

3. SINKING INTO SILENCE

Ways towards inner stillness

Ten feet down – that magic depth that my friend suggested to me as the place where the water is still – might as well be on another planet for most of us, most of the time. Our lives are tossed about relentlessly by the turbulence of the surface waves. How do we learn to sink just those crucial ‘ten feet’, into the stillness at the centre of ourselves? How might we encourage that deep inner relaxation which is the sign of surrender and openness to whatever God may wish to show us?

Preparing for prayer

Before you begin a time of this kind of relaxed prayerfulness, it is good to stop for a moment and remember what you are about to do. You are approaching God, the Lord of all creation, and asking him for the gift of prayer, through his Holy Spirit. You might find it helpful to use some personal way of marking this moment of humble petition. For example, I have a little pot of scented balm, which I use each day as a kind of ‘anointing’ on my forehead to remind myself that I am asking to come, in prayer, in to the presence of God. This in itself helps to steady me into stillness and reflectiveness. Another helpful way of marking the start of prayer is by lighting a candle and spending a few moments in its light.

There are many ways of relaxing, and you will no doubt have your own favourite method. There is no need to practise complicated techniques or go on any expensive courses! Relaxing is just what it says it is. Find a comfortable place, perhaps a reasonably firm chair. Sit upright, but not rigid, so that your back is straight and your feet are placed firmly on the floor. Rest your hands loosely in your lap or on your knees, whatever feels right for you. You may like to close your eyes, or, if this feels more natural for you, just focus your gaze on some object that will attract your wandering thoughts without distracting you, such as a candle, a flower, a picture or icon or a cross, or something that has personal meaning for you. For

example, I have an open oyster shell, and a special stone that I sometimes use as a focus.

Entering sacred space

In Chapter 2 we looked at a way of discovering a ‘sacred space’ in your imagination by using your memory. Many people find this kind of memory a useful gateway into meditative prayer. I have one friend, for example, who often goes, in prayer, to a particular path in her imagination which leads to a park bench. She ‘sits down’ there and meets Jesus in her own way. Very often she has told me later of her trip to the bench that morning, and what it has revealed to her! Other people go to an imaginary room inside themselves, and close the door (as Jesus himself told us to do when we pray), so as to be alone in their meeting with the Lord.

Another friend, who lives with a boisterous family in the inner city has no space to call her own except the view from the window of her second storey flat. But from that window she can see a particular tree, which accompanies her prayer all through the year, from the cloudy white of blossom time, through all the greens of spring and summer and the yellows and browns of autumn, to the stark, bare winter branches. The tree is often her ‘soul-friend’ when she has no other.

Sacred space may also be discovered in our own experience and our own story. The Celts held certain significant places in creation to be especially sacred. These included wells, springs, boundaries of all kinds, bridges, doorways and causeways. When you reflect on your own life’s journey, do you notice any times that have this kind of significance for you:

- Any times when you have felt yourself to be ‘at the bottom of the well’ but where, in fact, you have discovered living water that has given you a new lease of life?
- Any times when you have felt new energy springing up in you?
- Any times when you have felt you were walking the extremities of experience? Perhaps times of great suffering or intense joy?
- Any times when you have felt you were in transition between two phases of your life, as if crossing a bridge or a causeway towards an unknown future?
- Any times when you have felt you were standing in front of a closed

door, yet which, with hindsight you can see have become gateways to a time of new growth?

Some people find it helpful to take off their shoes on entering what they sense to be the sacred space in which they meet God in a special way.

Any of these may help you to enter into sacred space within yourself. Simply let the memory arise, unhampered, and ask God to consecrate it for you. Let it become the start point for your journey into prayer, and your descent to 'ten feet down'.

Your body – your ally

In all this talk of imagination and memory, we are in danger of forgetting that we are all embodied creatures, and that our physical being is as much a part of our prayer as our thoughts, feelings and memories.

