



PRACTICING CHRISTIANITY PART I

The phrase 'practicing Christian' is full of wonderful ambiguities! We generally use it to mean someone who goes to church – which is very odd when you think about it as the word Christian simply means a member of the worshipping community (so the idea of there being such a thing as Christian who doesn't go to church is in fact the odd one!) But of course you can use the phrase 'practicing Christian' the other way around – to mean a Christian who actually practices their faith, not simply by going to church, but by seeking to respond to God fully in all they do and all they are. Here is the first of a series of articles by Nicholas Henshall, vicar of Christ Church, on 'practicing Christianity' – over the months they will develop the core themes of Christian discipleship, of what it means to follow Christ today.

In this first part I want to offer a simple introduction to the theme of 'practicing Christianity', through a wonderful image of the four ways of drawing water, given by one of the great figures of the Christian tradition. I will then move on to a discussion of fundamental faith. In future editions of the magazine I will discuss key themes & principles and then develop the four ways of drawing water through the traditional teaching of the three ways of prayer. And do please feel free to ask questions and take issue with anything that is said here!

1 Introduction - four ways of drawing water

Teresa of Avila speaks of practicing Christianity as four ways of drawing water: we are God's tenant farmers; our job in the garden is to make the flowers grow. To do this, we need to get the water to the flowers. The flowers are our lives in God's service. The water is prayer. The water is always for the flowers. There is an umbilical connection between our praying and our living.

Teresa notes four ways of drawing water, corresponding to different experiences in or aspects of prayer:

- from a deep well with a small bucket (*a lot of hard work with little to show for it*)
- use a pump (*still hard work, but a lot more water*)
- divert a stream and irrigate the garden (*a lot of digging, but a lot of water too*)
- let it rain...

No way is better or worse than the other. And in any serious journey of faith, each of them will come our way – periods of great struggle and dryness, periods of great simplicity and stillness; and everything in between. Teresa's point is straightforward: in and through this range of encounters with God in prayer, his grace is forming us in the way of the gospel, in a way of life. The water is always for the flowers. There is an absolute, umbilical connection between our praying and our living.

I want to place this image at the very beginning to make clear that the practicing Christianity is not about a particular set of disciplines and traditions, or indulging in esoteric personal mysticism. Indeed Teresa – in common with most of the tradition – is highly suspicious of mystical experience in its own right. As she said "If you find a nun having visions, send her to work in the kitchens and the visions will probably go away". Teresa – like John of the Cross and Ignatius Loyola – teaches that prayer is bad for us if it does not issue in transformed lives. To live is to pray and to pray is to live. And while practicing Christianity suggests that there are certain distinctive disciplines of prayer, and even times and places set apart, the water is always for the flowers.

2 Fundamental Faith

Please note the title with care! I am not talking about fundamentalism, but about fundamental faith: i.e. what are the basic beliefs that Christians share. This is important: if I am going to present a vision of what 'practicing Christianity' is all about, I need first to say something about the Christian faith and the Christian tradition for it is out of this that the rest will arise. Apologies if this seems very basic, but again and again we need to be reminded of these key themes if they are to be the basis of our believing and our living (i.e. of our practicing Christianity!)



Vincent of Lérins famously defined the Christian faith as that which is believed everywhere by everyone. I am not sure he could see how big a hostage to fortune that might be. Indeed, Christian theology (and therefore spirituality) has shown itself to be remarkably fecund and adaptable over the last 2,000 years, which makes it difficult to encapsulate without saying too much, or simply lapsing into silence (both of these of course being common responses in the tradition!).

Christian faith has at its heart a deeply inclusive understanding of the nature of the church and the journey of faith. It warms to the words of the great Anglican Edward King when appointed Bishop of Lincoln: “I am glad that it is Wesley’s diocese”. Christianity that is simply about one tradition or one way of looking at the world is simply a tribalism, the maintenance of a particular culture, and fails to be Christian at all. As a parish priest over the last 21 years, it has been a great delight to me that one of my closest colleagues and most serious collaborators was the local Independent Evangelical house-church leader. And I have always treasured the words of the Roman Catholic French priest Paul Gallett who, encountering Baptists for the first time in Latin America, can say “they are just like us, particularly in their love of scripture and devotion to Christ.” The Christianity I am speaking about is not some narrowly defined denominationalism, but a faith of universal scope.

The foundation of the Christian faith is the Word of God – the word of God uniquely revealed in the Scripture of the Old and New Testaments, the word of God which is the person and work of Christ to whom the scriptures (again Old and New Testament) bear witness, the word of God celebrated in the sacraments (those covenanted signs through which Christ is met and his blessings received), and the word of God sought and served in the world whose story unfolds in glorious and tragic variety.

