

Expressing a doubt in this way is often a first step to reaching a deeper, and more mature layer of trust that may lie underneath it – like scraping away the loose sand to reveal the solid rock below. Or it may be a way of clearing your mind of issues that seem to be clouding your vision but are in fact not important to your deeper quest for God. No-one can predict where prayer that is personal encounter with God may lead. But we can *trust*. The journey of prayer is a journey of trust, and trust will lead to discovery.



A very helpful book for exploring this approach to prayer is:
Too Deep for Words – Rediscovering Lectio Divina by Thelma Hall (Paulist Press, 1988)

16. JUST IMAGINE . . .

Meditating the Gospels imaginatively

Imagination and prayer? Surely they go together like oil and water! This might well be your first reaction to the suggestion that imagination has any place in a Christian's life of prayer. And your second reaction might be: 'Anyway, I don't have any imagination.'

Let's deal with the second objection first. Have you ever waved goodbye to a loved one at a railway station – perhaps seen your son or daughter off to college, or taken leave of your grandchildren after a half-term holiday or taken a friend to the airport – and then, for days afterwards perhaps, found yourself wondering what they would be doing right now, and imagining their new surroundings? Or have you ever come home from a particularly memorable holiday, and, after your return, kept thinking back to the place and the people you had come to love, and imagining what you might be doing if you were there again?

If you can answer 'Yes' to any of these suggestions, then, at the very least, you cannot claim not to have any imagination. And, more than that, you know how to use it to *re-connect* yourself to people and places that you have loved but that are at present out of physical reach.

And if you still think you don't have any imagination, just shut your eyes for a moment and think of the sound of a piece of chalk scratching across a classroom blackboard. Did you find yourself wincing inwardly? Did your memory fly back briefly to your schooldays? Or, more recently, perhaps, can you bring to mind the sickening thud of two cars in collision? If so, what feelings does that memory evoke in you?

Rarely, if ever, does a person really have 'no imagination'. And we use our imaginations in all kinds of ways, that we are probably unaware of. For now let us just go back to that kind of imagining that we might do after a memorable holiday – the kind of imagining that re-connects us to people and places we have come to love . . .

Because this kind of imagining can become a gateway to prayer! If we can connect ourselves inwardly to other people and places, we can use the

same approach to become 'connected' in a special, and conscious, way to Jesus and to his earthly living, dying and rising. Jesus the man, who lived in Palestine two thousand years ago, is physically 'out of reach'. But our imaginations, used alongside the Gospels, can draw us into a personal encounter with as much power to change and transform us, as it did for the friends who accompanied the human Jesus all those centuries ago.

The only way to test this out is to try it for yourself. If you find it helpful, it may become a powerful way of prayer for you. But, like every other approach, it is only one way to pray, and not *the* way.

Where two worlds meet

It would all be so different, so much simpler, if we could have been there when Jesus lived on earth. We began our venture into ways of praying the Word with these thoughts (in Chapter 13). And we recalled that Jesus is *present* (not past or future) to us. Imaginative prayer takes hold of both these facts:

- It is amazingly powerful to be present to the Lord in the events of the Gospels, and
- He is present to us where we are in our daily lives.

Your imagination can become the place where these two worlds meet: the world of Gospel reality and the world of your daily life.

All you need to do to begin to pray in this way is to choose a Gospel story that especially appeals to you (one of the healing miracles for example). There is no need to agonise over which passage to choose. God will speak to your heart, whichever passage you choose. Begin, as always, by asking God to be your guide and to give you the gift of prayer, and trust that whatever your imagination brings up will be enlightened by the gift of the Holy Spirit. Now simply relax, maybe close your eyes or focus on some steady object such as a candle or a flower, and let yourself just imagine what the scene is like.

This is a very passive kind of exercise. Try not to let yourself be seduced into the need for effort. This isn't a test of your powers of descriptive writing or painting. It is simply the completely passive state of *letting yourself notice the pictures in your mind*. The scene that may suggest itself to you may appear to have nothing remotely to do with the Palestine of 2000

years ago. This doesn't matter. What matters is what your unconscious mind is offering up for your attention. Just notice the scene, without attempting to 'stage manage' it.

