

# IMAGINATION AND PRAYER

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**I**N RECENT YEARS many people, seeking to deepen or expand their experience of prayer, have found great help in what is called gospel contemplation. Stated very simply, this consists in taking a scene from the gospels, and 'putting oneself in the midst of the action', or making it present through the use of the imagination. Perhaps the easiest way to explain how gospel or imaginative contemplation proceeds is to begin by describing the experience of one retreatant, a school teacher, who had never tried this way of praying before. She was asked to use the incident of Peter walking on the water (Mt 14,22-33). When she came to describe this, she said that to start with she had no difficulty in imagining herself in a boat, as she had in fact been sailing as a youngster. She knew what it was like to experience the frustration and fear of fighting against a strong wind and current. This helped her to 'get inside' the scene. She recognized that Jesus was there, and found herself, like Peter, with a strong desire to join him, to be alongside him. However, she also felt unable to get out of the boat. Try as she might, she could not imagine herself doing this 'and so the prayer went wrong at that point'. Why did she feel this? 'Because, up to then I could identify with the actual story in the gospel, but when I could not get out of the boat, it all broke down'. And so, what did she do? 'I said to Jesus, "I can't get out of this boat"'. And then, 'I felt that Jesus asked why and I had to admit that I was scared. You see', she said, 'I can sail, but I can't swim very well'. Then she felt that Jesus was asking her whether she thought that he would make her do something beyond her capacity. 'Yes, you would . . . you often have'. This experience led the person to spend the remainder of the prayer sitting and talking to Christ about the fact that she did not really trust him because she did not know him well enough.

This example, it seems to me, underlines with great clarity some of the more important elements of the imaginative kind of prayer. Most importantly, the person was fully involved and was not just a spectator observing a picture, as one might contemplate a painting in a gallery. Quite instinctively she found herself identifying with

one of the characters in the gospel scene. And yet she did not *become* Peter, she remained herself. In this sense she did not put herself back in time. Rather, the story became present, and became *her* story. In this case she found it easy to enter the scene by some initially detailed imagination of being in a boat. However, as the story progressed, the degree of pictorial imagination grew less and less. Those with a strong ability to picture details find the notion of seeing the people, or feeling the wind on the face, or smelling the fish in the bottom of the boat very easy indeed. However, this is not a necessary part of imaginative prayer. Pictorial imagination is only one way of imagining. Not all are capable of it, and not all find it necessary. This person, as the story progressed, found that this aspect was less apparent. She 'sensed' that Jesus was asking her something, rather than heard specific words coming from a figure whom she could visualize and describe. This fact is important because some people object to trying imaginative contemplation precisely because they feel unable to imagine pictorially, or because it is unreal. Likewise, for those who do find it possible and helpful, there is the danger of becoming too involved in the trivia which, if used at all, are only a means to an end. That end, of course, is some kind of personal encounter with the Lord which touches the deepest parts of my reality. And that encounter was really present for this woman in that the imaginative representation of a particular scene provoked a realization of something very vital to her relationship with Christ: that she did not trust. Did the prayer go wrong because it ceased to follow the gospel story in literal detail? On the contrary, the gospel was a medium for the revelation of something very important and true about herself. And yet the gospel story was not left behind entirely. It was this specific scene of walking on the water which formed the backdrop to everything else that was valid about the prayer. And the prayer certainly remained within the general parameters of the gospel passage.

Another characteristic of this form of prayer is that it can free the person to allow deep-rooted feelings to emerge which are blocking any further growth. Imaginative contemplation, when it works, takes on a life of its own — and the life is that of the person praying. It therefore serves to bring the gospel into direct contact with the reality of this person's life, and frequently in a challenging way. Such prayer may also help a person come to terms with, and admit to, inner feelings which previously he or she felt were inappropriate before God. 'I should not feel angry'. A more distanced approach to