I want to highlight 5 aspects of this way of believing:

- 1) **Incarnation:** Christian faith takes its first cue from the Incarnation: the Lord of the universe empties himself to share our humanity (Phil 2.5-11); his glory is revealed in poverty; his power in weakness. “God becomes a human being so that human beings might become gods” (*Athanasius of Alexandria*): the incarnation is the promise of our destiny in the eyes of God, we who through baptism have become fellow heirs with Christ. “The glory of God is a human being fully alive, and the life of a human being is the vision of God” (*Irenaeus of Lyons*). This is the world-turning-upside down of Luke 1 and Matthew 5 where the poor are blessed and the humble lifted high. A place where there are no hierarchies except the paradoxical hierarchies of holiness where the first is the last and the greatest is a servant.
- 2) **Death & Resurrection:** Christian faith takes its next cue from the death and resurrection of Christ. This is a faith rooted in the work of Christ on the cross and the message of salvation. For Christian theology this salvation is of universal scope. The scriptural and creedal doctrine of the harrowing of hell is profoundly important: the death and resurrection of Jesus transform the whole creation, past, present and future. This is a faith that rejoices in Jesus’ teaching in Matthew 25.31-end that eternal loss is not predicated on simple assent to a set of doctrinal formulations, but is a way of life and a way of love (cf the hymn “My God I love thee not because I hope for heaven thereby”). Indeed, in its many voices Christian believing is fascinated by and delights in not what we are saved *from* (a high medieval & a post-Enlightenment obsession) but what we are saved *for*. The Christian understanding of redemption is full of hope – the great patristic teaching of Origen and Gregory of Nyssa that the triumph of the cross demands that at the end of time even the devil must be saved. A corollary of both this and a very high doctrine of the incarnation is that Christian theology is passionate about the *world* as the arena for our discipleship, and how God is recognised and served in the rough stuff of our human being.
- 3) **Ascension:** Christian faith takes its next cue from the Ascension, in its two most significant aspects: 1) the Lordship of Christ over the whole of creation, time and the universe, with its missionary insight that God has always already gone before us; and 2) the extraordinary teaching of the Gospels that at the heart of God is a bleeding human being, and the massive implications this has for our understanding of human frailty and need – a doctrine familiar from a figure we shall meet again later in this series: Jacob going on his way limping and yet made whole (Genesis 32.22-32).



- 4) **Holy Spirit:** Christian theology has a profound understanding of the work and person of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is leading the people of God into all the truth and into abundance of life in ways that are often disturbing and always surprising. Our attempts to tie down or define the work of the Spirit are always mistaken, for the Spirit – as Eldad and Medad so famously discovered (Numbers 11.26-29) – is profligate and always jumps beyond our human boundaries. Cardinal Newman’s comment that theology is always a process of “saying and unsaying” and John Macquarie’s more recent comment that “there is no final theology” sum up very well a understanding of the Holy Spirit as one who is always leading us into a new and unexpected future.
- 5) **The Holy Trinity:** and finally, Christian faith is rooted in the Holy Trinity, in the communion of love that is the nature of the godhead; and in worship, prayer, fellowship and service discovers, we learn and re-affirm this reality in the context of a broken world seeking healing. In Christianity – even for the hermit praying alone – there is no life without community.

In terms of practicing Christianity these fundamental doctrines are neither simple historic formularies nor boundary-lines of faith. They are rather invitations to life in God’s kingdom, of which the Church – conceived of not as institution but as divine community across all times and cultures – is sign and foretaste. The Church as a sacrament of God’s kingdom for the world is both seeker and bearer of the Gospel of salvation.



PRACTICING CHRISTIANITY 2

In last month's *GRAPEVINE* Nicholas began an introduction to what he called 'practicing Christianity' – in both senses: a) what it means to be a 'practising Christian in the conventional sense; and b) what it demands of us seriously to live out our faith. Last month the focus was on Teresa of Avila's wonderful image of the four ways of drawing water, and her remarkable emphasis on the fact that the water is always for the flowers – i.e. that our prayer serves to form us in the Christian way. This was followed by a discussion of fundamental (but not fundamentalist!) Christian faith.

This month the focus is on key themes and principles of Christian faith before moving on in April to discuss how we actually go about the business of how we say our prayers and how this enables us to live the Christian life.

3 Key themes in Christian Faith

On the basis of the discussion so far of the basics of Christian belief, I want now to note some key themes in Christianity as a way of highlighting some often forgotten wisdom.