You may like to use some of these questions as a framework for your exploration of the scene you have chosen:

- What can you see, hear, smell, taste, feel?
- What is the weather like? Warm, cold, windy, peaceful, wet, dry?
- What seems to be happening in the scene? Who is there? Anyone you recognise?
- What kind of 'atmosphere' does the scene suggest? Inviting, threatening, vibrant, solemn?
- Does any particular part of the scene attract your attention more than the remainder?

Entering the action

So far you have 'set the scene'. Whatever is there has arrived via your own imagination, under the guidance of God, in whom your prayer is firmly rooted.

You might compare this process with the way you look at the opening scene of a play. The curtain rises, and a scene is revealed in which the action will begin to happen. In the theatre, or the cinema, you know nothing, as yet, of how that action will work itself out, or what the characters will be like. And this is how it is, too, at the beginning of your imaginative prayer. You have read the script, certainly, and you are perhaps even over-familiar with the events of the Gospel passage you have chosen, but what about *your* part in it? Powerful drama has the effect of drawing the audience into its own life, and of *changing* the way they see and feel things in the future. And as Christians we believe that the Gospel is the most powerful drama there is. Will it stay on the pages of your Bible, or will you risk entering the action?

To enter into the Gospel in your prayer is indeed a leap of faith, because, however familiar you may be with the stories on which you are focusing your prayer, you cannot begin to predict what will happen when you get up from your comfortable front stall seat in that 'theatre', and walk onto the stage. Then the whole perspective changes. Suddenly you have a role

in the drama. Simply by being there, you have become part of the action. You have stepped into the *present moment* of the drama, and you have surrendered the security of knowing the beginning, middle and end of it. You are in the middle of it yourself, and it is happening around you.

When you reach this stage of your imaginative prayer, you might find this kind of question helpful:

- Where do you find yourself? Perhaps you are one of the crowd, or one of the disciples? Perhaps you feel like an outsider looking in, or perhaps you identify with the person being healed or challenged, or invited into a new relationship with Jesus? Don't make any judgements, or try to force yourself to be where you think you *ought* to be. The power of this kind of prayer is in being where you really find yourself, and letting the Gospel light shine on that place.
- How are you feeling about what is happening in your scene? Disturbed? Attracted? Curious? Afraid? Eager?
- Do you feel drawn to speak with anyone there? What do you feel you want to say? What do you feel is being said to you? Can you enter into a conversation with Jesus?
- If you noticed, earlier, that one part of the scene drew you more powerfully than any other, let yourself follow that drawing now. In your imagination, go to that part of the scene. Without forcing anything against your inclination, just see what it is in that part of the scene that is attracting you.

If you feel able to do so, end your prayer by entering into a conversation (see Chapter 17) with Jesus, or perhaps with one of the disciples, or with Mary. Just express your feelings about the experience, and let your heart be open to receive whatever God may want to suggest to you. When you are ready, close your prayer in whatever way you find most helpful, and spend a few minutes in reflection (see Chapter 4).

How do I know this is prayer?

We cannot by-pass the question with which this chapter began: Can my own imagination have any valid place in my prayer? Most of us tend to distrust our imagination. We regard it as the stuff of fairy-tales, not to be indulged beyond childhood, when real and serious living takes over. We

suspect it of being only one step short of deception. Our children tell us of some great dream they cherish in their hearts, or of some terror that haunts them, and we dismiss it with the words: 'You're only imagining it.' Or perhaps we confide in a friend some deep desire, only to have it shrugged off with a smiling 'Dream on!' Yet the longer I live, the more I become convinced that my imagination is a God-given gateway to prayer, a place where I meet God in ways that my busy conscious mind cannot interfere with.

When I think of my own relationship with my imagination, I see an ocean, with boats busily plying to and fro, running my life's errands and trading for my bread and butter. How easily I can stay up there on the surface of myself, managing the traffic of my boats and forming alliances with the islands and continents that I can see around me. But if I do ever stop to wonder what is in the depths beneath me I might feel drawn to put on a diving suit and go and have a look. I might find a whole new, undiscovered world down there. There may be sharks, but there will be shoals of exquisitely beautiful fish as well. The imagination is like that underwater world. It can take us below our normal conscious functioning and show us something of the desires we may not even realise we have.