scripture, where one asks 'What did Jesus say? What did he mean? How does this apply to christian action?' rarely does this. For when one is bringing only reason to the gospels there is a tendency to apply *a priori* limits to what is valid. Thus another retreatant, in praying the calming of the storm in Mark (4,16) was brought face to face both with what she felt about Christ, and how she herself behaved in life. Jesus, lying at the bottom of the boat, was in the way as she rushed around trimming the sails in the midst of the squall. At first she was politely apologetic at bumping into him, but eventually she shouted at him 'What do you think you are doing there? Lolling around when we have to do all the work? Why don't you do something useful?' To which the only reply was 'Who is in charge here anyway?' This brought the person to a halt and led her to reflect that this imaginative experience underlined both her feelings that God was generally uninvolved in her concerns, and that, in fact, she rarely let him act because she did not let go, or relax, either in life or in prayer. A similar realization came to the person who prayed the call of the first disciples in John (1,35-39). When Christ asked him 'What do you seek?' his instinctive response was 'To be with you'. Jesus then invited the person to follow, and set off at a rapid pace which prevented him from keeping up. When he cried 'Why do you have to go so fast?' Christ merely smiled and kept going, up hill and down dale and eventually into a town in whose winding streets the person finally lost sight of Jesus. Final panic set in, but with it the realization that the problem was that he felt that Christ was always too fast for him, and that consequently his life was always a struggle to keep up with impossible demands.

The realization of 'impossible demands' raises the question as to whether all images which emerge from such gospel contemplation are true. If we take the example of someone who felt in prayer that Jesus said to him 'I'm not going to start loving you, until you learn how to love me', it is clear that this is not a truly christian image of God. We all come to prayer with images — of God, of self and of our world — but none of them is perfect and some are radically unhelpful. Does this mean that the feeling just described (that God demands that we merit his love) is *totally* untrue? It is true, surely, in that it is what the person actually feels. Distorted images cannot just be repressed; they can only be refined if exposed, admitted to, and offered to God. But such an image is not from God for, if we follow the sound advice of St Ignatius's 'Rules for discernment', we can see that what produces joy, harmony and growth is the gift of the good

spirit, and that which produces sadness, despair or fragmentation is (to use Ignatius's language) a temptation of the evil spirit.<sup>1</sup>

While the most common approach to imagination in prayer is that of gospel contemplation, it sometimes happens that imagination comes into play in other forms of scripture prayer. Thus I may pray through a slow meditative reading of a passage — what was traditionally called, in monastic spirituality, *lectio divina*.<sup>2</sup> When a phrase or word strikes me I cease reading and allow myself to savour it for a time until it fills my consciousness and I am fully centred on it. Then, when I feel drawn to respond, I may converse with God in a personal way for as long as seems suitable. I may feel drawn in the end to remain still and silent before returning to the slow reading. The original savouring of the word or phrase does not imply reasoning about its meaning, but rather a process of letting it sink in — perhaps by repetition. However, sometimes the imagery of the scripture may find an echo in my own imagination. Once again an example may make this point more clear. One retreatant was using Luke 13 for prayer and was struck very much by the phrase 'I do not know where you come from' (verse 27). Quite spontaneously he found himself, in imagination, ejected into the rain from a party because the host had said 'I don't believe we have met, and this party is only for friends of mine'. The feeling of isolation, and how it can destroy a person, was further reinforced by imagining a discussion with others who had been refused entry, where they spent the time disparaging the host to cover up their own feelings. When the person imagined himself trying to get home by sharing a taxi with another, he found himself turned away yet again with the words 'I don't believe we are going in the same direction'. This imaginative experience helped the man to reach a deep understanding of some kind of self-made hell. He felt drawn to remain with this, in order to let it penetrate more deeply, and then to converse with Christ about the realization that he had been offered so many opportunities to recognize Jesus and to be recognized by him. Yet he had always chosen to remain on the fringe. 'I always come to you in prayer as a gate-crasher to a party, but in fact you always do let me in'. Thus this imaginative experience, provoked by the phrase in Luke's gospel, led the man to deep feelings of repentance, and to a realization of God's mercy and faithfulness which were in no sense merited.

Apart from indicating a further way in which imagination may play a role in prayer, the last example also underlines a general

point: that imagination is not an end in itself. Its value is that it can dispose me for an encounter with the living Christ who speaks directly to my present condition. Once that meeting between Christ and my inner desires or fears or ambiguities has begun, the process of imagining ceases to be important and should not be sustained artificially. In practice the person will be drawn into dialogue, or into silent 'being with' the God whose presence is now consciously felt. The imaginative phase, strictly so-called, may last for most of the period of prayer or be a relatively brief experience as a preface to extended silence. The point is that if I believe that it is God and not myself who controls prayer, I shall feel quite free to allow myself to be led wherever the Spirit wishes.