- 1) *Mass, not Holy Communion*: the Eucharist is not the focus of this article. However I do want to note here that it is precisely because of the dynamic theological understandings I outlined in last month's article that the Eucharist (and sacraments in general) plays such a crucial role in the Christian understanding of mission. Indeed, in the words of the great 20th century English Christian, Roland Walls: "The least inadequate understanding of the purpose of the church is that it is there to celebrate the Eucharist". The Eucharist is (in the words of John Wesley) "a converting ordinance" – it is Mass, not Holy Communion. The very Anglican term 'Holy Communion' helpfully draws attention to the four kinds of communion (with God, with one another, across cultures and across history). But the term 'Mass' – the same word as mission – widely used among a whole variety of Christians including Lutherans and Roman Catholics, links the celebration of the Eucharist with living the life: the very core of the Christian faith is to "go forth and tell". In the great eucharistic words of Augustine of Hippo: "**You** are to be taken, blessed, broken and distributed that the work of the Incarnation may go forward."
- 2) *Matter matters*: the sacramental use of material things (water, wine, bread, oil, light, perfume, flowers, fire, foot-washing, bodies, voices, music, icons, buildings, and so on) is characteristic of the Christian tradition and fundamental to Christian understandings of mission and social action: the God we greet and serve in the sacrament must be greeted and served in the poor. Frank Weston in a remarkable address in 1927 challenged Anglicans to recognise that meeting and serving Christ in the blessed sacrament, they must meet and serve Christ in the person of the poor. In Christian initiation you learn how to pray, learn how to read the scriptures, learn about the tradition of faith; but you also find yourself working in the parish soup-kitchen or night-shelter in your second week.
- 3) *The church is a "corpus permixtum"*: Augustine's wonderful scriptural insight that the church is a thoroughly "mixed-up body"! We are a group of saints and sinners, and each of us is a saint and a sinner too. As the American Trappist Thomas Merton writes (in *The Power and Meaning of Love*):

"The union that binds the members of Christ together is not the union of proud confidence in the power of an organisation. The Church is united by the humility as well as by the charity of her members. Hers is the union that comes from the consciousness of individual fallibility and poverty, from the humility which recognises its own limitations and accepts them, the meekness that cannot take upon itself to condemn, but can only forgive because it is conscious that it has itself been forgiven by Christ."

The Christian way is a "Way of Imperfection" (Simon Tugwell) – we are wounded people seeking healing. "Love is drained in making full, bound in setting others free" (Vanstone). The dynamic admission that we are sinners – in the Pauline sense, in the Lutheran sense, in the sense that we simply cannot evade or avoid, and which is not about doing certain sinful things



but something to do with who we are as human beings – this dynamic admission opens the door to God’s grace, so that it can begin to get to work on the rough stuff of our humanity. It is key to Catholic understandings of judgement and compassion in pastoral care, and is encapsulated in the deep sense in the desert tradition that we are all as bad as each other, and all as perfectible as each other. In the beautiful words of Maria Boulding:

Though God is an almighty lover, he can find himself shut out, and he longs to find an open door of vulnerability in us. It is extraordinarily hard for us to realise this, conditioned as we are by a secular ethic of success and a religious ideal of moral perfection which may owe little to the gospel. God calls us, implants his life in the deepest centre of our being at baptism, and loves us into growth. He does not propose to us some lofty, rigid ideal to which we must attain by our own unaided human resources. We are more sinful than we know, more deeply flawed than we can recognise by any human insight; but grace works in us in the deepest places of body and spirit. We must live from our weakness, from the barren places of our need, because there is the spring of grace and the source of our strength When we stand before God in the truth of our need, acknowledging our sinfulness and bankruptcy, then we can celebrate his mercy. Then we are living by grace, and we can allow full scope to his joy.

From “The Coming of God” (1994)

Or with great simplicity and some 1,500 years earlier from Isaac of Nineveh:

The person who can weep over their own sins for one hour is greater than the person who can raise the dead. The person who can recognise the depth of their own frailty is greater than the person who sees visions of angels.

This theme of frailty and grace is one of the key sustained insights of the Christian tradition, from Jacob limping, to Paul weak, to the desert fathers fighting the demons, to Francis receiving the Stigmata, to Wesley’s hymns on the passion, to the great 20th century saints Staretz Silouan, Charles de Foucauld, Padre Pio and beyond.