There is one sacred space which is always there for you, wherever and however you live, and that is your own body. Your body can be your friend, your ally and your faithful collaborator in the great adventure of prayer, with just a little, gentle training. The body that feels so full of itches and aches, the brain that is only waiting for a chance to rush off to attend to the day's agenda, and the senses that want to wander off after every sound and smell can actually *help* you to enter prayer. Here are a few ways in which this can happen. You might like to try them out and use any one that appeals to you on a particular day:

- Try tensing all your muscles and then letting them go, one by one, becoming conscious of how each part of you is becoming relaxed and 'letting go'.
- Concentrate your attention on one part of your body – let's say, your little toe. Either stay with that one part for as long as you can, or, if you prefer, gradually move your attention round each part of your body in turn. Become aware of how each part is feeling, any discomfort or other sensation such as the pressure of your shoe, or of the chair against your back.
- Notice your own breathing. Become fully conscious of every breath, as you breathe in and as you breathe out. When you breathe out, let all your surface worries and pre-occupations go, one by one (think of them as you do this, and deliberately surrender them out of your control into

God's). When you breathe in, take into yourself the peace of God. Let the steady rhythm of your breathing calm you and bring you into a natural balance.

- Become aware of your own pulse or heartbeat. As you notice each beat of your heart, reflect that God is holding you in being through every second of your life, for 'in him we live and move and have our being'.
- Use a mantra, or a simple word or phrase that speaks to you in some way, to steady your mind into inner silence. Choose a word like 'Maranatha' – 'Come, Lord Jesus' – and repeat it over and over until it becomes almost like breathing. This is a way of occupying the upper levels of your mind and leaving the deeper reaches of yourself free to be present to the silence of prayer.
- Listen very attentively to the sounds around you. Begin with the noises in the outside world, the traffic, the birds, the neighbours. Then move your attention to your own room. Listen to the humming of the radiator, the gurgling of the pipes, the creaking of the wood. Finally, bring your attention right inside yourself and become aware of the sounds within you, especially your heartbeat.

And inner stillness can, paradoxically, often be found in action. Swimming is an excellent opportunity for prayer. If you enjoy swimming you may find that your half hour in the pool can become an oasis of prayer in itself. Let the water support you, and become aware of its buoyancy beneath you, just as God's love supports you. Notice the centre of gravity in yourself, moving steadily through the water, and realise that the whole exercise is one of balance. Far more important than the sometimes wild movements of your arms and legs is this deep inner centre of gravity, which holds you in harmony and in balance with the water. Of course you don't think about it when you are swimming, and neither are you conscious of this innermost balance when you pray, but this invisible pivot point is nevertheless the inner compass that governs your movement. The action of swimming can also act as a physical mantra, keeping your mental processes occupied with the one operation of swimming, and leaving the rest of you free to follow the call of prayer.

Steady walking can have the same effect, and is another way of expressing an inner desire to be directed towards God, and beyond yourself. You may find it helpful to use a verbal mantra along with your walking. For

example, you could match the rhythm of your steps to a phrase like 'In you I live, and move, and have my being'.

And after prayer

When your prayer period comes to an end, it is helpful to close it with a familiar prayer, such as The Lord's Prayer, which also acts as a reminder that, though we pray individually, we are also praying, constantly, in community. As the hymn says 'The voice of prayer is never silent' as the earth spins. All who seek God are part of an unceasing circle of prayer, and as one person ends his prayer another is just beginning. The use of a prayer shared by all as a conclusion to your personal prayer reminds you of your place in the entire communion of faith.

Those who are familiar with Roman Catholic practices may also find the gesture of making a small sign of the cross on the forehead, the lips and the heart helpful. This is commonly done by individuals just before the Gospel is read during the Mass. Not being a 'cradle Catholic' myself, I have never established exactly what it is supposed to signify, but I have long since discovered my own meanings for it. I therefore use this gesture frequently at the end of a period of prayer and the start of a new day, to express my desire for God's blessing today 'on every thought in my head, every word on my lips and every stirring in my heart'. I add a fourth 'sign of the cross' to the back of my hand, to express the desire for a blessing on 'everything I write and every task I do today'.