It now seems possible to attempt a summary of the method of imaginative contemplation in a few words.<sup>3</sup> In my experience it is important for the freedom of this prayer not to have to refer back continually to the gospel text for more information. In other words, I would assume that the person has become familiar with the passage to be used before entering into prayer. The text can then be left aside. In a retreat one normally advises someone to prepare the passage some time before (often the previous evening) by reading it through several times and allowing it to sink in. For some people it is important at this stage to sort out more theoretical questions such as 'What does the text mean here?' in order to prevent this intruding into the prayer itself. Something similar may well suit people who want to use this kind of prayer in daily life. John Veltri and others suggest another more systematic approach as a prelude to the prayer time itself.<sup>4</sup> This consists in reading the passage slowly and meditatively and then stopping to let the events sink in and repeating this until it totally saturates the imagination. Once this has happened the bible may be put aside and the scene be permitted to happen. There should be no attempt to force it, but rather there should be an attentiveness to its developments. As you sink into the scene you may well experience that you lose the sense of yourself as you become more absorbed. The essential thing is to take part in the process of development. It is also important to avoid moralizing, or forcing applications of the passage to your life. Nor should you observe how you are affected by the passage, by asking yourself 'What is happening to me here?' Rather, you should allow yourself to be lost in the story — that is to say, in the people, in the words and in the actions. Your own reactions or 'what happens to you' will be noticeable later as you reflect back on the prayer, or perhaps will

appear more subtly in the effects such prayer has on your ordinary life.

While the prayer of imagination undoubtedly has connections with some of the insights of modern psychology (especially Jung's 'active imagination'), it is worth stressing that it has a long history in christian tradition. The medium through which gospel contemplation has come through to our own times is the *Spiritual Exercises* of Ignatius Loyola.<sup>5</sup> Until serious research into ignatian texts and other sources became more widespread and systematic in modern times, imagination was associated with a rather rigid and dry form of mental prayer or 'meditation' which involved, above all, the reason and will-power and which, it was believed, was the only authentic ignatian prayer. It is now appreciated much more widely that Ignatius did not promote any *one* method of prayer. The Exercises contain at least ten different ones! Further, it is now appreciated that the form of imaginative prayer which Ignatius recommends at the beginning of the Second Week or stage of the Exercises is really a form of contemplative prayer, rather than discursive meditation. This view is reinforced if we bear in mind its origins in the medieval monastic tradition *lectio divina*. In his teaching on prayer Ignatius is thoroughly eclectic and derivative. His originality lay in adapting and simplifying the riches of christian prayer in order to make them accessible beyond the confines of the cloister, and in weaving the various methods into a wider framework, the Exercises, which was conceived of as a context to enable a person to reach such an inner freedom that he or she could respond wholeheartedly to the call of Christ in everyday life.

Ignatius learned the practice of imaginative contemplation from his reading of the *Life of Christ* by Ludolph of Saxony (a fourteenth-century Carthusian), while recovering from the wound he had received at the siege of Pamplona.<sup>6</sup> Ludolph gives the essentials of the method in his prologue where he recommends the reader to look at the events of the life of Christ as if they were actually taking place. He himself inherited the tradition from the *Meditations on the life of Christ* which were extremely popular in the fourteenth century, and while not by Bonaventure as originally supposed, reflected the franciscan tradition of devotion to the human person of Christ. The origins of this form of prayer are not clear, but aspects of it are present in the writings of Anselm and Aelred of Rievaulx. Thus the tradition seems to have been passed from the Cistercians to the Franciscans and Carthusians. It is also mentioned favourably by

Walter Hilton and Teresa of Avila, who reacted strongly against those directors who suggested that to meditate on the human Christ was a hindrance to deeper prayer.