4 Basic principles about the nature of the Church

1) the priesthood and the ministry: there is a huge amount of confusion in most contemporary conversations about priesthood and ministry, and this causes huge problems in talking sensibly! It is worth noting that – perhaps much to our surprise – mainstream Christianity only ever officially uses the word ‘priestly’ of the whole people of God, and – except in popular custom – refuses to use the ambiguous English word ‘priest’ of an ordained minister. Whilst the current English Anglican ordinal gives to the ordination service the tautological and misleading title “The Ordination of Priests (also called Presbyters)”, the Roman Catholic rite is utterly straightforward: it is the ordination of *presbyters* plain and simple. As Calvin famously said, “the priesthood and the ministry are very different from one another. For the priesthood, as we have just said, is common to all Christians; not so the ministry.” (*Second Helvetic Confession* 1566). Absolutely!

An extended discussion of this is for another time, but do remember that the fashionable notion that all Christians are ministers in virtue of their baptism is a theological construction first found in 1948, and originally based on a disputed punctuation of Ephesians 4. Certainly it is a notion that has no warrant in scripture or tradition prior to that.

But I do not want to give the impression that rejection of this fashionable notion should lead us back to the clerical captivity of the church. Ordained elders are important, just not that important. Crucially they need to recognise their role more as motor mechanics than drivers, and let people take the vehicle out for a spin a bit more freely. It is certainly worth noting that almost all the great innovators in the Christian tradition have been lay people, and we may learn better what ordained elders are for when – like the church of all the first 18 centuries – we learn to ordain a lot more of them (cf the work of Wayne Meeks, which suggests the generally small Christian communities of the



first 300 years would have a very high proportion of ordained; medieval France, and even up to the 18th century, where some churches had more than 300 ordained elders; contemporary Ethiopia, where the government has actually legislated to limit the number of ordained elders for each church community to 100).

The difficulty with the notion that all Christians are ministers in virtue of their baptism (other than that it is non-scriptural and unsupported by tradition!) is not that it undermines a clerical autocracy (which after all would be a good thing), but that it appears to be having appalling outcomes in drawing peoples best energies *into* the institutional life of the church, rather than sending them outwards to witness and to serve. Remember the great John Robinson quote: “The laity are not the helpers of the clergy so that they can do their job. The clergy are the helpers of the laity so that they can be the church in the world.”

2) *the Church’s desert journey*: our current context is important to the demands I am going to outline in relation to our spiritual lives. What follows must be understood in the context of the collapse of Christendom. It has taken us a long time to wake up to this (cf *France Pagan* in the 1940s!) and in North Yorkshire the rolling back of Christendom is uneven (certainly in people’s perceptions).

As Robert Warren argued powerfully in *Building Missionary Congregations*, in this post-Christendom world, whilst there are many things that the Christian community must have in place, the core issue for its mission and identity is its spirituality – how the Christian community worships, how it prays, how it serves, how it models the common life (and therefore why God “adds daily to their number those who are being saved” cf Acts 2.42-end). It is an agenda that the Church in general and the Church of England in particular is struggling to address. Most of our current answers are based on other people’s off the shelf solutions, and are shallow and short-term in their scope. The work that faces us is deep and long-term, it is about the re-shaping of our souls; the re-shaping of whole cultures. As the American evangelical writer Richard Foster said in his now classic *Celebration of Discipline*

“Superficiality is the curse of our age. The doctrine of instant satisfaction is a primary spiritual problem. The desperate need today is not for a greater number of intelligent people, or gifted people, but for deep people.”

Remember the old preacher’s joke: “swimming pool Christianity: it tends to be very noisy in the shallow end.”

The days are evil, and the challenge is to resist the temptation of the late 19th century church, and retreat behind our walls into well-defended safe space. As Owen Chadwick said of the Victorian Church, “they drew up the drawbridge and boiled the oil”. Let’s not forget that this failure of nerve after the spectacular evangelistic success of the 19th century may not be unrelated to the fact that the church in England begins to decline statistically in 1913.

It is this agenda, and this context, that I want to address next month: the superficiality of our culture, yes; and the new issues raised by living in a post-Christendom Europe. But also the superficiality of our own response. Remember, even in the lax days of 18th century English Christianity there were some urban churches running Morning Prayer twice each weekday simply to fit in the numbers coming. It was on the hidden strength of such conventional praying millions that the great revivals – both evangelical and catholic – were built in the following 150 years. I see little sign yet that even the most evangelistically minded Christians in our own culture are willing to make the choices that the needs of the times demand today.

And if you think the demands I am seeking to make are surprising or extreme, I simply state here that I think nothing less even begins to be adequate to meet the days in which we live. As Benedict of Nursia, one of the great guides to Christian community in mission, would say, this is just a “little rule for beginners”.