However, I feel that it is important not to let such habits or gestures become automatic or mechanical, which could cause them to degenerate into superstitious practices. Let them come from your heart, if they come at all. Let them express what you really desire.

If you have been using a candle, when you blow it out watch, and smell, the smoke rise and disappear into the air. Your prayer will do that too. It will seem to have finished, and disappeared. But in reality it will have become part of the very air you breathe. It will have slipped silently, but fragrantly, into your life and into the life of all creation. It will have become a carrier of grace for the whole human family. You will go forward into your daily life carrying its power in your heart in very real, though invisible, ways, which I hope will become clearer to you as we move forward in this journey.

TAKING IT FURTHER . . .

Imagine your desire for stillness, both inner and outer, as the coming to rest of a glass of muddy water. You might see this glass as the container of your consciousness. In its shaken, disturbed state, it is opaque, useless and even potentially harmful. But as you sink into prayer, watch the cloudiness sink with you.

Ever so gradually the water at the top of the glass becomes clear again, and the mud sinks deeper.

Notice, as you gaze, how the band of clear water widens, and the layer of mud narrows at the bottom of the glass, even as it settles and thickens in density.

Eventually the stilling, settling process is complete. The water in the glass is pure, giving you clarity of vision and wholesome water to quench your inner thirst (and perhaps to give to others who are thirsty).

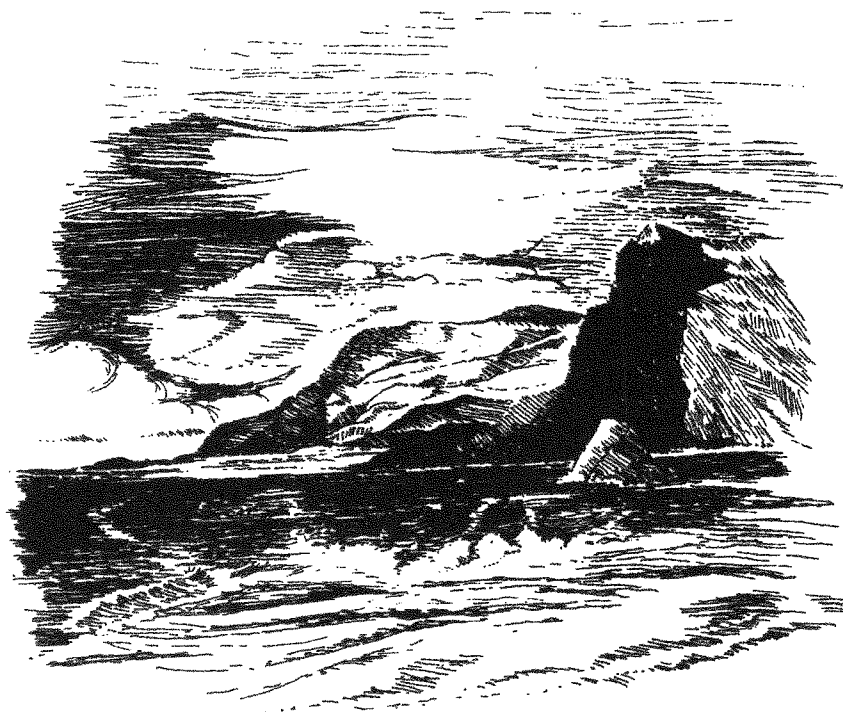
And the mud? A place, perhaps, where God will plant the seed of something new. Both elements are part of his plan — our clarity and purity, and our mud. Only our own confusion clouds the issue.



Coming to stillness in prayer can feel a bit like beachcombing, walking slowly along the shoreline, simply noticing the movement of the waves and the brush of the breeze on your skin, and all the while alert to whatever treasure may have been left at your feet by the tide. A picture like this, brought to mind by a photograph given to me by a friend, helped me to find stillness for prayer during a bumpy motorway bus journey to work one morning. Perhaps I might share it with you . . .

