

IMAGES THAT LEAD TO PRAYER

Walter Fabri

Praying with a Scripture Text

YOU WOULD LIKE TO PRAY, so you make up your mind where and for how long you are going to pray. First, you tune into the One you want to meet in prayer: you adopt a good body posture, and you gather all your physical and mental capacities to focus on your conversation with the Lord, how to speak, listen, pray. Anything which distracts will be kept at bay.

You have chosen your text in advance. This will first be read several times, once preferably out loud. During the reading, you emphasize some words and let them acquire focus. The words become stepping stones to get you to Our Lord. They point the way, clarify who he is, reveal Jesus in action.

You pause over words to savour them, taste them inwardly. Words are themselves invitations to penetrate further into clarity: one word leads to an insight. The person praying approaches his or her Lord. Or rather: the Lord approaches the one praying through words and images. The words and the circumstances in which they were spoken help to establish contact between God and the one praying. The scripture text gives rise to images: Jesus with his disciples, the persons who feature in gospel passages, historical characters named in the Old Testament. Anyone who has made the Spiritual Exercises recognises these suggestions as coming from Ignatius.

All that Surrounds Us

However, passages from scripture are not the only source of images. In fact, everything that surrounds us can serve as a point of departure, an 'image' that leads to prayer. A newspaper may offer images for prayer: shocking cries of misery, the knocking at the gate of whoever needs help;

The Way, 56/1 (January 2017), 57–62

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consoling images too: young people helping children with their homework, nurses on a mission abroad. Publications, books, magazines can be pointers to arrive at silence, listening, conversation and prayer.

Nature is an inexhaustible treasure-chest of occasions for prayer: is there a place which better invites us to feel the mystery of our own existence? It may suffice to observe a starry sky at night. Attentive observation of the progress of seasons is a constantly recurring source of wonder, of participation in life—of gratitude, too, for the great organic whole in which we are allowed to live as a human beings.

Praying with Art

What is relevant for praying with scripture texts is also relevant for praying with art. You would like to pray, so you decide to remain with Our Lord or to come closer to him using images or sounds. First of all, you select a work of art and, to make things easy, you begin with religious forms of art: representations of gospel passages, Jesus in action in the midst of disciples and listeners, biblical scenes in which precursors of the gospel occur. This is possible, but not indispensable: so-called abstract works can also contribute to prayer.

Praying in an Art Gallery

That which holds true for praying with scripture texts also holds true for praying in a gallery. Do you want to pray? Do you wish to remain with Our Lord or to come closer to him using the 'images' that you will see?

You choose a place to pray in the gallery. Walk through all the rooms on arrival. One work of art will appeal to you more than another; one is more expressive than the other. Choose. Decide: I will use *this* work of art to pray. Place yourself in front of it; if there is a bench in the room, use it. Do you have a stool with you? Use that to adopt a reverential posture and simultaneously a posture which you can maintain for a considerable while. You may like to just sit on the gallery floor.

Once you have decided to incorporate this sculpture or this painting into your prayer, focus your attention on it. Let yourself be distracted as little as possible by other visitors or by other objects in the room. First take time to look globally: what do I see? What is the subject? Who or what is depicted? Is it a portrait, a landscape? Are persons, animals or objects in it? Who or what is central in the piece? What is happening? Is there any action? What does the piece tell me? Do I see any possible connections to the life of Jesus, or not?

'Through the Little Gap between Your Fingers'

My mother always said: 'My boy, in order to see anything well you have to look through the little gap between your fingers'. She was right. If you look through the little gap between your fingers, you focus all your attention on to a small area. You concentrate your abilities of observation on to a small surface. In this way, certain details will strike you, your attention will be roused by something which escaped your notice previously.