It reminds me of the day when Jesus and Peter were confronted by the tax-man, demanding to know whether they were required to pay the local tax. Jesus sent Peter to catch a fish from the lake and look into its mouth, where he would find the necessary coin to pay the tax for both of them. Imaginative prayer sometimes feels like that for me. I meet the Lord in the Gospel, and he tells me, as it were, to go down into the images I find in the ocean of my own imagination. He invites me to take hold of these images, just as they come, as Peter caught hold of the first fish that swam past. If I look into these images, or into my own imagined reactions to a particular Gospel scene, I will find a 'coin' of their meaning for me. This coin may become the key to a new layer of understanding of myself and of my own, and God's, desire for my onward journey.

Perhaps I might share with you one of the 'coins' I once discovered inside a fish of my imagination's prayer, to illustrate how the Gospel story can connect vividly and fruitfully with our own experience and memory. The scene of this particular prayer was the wedding at Cana (John 2:1-12) ...

I had been to Cana before, and now, as then, I felt oddly out of place

there. I couldn't find the right kind of contact with the party-goers. I suppose I just wasn't in a party mood. It was a hot summer day. Everybody was outside in the field. Most people were sitting at the tables, eating and drinking. I suddenly felt very shy and lonely. I was standing quite close to you and your disciples. It felt a bit safer like that. So I could easily hear what passed between you and your mother. 'They've run out of wine', she said, in a matter-of-fact tone. It seemed obvious to her that you could solve the problem.

You had been enjoying the festivities, and I could see that the unexpected challenge upset you. You were quite sharp with her. It was as though you had come to an abrupt turning point in your life and it had shaken the ground beneath you. It had taken the course of future events out of your control. I felt disturbed by the incident, but I could identify with you in it very strongly. It seemed to reflect a sense of disorientation that I was aware of at the moment in my own life.

Were you reading my thoughts? What made you come over to me in the way you did, I wonder? 'There has been a running out for you, too, hasn't there?' you asked me, quietly, so that no-one else could hear. I nodded, surprised that you should be able to see inside me so clearly. 'Come with me', you said. 'I know the emptiness. I understand the hesitation.' I followed you as you walked, pensively, a little further away from the party crowd. I let you walk ahead. You needed space for yourself, I could see that. Mary walked beside me, in an unobtrusive sort of way. 'Don't worry', she reassured me. 'Just do as he tells you.'

We passed by the six stone water jars. I barely noticed them. The servants were filling them up with water from the nearby well, but it was an everyday scene. No surprises there. You stopped one of the servants and told him to draw off a carafe of water from one of the jars and take it over to the host. I noticed the rich crimson wine running into the carafe. I don't think I had ever seen such a richly coloured wine before, but even then the nature of what had happened didn't really sink in.

You sat down on a boulder at the edge of the field and beckoned me to join you. We sat there together in silence for a while. I closed my eyes against the dazzling sunlight and let my thoughts trickle away

into the grass, like water draining away from an overturned pitcher. Eventually I had emptied myself into the silence that enclosed us. The old had passed painfully away and was gone. I felt drained in every way, and sad for the emptying. Yet there was a cleansing in the empty space. It had been a necessary emptying. What had been there could not have stayed longer. It had been time for birth.

I thought of my own child's birth. I remembered that strange vacuum I had experienced when what I had carried was no longer in me. The sense of a dramatic passage from an old to a new creation. I remembered the complete exhaustion that followed, and I felt something of the same exhaustion there beside you on the rock, in the afternoon heat. I had sweated then, too, and the midwife had moved the fan closer to my forehead. Now a gentle breeze brushed my brow and I knew it had to do with you. You were assisting at a birth, yet not a word was spoken.

And there was another birth, a re-birth of spirit when, during my darkest, bleakest weeks you had suddenly, without reason, warning or deserving, filled me with a new and overwhelming sense of your presence and your love. It had felt like a tiny stream turned overnight into a fast-flowing torrent, bursting its banks and overflowing with the joy of being close to you. The mystery of that unexpected cascade of living water remains your secret, but it filled my six stone jars to the brim, in readiness for whatever transforming action was to come.

