

Praying with Scripture

Tradition is large. It is crammed with a wonderful range of pictures of God – as seamstress sewing clothes for Adam and Eve, as architect designing the ark and the temple, as a dinner party host, as wind, as fire and rock and water. We need such storehouses of images to elaborate our own views...

~ Ann and Barry Ulanov, *The Healing Imagination* ~

A bigger story meets our own

In a society of high stimulation, moving images and rapid change, how can we pray in a way that also brings colour, creativity, surprise and is an anchor in our lives? I have found that 'imaginative prayer' opens doors to new experiences of myself and of God. When I think prayer 'should' be quiet and holy but my being yearns for a more obvious life-impacting connection, praying imaginatively with Scripture has brought something visceral or yet deeply intimate.

Let's take Jacob, for example (Genesis 32:22–32), locked in a battle with an angel? With God? With himself? I've prayed with this story many times when I've felt tossed about by life, wrestling with myself or others. I've found companionship with Jacob who 'wins' – in terms of keeping his life – but who is wounded. I have come through alive, but changed forever, and bearing the scars. And like Jacob I have been touched by God.

Blind Bartimaeus (Mark 10:46–52) calls on Jesus passing by and, in imagination, I have heard Jesus' same question to Bartimaeus echoing in my own life:

'What do you want me to do for you?' Surely Bartimaeus' answer was obvious, with his unseeing eyes? But as I imagined this character from long ago, I have discovered some unexpected responses of my own. What is it that I really want of God?

And Mary, oh Mary, the womanly ally and motherly friend I have come to know through imaginative prayer using various passages: a small cosy stone house, baking bread in the kitchen, Jesus popping in occasionally, a stone window seat and a carpenter's rocking chair, places I return to talk and find comfort 'when all else fails' (and why not sooner?). I know this place well. Scripture is full of symbol and metaphor: Jesus' sermons, parables and life stories often bring unexpected images – a camel through the eye of a needle, pigs flinging themselves over a cliff, a bleeding woman. Imagination, like our senses, is a gift from God. Used reflectively with discernment, it leads us to insight and ongoing revelation of self and of God.

St Ignatius, in particular, encouraged the use of imagination in his 16th-century *Spiritual Exercises*, a series of prayerful and deepening meditations around the life of Christ. Rediscovered by today's spiritual seekers and pilgrims, you can 'Pray Now' using this same imaginative method in simple steps:

I Choose a passage – narrative stories from the Gospels are often a good place to begin.

I Find a comfortable yet attentive place and allow yourself to simply arrive. I often light a candle and take a couple of slower breaths, beginning to touch in to wherever I find myself on the inside and to the sense of 'the more than'.

I Take a few moments to consider what you hope for as

you begin this prayer. Ask God for what you most desire in your heart: what is the gift you are seeking today?

I Read the passage several times until you are familiar with the story. Don't try to make anything happen, but just listen to the story as a content child might listen at bedtime.

I Then slowly allow the scene to arise within you, taking your time. What initial image comes to mind? What do you see? Is it hot or raining? What do you smell, touch, hear? Use all your senses to 'see' the story.

I Who is there? And begin to notice where you are in the story: one of the characters, or someone looking on. Which part of the story do you identify with or see yourself in? Let the story unfold, without consciously directing it. Don't worry if things surprise you, or if the story develops a little differently from what you expect; God can come to us in many ways.

I What happens next? Is Jesus there? What do you find yourself saying or doing? How are you feeling as you are part of all this? Stay with the story as long you want to, waiting as it evolves.

In my own praying, I sometimes find surprising things strike me, and sometimes not much at all. But in either case, often a shift comes as I close the imaginative prayer and speak with God about what has just happened – or not happened! The more honest I am with God, the freer I feel, and then a new awareness may come; I am met by God - and Jesus' story meets my own.

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