



Discover Ignatian Spirituality

Week 4

Imaginative Contemplation

*“Something which has existed since the beginning,
that we have heard,
and we have seen with our own eyes;
that we have watched
and touched with our hands:
the Word, who is life – that is our subject.”*

I John 1:1

It can sometimes be easy to think ‘If only I had been there,’ or ‘The disciples were so lucky to spend time with Jesus’, and then come to the conclusion that we cannot have as close a relationship with Jesus as they did. But we too can ‘hear’, ‘see’ and ‘touch’ when we pray with our imagination, a way of praying that is a key part of Ignatian spirituality, a way of praying that gives us that ‘inner feeling and relish of things’ which Ignatius characterises as truly filling and satisfying the soul.

When we pray with our imaginations, our stories take their place among the ‘many other signs that Jesus worked’ that are not written in the gospels.¹ When we pray with our imaginations, we come into real intimacy with Jesus as we seek to place ourselves as fully as we can within a story from the gospels. We become onlooker-participants in a scene, allowing our imagination full rein to draw us into the encounter described.

Take, for example, the famous story of Jesus and Bartimaeus as told in Mark’s gospel.² In my imagination, I enter the story. I am there. I watch Jesus speaking to this blind man at the side of the road. I feel the hot Mediterranean sun beating down on me. I smell the dust kicked up by passers-by. I feel the itchy clothing I’m wearing, the sweat rolling down my brow, a rumble of hunger. I see the desperation in the blind man’s face and hear the wail of hope in his words. I note the irritation of the disciples. Above all, I watch Jesus – the way he walks, his gestures, the look in his eyes, the expressions on his face. I hear him speak the words recorded in the gospel. I may even go on to imagine other words that he might have spoken and other deeds that he might have performed.

Why did St Ignatius place such importance on imaginative contemplation? Ignatius wanted each one of us to meet Jesus. He wanted me to know Jesus not just as the Jesus of the gospels

¹ cf John 21:25

² Mark 10:46-52

but as *my* Jesus. The point of imaginative prayer is to help me to develop a unique and personal relationship with Jesus. I watch Jesus's face. I listen to the way he speaks. I notice how people respond to him. These details bring me to know Jesus as more than a name or a historical figure in a book. He is a living person. I can then say what the villagers in John's gospel said to the Samaritan woman: "Now we no longer believe because of what you told us. We have come to know him ourselves ..."³ And this knowing leads to loving, leads to following.

For Ignatius the progression was obvious. Knowing Jesus more clearly means that I will love him more dearly; loving him more dearly means that I will want to follow him more nearly.⁴ Imaginative prayer is a unique way of seeing, knowing, experiencing Jesus, teaching me things about Jesus that I may not learn through Scripture study or theological reflection. It allows the person of Jesus to penetrate parts of me that my intellect does not reach. It brings Jesus into my heart. It engages my feelings. It inflames me with ideals of generous service. In George Aschenbrenner's words, "we become whom we contemplate."⁵

To put it another way, God works through the totality of my being. Since God became human in Jesus, this means that God totally and fully values everything that constitutes my humanity, everything that makes me who I am. All of my experiences, my senses, my body, my feelings, my desires, my brokenness, my joys, my miseries, my challenges, my moods, my imaginings, my everything. Imaginative prayer is a powerful way of meeting God in, with and through all of this, the whole of my humanity, and meeting Jesus in his humanity. The imagination becomes a tool to help me know and love God more and more.

In *Spiritual Exercises*, the gospel scenes St Ignatius chooses for imaginative contemplation are mostly of Jesus acting rather than of him teaching or telling parables. Ignatius wants us to see Jesus interacting with others, Jesus making decisions, Jesus moving about, Jesus ministering. He doesn't want us to just to think about Jesus. He wants us to experience him. He wants Jesus to fill our senses. He wants us to meet him.

Different kinds of imagination

Our imaginations work in different ways. Some people have a very strong visual imagination and will be able to imagine a scene as described at the beginning of the session with the example of the blind man, but this is only one of the ways the imagination works. Two others are auditory imagination, through hearing sounds, and kinaesthetic imagination, which uses feelings and an inner sense of what is happening. There is sometimes also an olfactory component involving smells. The important thing is to pray with the imagination you have – not the one you wish you had.

*There were many other things that Jesus did;
if all were written down,
the world itself, I suppose,
would not hold all the books that would have to be written.*

John 21:25

³ John 4:42

⁴ cf Prayer of St Richard of Chichester

⁵ George Aschenbrenner SJ, *Becoming Whom we Contemplate, Way Supplement 52* (Spring 1985) p32

THE PROCESS of IMAGINATIVE CONTEMPLATION

Adapt to what works for you

There is no right or wrong way to do an imaginative contemplation. In the words of one Benedictine writer: “Pray as you can, not as you can’t.”

In other words, trust that the Holy Spirit is guiding you and let your imagination lead. But do make sure to keep your attention focused on Jesus, not on yourself.

One way that works for many people is to read the passage you have chosen three times. The first time, read the passage slowly and attentively, then put your Bible to one side. Now spend a minute or two, probably with your eyes shut, recollecting the scene you’ve just read about. You won’t remember everything, but a few things will have stood out. For some people these may be visual images, for others sounds or smells, for others feelings – the feelings of Jesus, of the person being healed, of the disciples, of the hostile Pharisees. Dwell upon these. Let them come alive in your imagination.

Now take up your Bible again and read the passage a second time. This time focus on the people involved, their responses and feelings. Put your Bible aside again and spend a minute or two recollecting what you noticed on this second reading. You may want to give the scene a setting. It doesn’t have to be an authentic historical setting. You may feel led to set it against a contemporary background, your home or workplace perhaps. Again, let the scene take on its own life in your imagination. What do you see as you look around you in your imagination? What do you smell, hear, feel, taste ...?

Take up your Bible a third time. This time as you read the passage, think about entering the scene as a participant. Who do you identify with in this story? One of the disciples? Someone in the crowd? The person wanting to be healed? Perhaps even Jesus himself? You may start off as one person, then change and take over the role of someone else. Now put your Bible aside for the final time. Enter the scene as the person you want to be, so that what happens in the scene happens to you, what is said in the scene is said to you; so that you see how everyone else reacts and how you yourself react. Allow several minutes for this, the longest phase of the contemplation.

See also:

<https://onlineministries.creighton.edu/CollaborativeMinistry/Imagination/>

Some texts for imaginative contemplation

Mark 5: 24-34

Jesus heals the woman in haemorrhage

Mark 6: 30-44

The feeding of the five thousand

Mark 10: 46-52

The healing of Bartimaeus

Matthew 14: 22-33

Jesus walks on the water and, with him, Peter

John 1: 35-42

The first disciples

John 21: 1-12

Resurrection appearance on the shore of Tiberias