My memories returned to the labour ward and slid softly through the first hours of the baby's life. With vivid recollection I experienced again that tingling sensation that signalled that my body was ready to feed its firstborn. I looked up at you, and you were gazing steadily into my face. I heard again your words to the servant: 'Draw off a carafe of water and take it to the guests.' But this time the words thrilled me with the full sense of miracle. With a surge of love I took my daughter in my arms, and with her tiny mouth she drew her first nourishment from me. My drained, exhausted, empty body of yesterday had become a source of life and growth for the newborn. I had done nothing, felt nothing, yet overnight an amazing transformation had occurred, and the life-giving milk flowed out of emptiness.

That had been many years ago now, but there in the sunlit field it

had returned to me as if I were re-living it. I moved closer to you, to thank you, to kneel before you in recognition of who you are. You stroked my bowed head. 'And so it is with the water of your soul', you whispered softly. 'You didn't do anything. You didn't notice anything. But in the silence and the emptiness, your creator was making all things new. At first the transformation remains a secret. The water jar does not know what it contains and the world cannot guess. But the day comes, for you too, when I invite someone to draw from you a carafe of needed refreshment, and the expected water is found to be the finest wine. The miracle is only recognised when the wine is drawn. If it stays in the jar, it might just as well be water, but if it is drawn off and shared, it will bring joy and the fullness of life.'

We walked back across the field together, side by side, in comfortable companionship, and I understood the heart of the feasting and rejoiced in the richness of the promised vintage.

We began by considering the need to 'focus' our hearts towards God in some particular way. The way of imaginative prayer is one way of practising this 'focusing', but it does more than that: it draws together two different, but connected 'stories' – the Gospel story you are imagining, and your own personal story. This has the effect of bringing the two into a single focus, so that the Gospel light, and the light of Jesus' living presence really does shine upon your own lived experience in very specific detail. The results of this focusing may challenge you to the core, but they will also bring you joy, a new depth of friendship with God and a fuller understanding of what it might mean for you to become ever more fully alive in Him.

And how do I know (for example in the prayer encounter I have described), that this was prayer and not just a day-dream? I would suggest these ways of testing your prayer experience and discerning what is of God and what is merely a passing fantasy:

- What comes from God will last, and will bring about real change within you. The 'Cana prayer' is well over six years old now, but I remember it as vividly as if it were yesterday, and it has become part of who I am. It has changed my perspective on things, especially when I am feeling 'drained', and it continues to give me a vision of the power that is

released when we are 'poured out'.

- What comes from God has a peculiar characteristic of weaving itself, seamlessly, into our own very personal experience and our memories. In the 'Cana prayer' you can almost feel the Lord's fingers picking up the threads of my feelings of desolation, and my memories of childbirth, and folding them into his own experience of challenge and hesitation when the wine ran out at Cana. There is a deep consistency, in authentic imaginative prayer, between our own experience and God's self-revelation. There is a kind of oneness between the way he reveals himself in the Gospel narrative and the way he reveals himself through the windows of our memory and the images that arise from our subconscious minds. It can feel almost like reading a parallel text translation of an ancient classic. We read the original text in the pages of the Gospel, and alongside it, intertwined with it, we read our own memories and experience.
- What comes from God will always tend to draw us closer to him and closer to each other, though it may lead us through hard challenges. What comes only from ourselves will tend to focus on ourselves, and therefore lead us further away from God and from each other. An encounter with God leaves us with an awareness of a movement towards life and growth, which self-focused pondering can never yield.

Some questions, then, to ask yourself:

- Has my prayer made any difference to the way I am?
- Is my prayer consistent with what is happening in my life?
- Does my prayer lead me closer to God and to other people, or further away?
- Where is the centre of gravity: in me, or beyond myself in God and in his creation?

If you can answer these questions positively, then you can be assured that your prayer was more than just a flight of fantasy. If there are good fruits, then they can only have come from a sound tree. All you need to do is to give that tree the time and space to grow in your heart, and allow the fruits time to ripen.

