



ST AUGUSTINE'S
COLLEGE OF THEOLOGY

Turning Lockdown into a Retreat week 5

Caring for the imagination

The Bible as a book of imagination and memory: When we allow the Scriptures into our memories, giving them our time and attention, they begin to feed our imaginations. Then we might also begin to see them everywhere in nature and art around us. If you find something alien or dispiriting in a text, argue with it. Treat this text wildly on occasion if you have to: like Meister Eckhart when he reads the story of Jesus at the house of Mary and Martha. He commends *Martha's* mature capacity to live "on the rim of eternity", standing "experienced in her ground" as she prepares the food while voicing her concern to Jesus *for* Mary, whom she worries has got herself stuck seeking a spiritual fix at Jesus's feet. According to Eckhart's extraordinary yet powerful reading, Jesus reassures Martha: one day Mary will be as mature as she, Martha, is now. To adopt a tennis metaphor avoid a focus on always patting our "interpretative returns" safely back up the centre of the court. There will be times when we may need to seek instead the outside edge of the sideline. And it can be worth seeking out everywhere in the text of Scripture the *gaps*: the places where the surface sheen of a text that we think we already know displays a blip or a blemish, a word or phrase that seems discordant or out of place, unexplained, perhaps inadvertent. The fragment that doesn't seem to fit; the crack that lets the divine light in. Here, seedlings of imaginative possibility burst through the tarmac of what was starting to seem a dully uniform and ideological text. Reading the Bible draws upon our imagination and practical love, thoughtfulness and feeling, acquired across the whole of life. Reading and living are mutual. *Barnabas Palfrey*

Imagination and vision: Our imagination left to itself can sometimes fill our mind with fear and anxiety. And yet, with the Spirit's help our imagination can lead us into life-giving vision that enables us to act with purpose and with love. We call this vision 'hope' – a gift of the Spirit. Hope is not wishful thinking. Wishful thinking wants to escape reality. Hope faces the muddle of how things are *and* sees possibilities. The obstacles and difficulties are real – yet God is in this place, working creatively to make all things new.

- Look with God at your life as it is today.
- If fears and anxieties about the present or the future arise, acknowledge them and then release them to God who stands with you in this place
- Imagine the Spirit moving over this chaos and darkness, as at the dawn of creation.

- What is God waking into life within you?
- What larger picture of your future does God begin to give you a glimpse of?
- What seeds of hope have you seen within this time of lockdown? What might they become?
- And what of our life together – in our neighbourhoods, our churches, and our common home in this world?
- What new vision of our shared life is forming?
- What might be your part in this?

In praying for vision don't try too hard as if everything depended on you. Instead, relax, be attentive and receptive, trusting that the Spirit will work through your openness. It may not happen in your formal time of prayer. The time will arise – often when we are engaged in the ordinary tasks of life – when vision will come.

Praying the Bible using the imagination

This is a way of prayer that uses the imagination to enter into a Gospel passage and allow it to interact with the place where we are

- Choose a Gospel passage that describes an event in Jesus' life.
- Make yourself at home in the presence of God. You may find it helps to spend a few minutes stilling yourself down, giving your attention to what you can hear around you, or becoming aware of the rhythm of your breathing.
- Bring to God what it is you are seeking today, for example a deeper awareness of his presence, guidance in a decision you are making, or greater freedom within you to be able to let go to God.
- Read the passage through a couple of times slowly and reflectively.
- Put the Bible down, and in your imagination set the scene described in the passage. The setting might be similar to that described in the passage, or you may find the setting changes to one that connects in some way with your past / present experience.
- Use all your senses – what can you see, hear, feel, taste, or smell?
- Now put yourself into the story. Who are you? A central character or someone observing from the sidelines?
- Let the scene unfold in its own way, even if it develops in a way that is different from that described. The story may stick closely to what you read in the gospel or seem to

take on a life of its own; rather than fight this, trust that it's OK, and that this is the story that it is important for you to attend to today.

- You may find yourself talking to Jesus as the story unfolds or that Jesus speaks to you. Or you may engage with another person in the story.
- Be aware of your own feelings and responses as you pray through the passage.
- When you have finished, look back over the prayer. Remember how you reacted and felt at different points. What seems to you significant? Did anything surprise you? Ponder what this might be saying to you, asking God to help you see and understand.
- Spend some time in conversation with God sharing your thoughts, feelings and needs.
- *You may find it helpful to repeat the prayer at another time, returning to those points where you were conscious of being moved in some way.*

Some Bible passages for this week:

Isaiah 43.14-21; Isaiah 58.6-12; Ezekiel 47.1-12; Isaiah 35; Luke 10.38-42; Luke 24. 13-35

When I think no thing is like any other thing
I become speechless, cold, my body turns silver
and water runs off me. There I am
ten feet from myself, possessor of nothing,
uncomprehending of even the simplest particle of dust.
But when I say, You are like
a swamp animal during an eclipse,
I am happy, full of wisdom, loved by children
and old men alike. I am sorry if this confuses you.
During an eclipse the swamp animal
acts as though day were night,
drinking when he should be sleeping, etc.
This is why men stay up all night
writing to you. ['Entries', James Tate]