

Adventures in Prayer

Prayer of contemplation

Contemplation is a particular way of prayer – a deliberate turning aside from the rush of life and a turning towards God the source of life and being. A way of prayer that is receptive, in one sense passive – though we come to this place by deliberate active choice. We put aside thinking, talking and asking and instead come to God with the simple desire to be present and to be open. We choose for this time to abide in the presence of God.

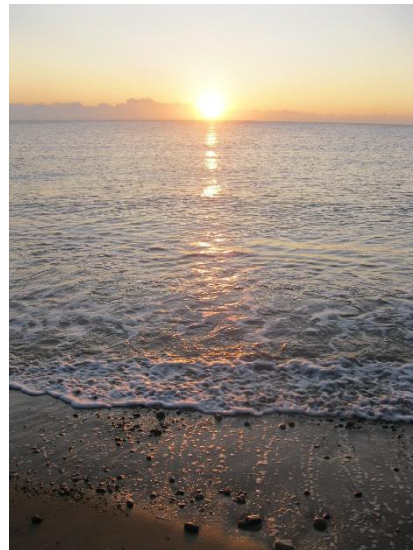
Or putting it another way, abiding in the present – for the present, the here and now moment, is where God is. For us who live in a time bound world it is hard to be present – we are haunted by the past and worried and harried sometimes by the future – we carry this baggage with us most of the time, and so often feel burdened.

Contemplation is a way of stepping out of the normal course of time, beyond the rush and drive of our moment by moment existence, into the eternity that is God.

Contemplation is nothing but a hidden, peaceful, loving inflow of God.

If it is given room, it will inflame the spirit with love.

[John of the Cross: *Dark Night*



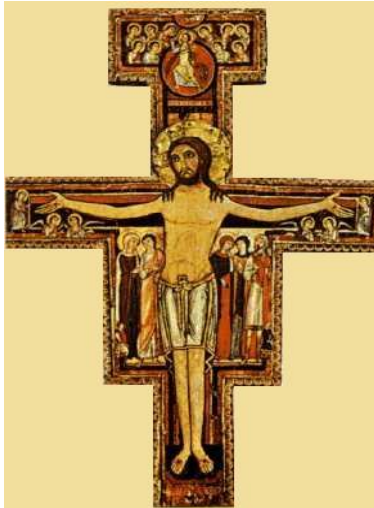
Sense:

Spend 5 minutes each day being alive to God in all things by staying in your senses. Listen to the early morning call of a blackbird. Look at the changing patterns of light and shadow along a city street. Savour the taste of an orange. Touch the smoothness of a wave-worn pebble. Smell the rain after a long dry spell.

To see a World in a Grain of Sand
And a Heaven in a Wild Flower,
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand



And Eternity in an hour.
William Blake: *Auguries of Innocence*
Gazing on God:
praying with icons and religious art



Gaze: Choose a visual focus point for your prayer; this could be a cross or an icon, or a painting – something that for you, expresses a dimension of who God is for you.

To gaze is to fix one's attention in one place, but in a relaxed way. Rest your eyes on what you see, and let it still you. Though your eyes and thoughts may be drawn elsewhere, bring them back to the picture or image that is the focus of your prayer.

Consider: As you gaze, consider what is before you. What strikes you in what you see? What do you glimpse of God through it? Are there any ways you sense some challenge or invitation for you? You may find you don't so much have a thinking response as a feeling response: what are you feeling – can you give it a name? You may find there are things you want to say to God, or that you sense God in some way speaking to you.

Contemplate: Remain gazing attentively. Relax into the picture. Rather than being active in your observation and thinking by trying to identify new insights, look to be present to what you have already thought or felt and let God, if God chooses, take you more deeply into these.

This is a time of simply being there, present to God as God is present to you.

The greatest radiance anyone can have on earth
is truth in works of justice in imitation of the Son.
For he who gazes on what he desires,
becomes ardently enkindled,
so that his heart within him begins to beat slowly
because of the sweet burden of Love.
And through perseverance in this holy life of contemplation,
wherein he continually gazes on God,
he is drawn within God.

[Hadewijch]

Developing contemplative awareness

*Morning by morning he wakens – wakens my ear,
to listen as those who are taught [Isaiah 50.4]*

When we contemplate, we allow ourselves to be absorbed in the other. We lose ourselves in listening to music, gazing at a painting, watching a child at play or being held in wonder at the changing colours of the sky at sunset. For that moment we begin to let go of our own concerns, agendas and needs and become open to receive what the 'other' is and what the other might gift us with. What we experience has an impact on us – not least at the level of our emotions – and this experience invites a response. A dialogue takes place at a depth that goes beyond the surface level we move on for much of the time.

Contrast this with when we are self-absorbed. We are too busy to notice or too anxious to be relaxed enough to receive. We tend to see the one in front of us through the narrow lens of what we need them to be; we miss who they really are. Openness to the Spirit flows from a contemplative stance to life: we become open to who the Other is, what the Other does, what the Other says and how this Other invites us to respond. This 'Other' is God, who is expressed in all that is.

Sometimes, when I least expect it,
someone suddenly kneels down in the corner of my being.
when I am out walking, or just talking to people.
and that someone, the one who kneels down, is myself.
[Etty Hillesum: *An Interrupted Life*]



'Old Man's Beard' on railings outside Canterbury East station.