Some of the reasons why people find the idea of imaginative prayer difficult are really misunderstandings of the whole process. As I have already suggested, gospel contemplation does not depend on one's ability to imagine pictorially. Further, such prayer does not involve the need to control the process, to be logical or to stick firmly to the gospel text exactly as it is. If one is truly involved the process will inevitably 'take on a life of its own'. Is there a danger of sentimentality? Indeed there is, but all forms of prayer have their dangers, and the objection to this kind of prayer often relates to problems about using images at all or about the value of feelings. Certainly our prayer should be free from any straining after emotional reactions that do not arise of themselves. However, many people have been taught to distrust *any* feelings in prayer, and this needs to be corrected. We come to prayer as whole persons, with body, mind and feelings. To exclude, arbitrarily, one or the other part is to risk the danger of an incomplete response. But surely imageless prayer is better prayer? Certainly there are not a few modern writings which give this impression. It is worth reflecting once again that imagination played a significant role in medieval monastic and contemplative tradition. To suggest that praying the gospels gets in the way of reaching out to a God who is beyond all images is to undervalue the 'sacramental' quality of scripture and the christian tradition that the gospels are a privileged context for encountering the living, risen Jesus. To focus on the person of Christ is hardly a side-track from seeking the God who transcends all our concepts and imaginings. For 'It is the Father's will that whoever sees the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life' (Jn 6,40). The way to the Father is in Christ: 'No one can come to the Father except through me. . . . To have seen me is to have seen the Father' (Jn 14,6.9). In talking, therefore, of 'imageless prayer' one has to distinguish carefully between those people who are *drawn* into silence and stillness, and those who merely feel bound to adopt still imageless prayer as a matter of principle. Undoubtedly there is a process of simplification by which people need images or ideas less and less as a stimulus for prayer, but this needs some guidance. However, one also needs to remember that progress in prayer is not a matter of straight lines. The need for imagination or some similar starting point recurs at different times even for profound mystics.

Is imagination 'unreal' however? As far as imagining the gospels are concerned, it is a process of making present to myself what is at the deepest level a mystery. For God, all is eternally 'now', and therefore it follows that I can speak to him as present not merely in the imagination but in reality. Scripture, we should remember, has a symbolic character. That is, the events, parables or miracles recorded are, even if factual, more than *mere* facts. There is an open-ended quality to the gospels which points beyond the level of event to universal significance. By universal I do not mean, of course, that there is *one* meaning, but rather that there is a significance which confronts 'all manner and condition of persons'. The significance is a person, Jesus Christ, who is re-presented through the imaginative process. We are not, therefore, talking about going back in time in prayer, but entering rather into the eternal present. There is a parallel in the 'making present' associated with the Eucharist. The risen Lord, although beyond time, enters our experience at this specific moment, and brings the Easter mystery to life for us, and in us, in the Eucharist. Thus too, in imaginative prayer, the Lord can make the mysteries of his life, death and resurrection present to us in their significance now. Is there a contradiction between confronting Christ now, the Jesus of faith, and going back to the Jesus of history? The fact is that we cannot truly distinguish the one from the other. 'The eternal Christ is not just the product or aftermath of his thirty years at Nazareth, he *is* this history now'.<sup>7</sup> Nor is imagination unreal in psychological terms. Jung's method of 'active imagination', in which he encouraged patients to write down, reflect upon or paint their dreams, was based on the belief that one could bring about a healthy interaction between the conscious individual and his unconscious depths.<sup>8</sup> This leads to an enlargement of consciousness by admitting into it feelings or ideas from the unconscious. It is sometimes a question of activating things, for example knowledge and trust, which we already possess deep down. And as a believer I can see that to reach down into my centre is not merely to confront inner feelings and reactions, but to meet God where he is most certainly to be found. The process of revealing my inner feelings and reactions is vital if my prayer is to deepen and grow. I may not be aware of them, or, rather I may not have been prepared to acknowledge them, and for this reason I am only able to meet God with a part of myself. A great deal more is safely locked away. Imaginative prayer, especially when it involves a confrontation with the gospels, frequently serves to bring these feelings to the surface in a creative way.

The question of how gospel contemplation, or prayer with scripture in general, relates to the insights of contemporary biblical scholarship is a complex one.<sup>9</sup> I can only hope to make some very general remarks here. First, an important guiding principle is that it is *not* a question of asking whether we can reach the purely historical Jesus, because that would be to raise problems of its own about relating such a circumscribed experience to the present. The gospel texts are the distillation of a particular writer's experience of the risen Christ, challenging him through the various traditions about the Jesus of history. Thus the value of gospel prayer is not the historicity of particular events in the gospels, but the experience of the risen Jesus acting through those traditions on the person praying. Access to Jesus through scripture prayer is always mediated through the perspective of particular people, and this perspective involves many layers of meaning. To reach the historical involves passing through other layers: the evangelist's own insights, and behind these the creativity of the christian communities during a period of oral tradition. Value does not lie merely in the historical level but rather each layer has its own validity and usefulness. We must be aware that sometimes, even with the aid of the most sophisticated exegesis, we cannot pass beyond the first or the second level. Some people think that biblical scholarship is the ally of imaginative gospel prayer precisely because it seeks out the historical, geographical, cultural, religious *factual* elements, which then assist the vividness and realism of the experience. This approach tends to link imagination too narrowly to the historical. Are we to select only those parts of the gospel where something is written about the supposed historical context (which is not always the case), or, more narrowly, where what is said is thought certainly to be accurate? We should not forget that imagination is a *creative*, not a 'scientific' faculty. The value of modern scholarship to imaginative prayer is rather in the fact of a creative mediation by the early christian community of traditions about Jesus. This freedom to be creative is surely a liberating example for contemplative gospel prayer.