All through this chapter we have concentrated mainly on the use of imagination to enter the Gospel scenes. Your imagination can, however, be

used very powerfully on any piece of Scripture, or, indeed, you may find it helpful to pray imaginatively with non-scriptural material. Many people find that a piece of poetry, or a picture can open up unconscious streams within them and lead them into the communion of prayer. Others discover a key to their inner world in fantasy prayer, simply by allowing an image (perhaps of a tree, or a remembered scene) to form freely in their mind and following in prayer wherever it leads them.

And if you are one of those people who remember their dreams you have another rich vein of treasure accessible to you. Notice your dreams, especially what some people call 'big dreams' – the kind of dream that stays with you long after you dreamed it. I personally have often found that dreams like these have helped me to become aware of hitherto unrecognised areas and layers of my being. Such dreams have become a kind of ongoing prayer within me and have continued to release guiding and transforming power.

My light or God's? An exercise in discernment

Prayer brings light. Jesus said he was the 'Light of the world', and this is the Light we seek in prayer. How do we know, when we think that there has been enlightenment in our prayer, that the light is really of God, and not merely our own?

Discernment might be helped by the following guidelines:

- The light that comes from God makes a difference. It is like light from the sun: it generates and sustains life; it keeps us warm; it makes us grow; it provides energy that we can feel, and trust, and use. When we follow it, we *know* that we are being enlivened.
- Our own lights – our intellectual sparks and bright ideas may dazzle, but they will not leave us with this inner warmth and they will not bring about any true growth or change in us. In their effects, our own lights remain cold, and without miracle-powers

My own 'lights', I find, may momentarily illuminate a part of my tangle of experience, but they will fade, as soon as my battery runs low. God's Light enlivens all creation. It sustains us and forms us, even as we grope around in our darkness with our pocket torches.

TAKING IT FURTHER ...

Relax and use whatever method helps you to come to inner stillness. You are sinking 'ten feet down'. You are bringing the dish of your 'telescope' to stillness, to await the gift of prayer

An experiment in imaginative prayer

Try to imagine a scene that happened just a short time before Jesus entered into the final, terrible week of his life. He is visiting friends in Bethany, not far from Jerusalem – Martha, Mary and Lazarus, together with some of his disciples, including Judas. Not long previously he had raised Lazarus from the dead, and this had attracted the attention of the authorities. Lazarus' journey back to life had become the immediate cause of Jesus himself being sentenced to death. Perhaps, as they share this meal together, the four friends are somehow aware of these connections – of the joy at Lazarus' return to life, of the sense of wonder at the power in the hands and the heart of their friend Jesus, and of a vague apprehension, a dull fear of the darkness looming ahead of them, that had not yet shown itself, except as a dim sense of dire threat.

Before you begin your prayer, read through the passage where this scene is described. You may feel drawn to read it through several times, letting



Groping through my own tangles,
or seeing with the Light of the World?

the 'feel' of it sink into you. Read slowly, as if soaking up the atmosphere of the place, and the feelings of the people.

Six days before the Passover, Jesus went to Bethany, where Lazarus was, whom he had raised from the dead. They gave a dinner for him there; Martha waited on them and Lazarus was among those at table. Mary brought in a pound of very costly ointment, pure nard, and with it anointed the feet of Jesus, wiping them with her hair; the house was filled with the scent of the ointment.

Then Judas Iscariot – one of the disciples, the man who was to betray him – said, 'Why was this ointment not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?' He said this, not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he was in charge of the common fund and used to help himself to the contents. So Jesus said, 'Leave her alone; let her keep it for the day of my burial. You have the poor with you always, you will not always have me.'

Meanwhile a large number of Jews heard that he was there and came not only on account of Jesus but also to see Lazarus whom he had raised from the dead. Then the chief priests decided to kill Lazarus as well, since it was on his account that many of the Jews were leaving them and believing in Jesus.

(John 12:1–11)

Imagine the place where this scene is happening. How does the room look, and feel? Notice the details that come to mind – the shape and size of the room, the furniture, windows, views out of those windows

Who is in the room? Where are you?

Take time to notice everything that makes the place how it is: see the colours, listen to the sounds you can hear – the sounds outside the house, and the sounds inside. Notice any scents – perhaps the smell of cooking or the fragrance of flowers. Use all your senses to re-create the scene as feels 'right' for you.

How do you *feel* in that scene – comfortable, peaceful, disturbed? Don't make any judgements or try to work out reasons for your feelings. Just let them be there and become aware of them.