3 Drawing water

3.1 Introduction

I now want to turn my attention to what – in Teresa’s image of the garden – we might call the drawing of the water. We know what the water is for: it makes the flowers grow. And we know something of the range of theological and ecclesiological principles which form the context of this journey, and some of the key themes which inform this way of life. So now to the drawing of the water itself.

What follows is very simple. It does not belong to one tradition of the church, but is essentially the common heritage of all of us. Before the great forgetting of the last half century this would have been recognised as core disciplines in any Christian tradition. It is simply an invitation to be serious about prayer as the key handmaid of our discipleship.

As a frame, I want to use the ancient Christian classification of prayer into 1) prayer with the lips; 2) prayer with the mind; and 3) prayer of the heart. I want to speak briefly of the three core strands of daily prayer and then point to some broader patterns. But remember: we draw the water not for its own sake, but because it makes the flowers grow.

3.2 Daily Prayer - *prayer with the lips*

Firstly, we are called to be singers of the praises of God. Daily Prayer, the Daily Office, the Liturgy of the Hours, the Breviary, Common Prayer are all names used to refer to a very broad range of structured acts of regular prayer and praise, celebrated by both individuals and communities, regarded through most of the last 2,000 years as foundational for Christian prayer and life.

Daily Prayer has its root in the practice of Jesus and the apostolic church, themselves taking their cue from the patterns of daily prayer (and possibly some of the structures & content) that had formed them in the Jewish milieu, particularly the practice of praying at set times; and has further roots in the biblical injunction to “pray without ceasing” (1 Thessalonians 5.17), and often shares some of the apocalyptic culture of that letter.

Different cultures and traditions have developed Christian daily prayer in gloriously different ways – from the extraordinary 5th century Sunday family worship at Agia Sophia in Istanbul with thousands of people charging round that great building singing popular hymns, to the huge monolith of the traditional Night Office with up to 18 psalms in one service, to the famous Polish Vespers celebrated by vast congregations even though the clergy tried to stop them, to three people round a kitchen table saying a psalm, singing a hymn, reading some scripture and praying for their town.

These patterns of daily prayer – in huge variety, certainly, but with a family likeness – have been a near-universal feature of Christian history, and regarded as a key element in any Christian life.

Anglicans have been uniquely defined as people of the daily office. Daily Prayer is the key plank of Cranmer’s vision for evangelisation. Despite being essentially a straight version of the Benedictine monastic office, the Book of Common Prayer is probably the most successful popular office in Christian history.

In the context of our present discussion it is very important to remember that this way of daily prayer is not a feature of one particular tradition. It is the duty and joy of all Christians, of all shades of opinion and patterns of piety. The evangelical Charles Simeon would be praying the same office as his catholic near contemporary John Keble. It was the practice of the Wesleys as much as of John Henry Newman.

The Church of England does still enshrine the centrality of the daily office as a universal commitment. It is after all one of the very few obligations ordained elders freely take on at ordination: to pray the daily office morning and evening, every day for the rest of our lives.



I have been fortunate always to have lived and worked in parishes (and deaneries for that matter) where the public celebration of daily prayer was seen as a key priority by the people of God. For instance, out of 14 benefices in west Newcastle the daily office was celebrated publicly in twelve. Things in Derby were a great deal more uneven on the ground, but in Harrogate I am struck and impressed that daily prayer is a feature of the public ministry of many of the churches. As I will suggest, where the tradition of daily prayer is weak, this undermines our mission at the deepest level. For the people of God daily prayer is the absolute minimal requirement for enabling and sustaining missionary ministry in missionary communities.

Daily prayer has had a rocky forty years in Britain. By the early '80s even writers such as Paul Bradshaw were prophesying the total collapse of the office. And then in 1992 *Celebrating Common Prayer* became the fastest selling book Mowbrays had ever published. Suddenly daily prayer was back on the agenda and the explosion of publishing and praying since has completely changed the picture – and begun the long process of laying the foundations we need for the evangelistic imperatives of the next three generations.

Although France has a different history, I would simply note here that there – where the church has ceased to exist in a meaningful way across large parts of that country – it is the centres of daily prayer such as Vézelay, Grandchamp, Taizé, La Pierre qui Vire, Fleury, etc. that are becoming the powerhouses of praise fundamental to the renewal of mission.