A painting, a sculpture, a group of sculptures can be approached in the same way as a fragment of the Bible. As an example: come and join me in the Museum of Fine Arts in the Citadelpark in Ghent. In the round upper corridor, there is Constantin Meunier's sculpture *The Prodigal Son*. It is cast in bronze: a seated father and a son who leans on him. It is almost life-size. You can look at it from three angles. A first key to praying with such a work of art is: take time for it. Take plenty of time. Look at the work from different viewpoints: high, low, left, right, far, close. Go and sit close by. Soon, many things will stand out to you. First, their posture. The father sits. This gives him a tranquil dignity. He has taken the son's head into his hands. The son's head leads to the father's eyes: loving eyes, full of sorrow. His face is turned towards the son, close by. The son himself almost lies in the father's arms, with his right arm on the father's shoulder as a support, giving himself wholly, without fear, to his father's invitation. To judge from the boy's clothes, he has suffered, has known poverty, has ended up in misery. Those who look at Meunier's group sculpture will understand much better why the father will cover his son with such abundant



The Prodigal Son, by Constantin Meunier, 1892

generosity: new clothing, a ring, sandals. They will also understand better the party that will follow. The father's face says why: it betrays no reproach at all. The fearful waiting is over. The face speaks of reunion, of love, of desire for life.

How can the prayer continue further? You can get under the skin of both men: what does the father feel? What does he say to his son? How does he see the future? Imagine the son. What was going on in him before his departure from being a keeper of pigs? What was he feeling during his journey? What is happening to him now that his father receives him in this way? What does he say, or stammer?

Figurative or Abstract?

Can only figurative work be used in prayer? No, certainly not. Abstract painters and abstract paintings can point us to our Lord. Some examples: the Tate Modern in London has in one of its rooms a bronze bar welded on to a metal ground plate. When one looks attentively, one notices that this bar has some imprints on its sides, as if the sculptor had pinched it with his thumb. One can wonder: do I allow myself to be shaped by our Lord? Do I say: *No, don't touch me! I am made of metal?* Or the wish can be uttered: *Form me, mould me.*

Several years ago, Anthony Caro exhibited his work on the lawns of Middelheim in Antwerp. He laid down heavy, brightly painted metal H-, L- and I-shapes on the grass. A wandering visitor might well have wondered about the possible reason for this arrangement. Later, the memory would remain with him or her.

Elsewhere, in a video work, a big lime-tree can be seen with a house in the far background. Seemingly nothing is happening, until your eye discovers how the outer leaves of the tree gently wave in the wind. Again, in a work by Bill Viola, from his Quintet series of videos, five figures—four men and one woman—look at something, someone, that cannot be seen. All sorts of feelings can be read from their faces: sadness, surprise, pain, rejection, pity.

You arrive in another room in Tate Modern and see an almost wall-sized painting: *Eve*, by Barnett Newman. It is a big red canvas, bordered on the right-hand side by a dark purple line. At first the work irritates: it is uniform red, big and monotonous. But after a while, associations



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St Pancras Station, London

appear: red, blood, love, struggle, spirit. A demarcated domain or a battlefield. Could this be my life? Am I alone in this battle? After some time looking at it, the line on the side is noticed, the purple line. Am I then not alone after all? Perhaps a conversation starts from this discovery. This kind of work of art can provide a certainty: I am not alone in life; I am not alone facing issues. There is always Someone on the sideline, supporting me, wherever I am and wherever I go.

Beyond the Gallery

After the gallery visit, you go home. While at the station, your eye is caught by the forms supporting the glass roof: Caro in your own town! You see the people waiting on the next platform. How do they look, what occupies them, what worries them, what makes them sad or joyful? The trees outside wave in the light breeze. Your eye catches a wheelchair-user who struggles to get along the footpath. Strangers with luggage move slowly, inaudibly past. You see them. They touch you.

Prayer in a gallery can sharpen your awareness. It helps you to look; it practises close attention, involvement. It brings that which is other,

the Other, into your world, into your daily rhythm. There are more connections, more openness: there is a break in your little circle.

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