Now turn your attention to the *people* in the scene. What are they doing? Are any conversations taking place? How is the underlying mood of these conversations? Do you feel drawn to join in any of them? What,

if anything, do you feel you would like to say? Who would you like to have a 'one-to-one' with? Feel free, in your imagination, to go up to that person and express whatever it is that you would like to say or ask. Do you feel drawn to speak to Jesus in a personal way? Let this conversation take its course. Speak to him of whatever is in your heart, and listen to his response. Notice the look on his face (if you can) and the tone of his voice. In a significant meeting with a friend, you would be very observant of the 'body language' and the unspoken feelings passing between you. Do the same now with Jesus, if you feel drawn to do so.

You might like to let your imagination roam over one or both of the central events of the scene. Mary comes in to the room carrying a container of precious ointment, to pour over Jesus' feet. Imagine her feelings as she does so. How do you feel? (For example, some people may feel drawn to make their own offering of what is most precious to them; others may feel aloof and distant from the action, or embarrassed or disturbed. Don't judge your reaction – simply notice it.) Judas objects to what he regards as a waste. Listen to his reaction and notice how you feel. Do either of these two incidents pick up any memories in you, reminding you of anything in your own life? Just notice which, if either, draws you in to it. Notice your own role in all of this: maybe as an observer, not involved, or perhaps you find yourself identifying with Mary, Martha, Lazarus, Judas, one of the disciples, or Jesus himself. *Anything* can happen in imagination: don't put up any resistance to whatever floats up into your 'scene', even if you feel that it isn't the 'right' way to respond. There is no right and wrong way in prayer. Whatever is happening in your prayer has something to show you about your relationship with God and his movement in your heart.

After prayer – reflection

This kind of prayer, if you find that you are comfortable with it, can help you to discover a great deal about what is happening between you and God in the depths of your heart. But this will only be helpful if, after a period of prayer, you spend a few minutes *reflecting* on how it was and what seemed to be happening. (See Chapter 4.)

Let's suppose, for example, that you felt quite remote from Mary and her act of anointing, but Judas' words made you 'sit up and take notice'. What

caused that change in your level of attention? Anger with Judas, perhaps, or impatience with Mary, or what? Notice your findings and ponder what they may be showing you – about yourself, or about your circumstances or situation, about any 'agenda' that is important to you right now?

Look back, in your reflection, especially over any 'conversations' you had in your prayer. Just as you might review a conversation with someone that happened at work, or in the family, taking in what was said, how it was said, what the implications were, etc., so too you will find it helpful and revealing to look back at any prayer conversations, especially if you were able, in your prayer, to speak to Jesus.

Two books that may help you further in your explorations of imaginative prayer are:

Six New Gospels by Margaret Hebblethwaite (Geoffrey Chapman, 1994)

Imagine That! by Marlene Halpin (Brown Roa, Iowa, USA, 1982)

17. BETWEEN FRIENDS

Prayer as conversation

If, in prayer, we are really seeking a personal relationship with God, then surely one way in which such a relationship would grow and be expressed would be in the course of *conversation*. This, after all, is the most obvious way of developing friendship in human relationships. Does the notion of holding a conversation with God make any sense in the life of prayer?

Then again, in our human friendships, our conversations are not limited to a single person. We hold conversations in different ways with different people, and, most importantly, our friendship with one particular person will very often lead us to meet, and enter into relationship with, others. We speak of a *circle of friends*. And we also frequently depict the Trinity as a circle of unbroken relationship between the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Can prayer lead us into the mystery of this communion of friendship?

And can our conversations with God help us to understand more deeply the unbroken networks of communication that hold our human lives together? For example:

- The inner dialogue in which we are continually engaged, between God's creation and our own senses;
- The outer dialogues that we hold with each other, as we seek to understand ourselves and our hearts' desires.

And finally, the difficult, yet unavoidable question: how can we be sure that it is God 'speaking' to our hearts in prayer, and not just some script that we have written for ourselves?

Conversations with God

What might it mean to enter into a conversation with God? Isn't it a bit like trying to use a transistor radio to tune into the meaning of the universe? Isn't a conversation with God just a rather inflated way of