Whist there is a canonical expectation that every ordained elder prays the daily office morning and evening, and it has become more and more the property of Christian communities as a whole, do remember two things:

- the church does not lay down the specific form of the prayer, simply the outline of what it should contain; there is a core invitation to variety and experiment
- the ordained minister is only the enabler of this prayer – as scores of communities have come to understand, when the daily prayer becomes rooted in the life of the people it has extraordinary power to transform lives (e.g. St James', Haydock; St Margaret's, Scotswood). In 14 years of parish ministry I never prayed the office alone.

And what kind of office? Although prone to endless elaboration, the core features of the daily office are the singing of praise (canticles, hymns and psalms) and intercession. The Anglican tradition – drawing on one aspect of the monastic past – bizarrely added the reading of huge chunks of scripture to the office. Some still labour under this burden, but most authorities would seriously question whether the office is the place for this, and modern revisions reflect this.

So what? Essentially the office is a very simple offering of prayer and praise that can be developed organically in response to the changing needs of the praying community. But the invitation here is for communities and individuals to discover and explore with imagination – and within very broad constraints – what works in their context.

This way of believing simply tells you: say your prayers; do it daily; follow a decent diet. If you don't do it, you may well stop praying in any meaningful way altogether. And remember, it is not a personal issue – it is fundamental to the drawing of water. In the words of one evangelist in the 1980s: "Until there is a praying presence morning and evening in every community, this country will not be won again for Christ."

But the office is only one part of the equation, and should not be made to bear too much. As the evangelical leader David Gillett – himself a committed pray-er of the office three times a day – advises: the office should only form about a third of your daily prayer. It is to the other elements that I know turn.



3.3 Meditation on Scripture - *prayer with the mind*

Scripture is one of the primary ways of knowing Jesus. Thomas Aquinas notably places scripture alongside the sacraments and the world as the three primary ways of knowing Jesus. And certainly meditation on scripture is one of the key ways of prayer in the Christian tradition. It is classically called ‘mental prayer’ and a huge variety of approaches have been developed and popularised over the last 2,000 years. Before proceeding to the mechanics of meditation, I need first to say something about the role and understanding of Scripture in Christianity, and I hope I do not raise too many Reformation hackles on the way.

That the church is under the authority of Scripture. But it is also the case that Scripture belongs to the church, because the church is the interpretive community.

This is not meant to be an undermining of the authority of Scripture, but simply placing it in the proper context. History tells the story: remember, even the canon of the Old Testament was not closed until 30 years after the death and resurrection of Jesus (Council of Jamnia, 90 AD); the canon of the New Testament only begins to form recognisably in the late 2nd and early 3rd century, and it is not until 367 AD (39th Paschal Epistle of Athanasius) that the church through its bishops in the power of the Spirit finally decided on the 27 books that make up what then became known as the New Testament. Even then, Athanasius, the church leader who makes this authoritative decision, makes it clear that other books not in the canon are still authoritative for Christians and may be read in church.

So as much as the church is under Scripture, Scripture belongs to the church. Wherever you stand on the spectrum of Christian tradition, that is our common heritage. And it is worth noting that the clarity we have about what is in and what is out is one not shared by the New Testament writers themselves, nor by any Christians until the advent of printing. We should further note that the practice of saying “This is the word of the Lord” is a post-Vatican II Roman Catholic invention which has been adopted rather unthinkingly by other Christian traditions. Scripture itself tells us this is incorrect: in the New Testament the word of the Lord is Jesus; the gospel is Jesus. The written record is the inspired witness to the word of the Lord and an invitation to the relationship with Christ that we call faith, certainly. But we are committing a kind of idolatry if we say the scripture is the word of the Lord. Christianity is (until the 18th century at least) not the religion of a book, but a faith based on a relationship with the person of Christ.

Christian tradition cherishes this understanding, and insists that all reading of scripture is dialogical. Because the Scriptures belong to the church, reading scripture is something done in conversation in community, and across communities; and these communities are not simply in conversation with one another in or across cultures, but across history, listening attentively to the often conflicting and disturbing voices. It is the model of the Jewish commentary, and many of the great biblical commentaries emerging from the world church over the last 40 years have had this character – most notably, perhaps, the work of Joseph Fitzmyer on Luke-Acts & Romans and the extraordinary commentaries of Raymond Brown particularly on John, and on the Birth & Passion Narratives. The interpretation of Scripture is a conversation, resonating across time and culture.

That is why Scripture is clearly not a collection of uniform proof texts that we can produce without context to beat each other over the head with (e.g. as in the current emerging debate about slavery in west Africa). Rather, it is a deep sea in which we are invited to learn to swim, gradually discovering hidden depths and new currents.