Hopefully, it will now be reasonably clear what are some of the particular values of imaginative prayer. Within the actual prayer experience there is the fact that scripture can become alive, often for the first time. This 'coming alive' often involves the imagination in moving beyond the literal text, while remaining within the general parameters of the gospel passage. Thus it brings the person praying to some very deep personal insights both about self and his or her

relationship with God or the world. Because the process of imagining is not the same as analysing the texts, the result is often strikingly simple. That is to say that, on reflection, one finds that the very varied imaginative experience really centres around one single point. Most important of all, perhaps, is the fact that such prayer *involves* the person — indeed, involvement is of its very essence. And because I am involved personally, the process of putting myself in the scene is equivalent to ‘putting myself on the line’ — that is, exposing myself to the transforming presence of Christ. It is necessarily, therefore, a challenging prayer, in that it disposes me not only to what God wishes to say, but also to his invitation to respond. Such response is not merely a matter of pious sentiments for, because such prayer deals directly with life and experience, it cannot be separated from the way I am involved in the world. Unless a person rigidly excludes his or her social dimension from such prayer, contemplation should help to shape, or at least to illuminate the world within which the person must function.<sup>10</sup> Jesus’s miracles and parables, for example, invite us to change our world view, and gospel contemplation can prove a highly effective way of increasing our awareness of the world as it really is, with its injustices as well as its beauty, and of what God is saying to us in the present about our world. Gospel contemplation, because it brings us face to face with our response to God and with what is preventing a whole-hearted ‘yes’, is inevitably oriented towards collaboration with the divine plan. Thus such prayer, while contemplative, is also necessarily practical. In this context it has often proved of great value in increasing a person’s engagement to the world in the manner of Christ. I am invited to allow the full effects of the gospel mystery to penetrate my whole life and action so that I may be a more effective apostle.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> See Exx 316-17.

<sup>2</sup> See for example Neuman, Matthias: ‘Contemporary spirituality of the monastic *lectio*’, in *Review for Religious* (1977), pp 97-110.

<sup>3</sup> The method of gospel contemplation is described in a number of recent books. See, for example: Veltri, John: *Orientations*, Vol 1 (Guelph, Ontario, 1979), pp 25-27; de Mello, Anthony: *Sādhana, a way to God* (Gujarat/St Louis, 1978), p 73ff; Bryant, Christopher: *The river within* (London, 1980), pp 85-88; Kelsey, Morton: *Transcend* (New York, 1981), pp 101-10.

<sup>4</sup> Veltri, John: *op. cit.*

<sup>5</sup> St Ignatius’s brief description of the method is to be found in the second contemplation of the Second Week, ‘The Nativity’, Exx 110-17.

<sup>6</sup> For the origins of Ignatius's gospel contemplation, see for example de Guibert, Joseph: *The Jesuits: their spiritual doctrine and practice* (St Louis, 1972), ch 4 *passim*, or Walsh, James: 'Application of the senses', in *The Way Supplement*, 27 (Spring 1976), pp 59-68. For a more detailed history of this method of prayer, see Spear, Linda: 'Prayer with images', in *The Way* (July 1973), pp 236-44.

<sup>7</sup> Whelan, Joseph: 'Contemplating Christ', in *The Way* (July 1970), p 194.

<sup>8</sup> For a general introduction to the relationship between Jung's understanding of imagination and christian prayer see: Bryant, Christopher: *Jung and the Christian way* (London, 1983), and Kelsey, Morton: *The other side of silence* (New York, 1976).

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, Stanley, David: 'Revitalizing our prayer through the gospels', in *The Way Supplement*, 19 (Summer 1973), pp 3-12 and the subsequent discussion in a pamphlet of the same name which appeared in the series *Program to adapt the Spiritual Exercises* (Jersey City, 1973). Also Donovan, Margot: 'Contemplating Christ risen', in *The Way Supplement*, 46 (Spring 1983), pp 78-96.

<sup>10</sup> See for example, Wickham, John: 'Ignatian contemplation today', in *The Way Supplement*, 34 (Autumn 1978), pp 35-44.