God may be saying. I would also add that it is wise to check any guidance given during a period of meditation against other passages in the Bible, and with friends: deep communion with God can be subject to interference.

First of all, chose a time and a place that should be quiet and free from interruptions. Use a chair on which you can sit in an upright posture (the best position for staying focussed for a while). Have to hand your Bible and a notebook in which to write down your impressions of what God is saying to you. Pray for God's peace and protection, and His grace to enable you to see what He has to say.

Lectio divina

This is a meditation in four stages. As you read, you may find yourself working through each stage one at a time, or you may find that the Holy Spirit leads you to move back and forth through the first three stages. Suggested verses: Psalm 34: 4,5

- 1 Read your chosen verses attentively and expectantly (*lectio*)
- 2 Ponder on the significance of the text, letting it sink in (*meditatio*)
- 3 Express yourself in praise, thanksgiving, petition, intercession, lamentation – you are allowing your real self to be touched and changed by God's word (*oratio*)
- 4 Remain open to God's love and peace, aware of His presence (*contemplatio*)

Ignatian Meditation

This is a method of meditating on the gospel (named after St Ignatius Loyola) whose purpose is to enable you to enter the narrative for yourself.

Start by choosing a gospel passage. (Suggested passage: Luke 5 1-11.) Read the passage twice, and make a note of what stands out each time. When you are familiar with the narrative, place yourself in the scene, either as a spectator or one of the main characters. Apply your senses to the scene. Is it night or day? Is the air warm or cold, still or windy? Is the sun shining brightly or is it cloudy? What is the ground like underfoot? Are you in the middle of a crowd or on the edge? What are you wearing? What smells reach your nose, and what sounds reach your ears?

As you place yourself within the scene, Jesus approaches you. What does he have to say to you? And what do you need to say to him? Take time to stay in the scene and listen to what is being said. Thank God for the opportunity to meet Him, and for any words He may have given you on this occasion.

Breath prayers

These are short prayers that can be said comfortably in one breath. The most famous of these short prayers is "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner", based on the prayer of the tax-collector in Jesus' parable recorded in Luke 18. Richard Foster shows us how to construct breath prayers for ourselves.

First, find a quiet place at a time when you will not be interrupted. After a few moments, allow God to call you by name. Next, answer the question "What do you want?" as simply and directly as you can with a word (eg "Peace") or a phrase (eg "to know your love"). Then, connect your prayer with your most comfortable form of address for God. Lastly, write down your prayer ("Father, let me know your love").

Keep using the prayer whenever you find your thoughts jostling in your head. Over the first few days you may find that the form of the prayer changes slightly as God adjusts it ("Father, let me *feel* your love": your head knowledge of God's love is fine, but He knows that your heart needs to catch up). Keep using the prayer until God makes it clear that the work He intended by it has been accomplished. Richard Foster comments on an 8 month-old prayer that, at the time of writing, was showing no signs of ceasing to be effective for him.

Although this prayer may be conceived at a quiet time, it is ideally suited to being used when you are out walking or running. David Ausburger describes a similar exercise ("Peditation") in his book *Dissident Discipleship*: Helen Paynter is a fan.

For more exercises, read Chapter 2 of *Celebration of Discipline*. Joyce Huggett's *Listening to God* is also a very helpful book, describing the author's journey in contemplation and meditation.

Next month: Studying God's Word. Contributions to Nicola (nicola.tzfeather@googlemail.com) by April 16th 2010, please.