Meditation is the invitation to jump into this sea. The word literally means ‘thinking over’ (hence ‘mental prayer’). And classically meditation is the thinking over of texts from Scripture, almost chewing them over in some authors so that it sinks in, deeper and deeper. Meditation is not the intellectual study of Scripture – though it may spill over into this for some, and for many knowledge about Scripture does help the journey. But that is the right way round: it is about formation in the



way of Scripture, rather than getting a GCSE in religious studies. Certainly over the years regular meditation does give someone a formidable knowledge of the texts of Scripture, but the core issue – certainly in the writings of the great teachers such as Ignatius Loyola in his *Spiritual Exercises* – is not what we know or how we feel, but how scripture enables us to live. These are ‘texts to live by’ (c.f. Henri Nouwen), forming us in what the Church of England’s current adult nurture rites call “the way of Scripture”. To go back to the beginning: the water is always for the flowers.

Practicalities: so how do you meditate? Here is a very simple version of a basic Ignatian scheme that has become very widely used over the last 30 years (draw attention to the card). It assumes that the regular time for meditation is the morning but an easily be adapted:

1. Open the Bible at the passage you are going to meditate on.
2. Sit down on a chair with a straight back. Sit in a way that is both relaxed and alert. Still your breathing. Spend a few moments simply being aware of yourself and your surroundings.
3. After a moment say a suitable psalm (e.g. Psalm 131, or a section of Psalm 119)
4. After a moment of silence, commend the time ahead to God.
5. Take up your bible. Read the passage through once. Pause. Then read it through slowly a second time. Pause over particular words and phrases that catch your attention. Mark them in some way, if you find this helpful. Ask God to show you how his word is being born in you.
6. You can spend whatever time you have on this. Five minutes may be too short. Around 15 is good. Most people have not got 30 minutes. Many teachers of the Ignatian method suggest it is only when you are spending an hour each day that it will begin to have its full effect(!) Do not worry if you feel dry, bored or unclear during this exercise. Offer that to God as well.
7. Once the time is up, come gently out of the meditation. Make a note of anything that strikes you from your time with these words from the Gospel.
8. Thank God for this time, and the gift of his word.
9. At the end of the day, look back prayerfully, asking God to show you how this scripture has affected the day.

Most people these days meditate alone, and the Ignatian revival has probably encouraged this. But patterns of communal meditation are found. One of my favourites is a community in Italy: they gather in the early morning for a time of communal reading of psalmody and scripture. At the end of this, the short daily Gospel reading is read. Each member of the community is then expected to spend at least 30 minutes with this scripture. When they gather again in the evening, they share their experiences of living with this text through the day. This kind of model can easily be adapted in a context like ours for e.g. a week of guided prayer.

There is a clear pattern in the process of developing a pattern of meditation: at the beginning people often get through whole chapters at a time, and then as the practice matures more and more time is spent on mulling over often just a few verses, going deeper and deeper with the Scriptures. And it is worth noting here that many are helped by going on an Ignatian retreat (anything from ten days to three months) as a way of learning to meditate.

3.4 Silence - prayer of the heart

Silence is a key constituent part of Christian daily prayer. There are many rationales to this, not least the practice of Jesus himself. But the bottom line is clear: those who do not listen to God will have some difficulty hearing what he is saying to them, and will also be pretty useless at listening to others.

This silence has its roots in Jesus’ early morning vigils, his desert journey and the experience of Gethsemane. “Be still and know that I am God” (Psalm 46) is not an invitation to ease and quiet, but an invitation to a scary kind of awe. This is how so much of scripture and tradition speak of silence. Silence is like the well in a dry desert of Psalm 84, or Jacob’s night time fight with God at Peniel; and even the strange, anticipatory silence of heaven in the Book of Revelation (8.1).



This silence – this ministry-sustaining silence – is never easy (or if it is, that simply means that we haven't been doing it much lately). This is an active silence. It is often boring – many of you will be familiar with Henri Nouwen's famous passage about his daily hour of silence; and the great Teresa herself writes openly about shaking her hour glass to make the sand more quickly through!

The boredom of this silence is in the first place quite an important place to be. A dynamic openness, a dynamic uselessness. For this silence is essentially the arena for battle – the desert – and for beating on the door of heaven; cf. Theofan the Recluse: “stand before God with your mind in your heart, and keep on saying ‘Lord, have mercy’ until the end of life”. This is a journey through the luminous darkness (cf. Staretz Silouan). Indeed, this silence often has the character of battle and darkness; this – as a previous generation would have put it – is the arena for spiritual warfare.