. . . This morning I am travelling to work on the bus, for the first time. A very different experience after the steady, familiar rhythm of the rails. Can I pray on the bus, I wonder? I can't pick up the rhythm of my breathing. It all gets submerged in the joggling and shaking as the bus slows and speeds and rounds corners and staggers across busy crossroads. And still the maker of heaven and earth can't be silenced by a bus on a congested motorway. Surely not.

I look at the seascape photograph a friend has given me and let myself



*The tide of prayer flows
into the steady rock
of God's ever-presence.*

be on the shoreline. It takes me to the beach and reminds me that there is sacred space at the meeting point. The waves break over the shore. Waves, light and restless and impermanent. Breaking. Waves of my lived reality, coming and going and throwing me about, and breaking. Those things that occupy almost all of my conscious being, almost all of the time, simply breaking and leaving just a shower of spray as a last image of themselves against a steady sky. The waves of my lived life, breaking against the bedrock of your truth. And that is prayer, and that is sacred space.

The waves of my prayer are gentle enough today in spite of the jumps and starts of motorway travel. They come to your shore humbly today. Just asking for a little space to land and do their breaking. But it isn't always

like that. There are days when they heave themselves over to you like grey mountains, swelling and straining, heavy with pain and the unmanageable forces of their own energy.

And sometimes I hardly notice them, as they come lapping like tame kittens, searching for a little sustenance from the sandy beaches, spreading themselves ever so thinly, ever so far, into the flatness. They come under heavy grey skies, reflecting threat and fear. Or they sparkle when the sun shines, and scatter happiness like foam across the rocks. Or they creep in tears to seek your comfort and linger in your rock pools, begging for shelter until the tide turns.

These are my prayers, Lord. And yours is the rock and the solid beach and the steady shoreline. And I meet you in this sacred space. You receive me there, and I wander in my prayer like a beachcomber, mainly just for the joy of being there, but from time to time there will be gifts among the shingle, waiting to be discovered and gratefully gathered. A beautiful shell that reflects the colours of eternity. A persistent crab that raises a family in the rocks, against the odds, against the tide. A word from you, to change my world today.

My lived reality breaks daily against the rock that is you. It flings itself senselessly, instinctively against your cliffs, demanding and confronting, surging into the caverns of darkness, emptily echoing. And it ripples lovingly across the gentle welcoming sand, on its better days.

But the moment isn't for ever. The waters of our meeting are soon sucked out to sea again. Reluctantly withdrawing, whence they came. Yet not unchanged. Drawn back into the swell again, but never ever the same again. The tide of prayer ebbs again, and I am back on the high seas again. No longer who I was a prayer ago, nor yet who I will be another prayer away, beyond the next tide's turning. There is sadness in withdrawing, but there is strength in the power of the swell, and there is hope.

Prayer has happened. Your gift given and received, at the breaking point, when my tide spreads itself in a gesture of surrender and my waves collapse, exhausted, on the shore. Prayer happens when I break into the spray on the bedrock of your reality. And then the moment is over. I open my eyes, and the trees are breaking into blossom on the dual carriageway, casting their own traces of dappled springtime spray across the oceans of a grey-blue sky above them.

And there is a long day ahead, until my tide can flow again onto your

24 APPROACHES

waiting beaches. And the rock remains, and the beaches. Only the tide moves in and out.



For a very readable guide to these and other forms of relaxation into prayer, the book *Sadhana – A Way to God* by Anthony de Mello (Doubleday Image, 1978) may also be helpful.

Copyright Notice

This extract is copied under CLA licence.

This extract is made available by the Heythrop Library for students enrolled on courses with the London Jesuit Centre.

You must not further copy or make this this extract available, either electronically or in hard copy, to anyone else.

Heythrop Library
2021