Many practitioners of this way of silence also note speaking in tongues in this context (e.g. Francis of Assisi, and the great East Midlands author of the *Cloud of Unknowing*), and the related experience of the gift of tears (*penthos* the moment of turning, rooted in the experience of Peter, and understanding tears as a kind of reminder and renewal of our baptism). C.f. the Isaac of Nineveh passage that we have already encountered: the gift of tears as a dynamic opening of the door of our frailty to the transforming power of grace.

Practice: how do we actually ‘do’ this silence? Well, the words of Metropolitan Anthony are probably enough: “Silence is its own teacher”. Simply get on with it, and as the desert tradition says, your cell will teach you everything.

Wesley thought (and showed in his practice) that a minimum of an hour's silent prayer at the beginning of the day was basic. Bonhoffer at the seminary at Finkenwalde (where he wrote *The Cost of Discipleship* and *Life Together*) likewise trained his evangelical students that everyday must begin with an hour's corporate silence. Certainly without a basic minimum of 15 minutes a day (cf Igumen Chariton) we won't even be setting out on the journey, and more extended periods (including the odd long night of silence) should certainly be part of the picture.

And silence, deeply experienced, is probably the only proper context for intercession – many of you will be familiar with the comment of Michael Ramsey when asked how long he spent praying for people each day: “about a minute; but an hour's silence getting ready.” And it is not simply something to fill in a bit of spare time, but an essential underpinning; in the famous line of Martin Luther: “I am so busy at the moment that I have to give an extra hour to prayer”.

And if we want to think about it further, Scripture and tradition offer a whole variety of ways into silence – from physical exercise and chanting the psalms to the familiar recitation of the Jesus Prayer.



3.5 Wider patterns

Very briefly I want to note that these daily patterns of office, meditation and silence, these three key threads of daily prayer, take their place and have their meaning in a wider context – of weekly Eucharist; regular fasting; vigils; retreat (at least annually); study (not to feed the mind so much as to form the heart); longer times of silence; etc. And that most of the Christian tradition would strongly suggest that we should do this with the wise accompaniment of a spiritual director / soul friend (or whatever term we prefer!)

4 Conclusion

The purpose of the spiritual life and the spiritual disciplines is sanctification – the long journey where our openness and God's grace meet in the gradual transformation of the rough stuff of our humanity. There are no hierarchies here – except the upside down hierarchies of holiness which share in that bizarre kingdom thinking where the first are last and the last first.

And of course – almost in spite of so much I have said – there are absolutely no guaranteed techniques to make God notice us. Our praying is not a means for us to buy or cajole God, or even to tell him how much we love him. It is simply our digging of the garden, our carrying of our weight of sand to him; our being in the presence of the God who – as Isaiah says – is “always waiting to be gracious to us”. Some are covenanted signs, others proved in long human experience. But there is always the invitation to explore and renew – figures such as Thomas Merton, Dorothy Day, Bede Griffiths and John Main have in very different ways expanded our vision of what it is to pursue a life of holiness over the last 40 years, and each generation adds new wisdom and insight.

And it would certainly be my experience that the way in which each of us pray – and the way our communities engage in prayer – changes all the time, sometimes incrementally, sometimes very quickly. I have been praying the daily office for nearly 30 years now. But the way I pray today is hugely different from how things went when I was an inner city parish priest, or as a student, or living in a monastery, or wandering around the eastern Mediterranean.

But let me go back to the beginning.

Christendom is over, and the evangelistic challenge of this new world invites us both to bold experiment and to delving deep in the wisdom of the last 2000 years. It is my confidence that the robust vision of practicing Christianity presented here has an important contribution to make to this unfolding agenda, particularly in re-connecting how we pray and how we live.

Remember the words of Robert Warren that I quoted at the beginning: the issue for churches as they seek again to become missionary communities is fundamentally an issue about spirituality – about how we pray, how we worship, and therefore about how the people of God are formed as a sacrament of God's kingdom for the world.

Nicholas Henshall,



Select Bibliography

Some have commented that the number of books about prayer seems to rise in inverse proportion to the amount of praying actually being done! Certainly the consumption of literature *about* prayer can easily replace getting on with praying. Here, however, is a very brief selection of contemporary texts that may be of help.

Celebration of Discipline by Richard Foster (Hodder and Stoughton 1980; many editions since). This is a remarkable and demanding book by an American evangelical which contains core catholic teaching about the life of prayer. Also available with a study guide for personal and group use.

Heaven in Ordinary by Angela Ashwin (McCrimmonds Publications, recently re-printed). Absolute basics put very well indeed.

Company of Voices by George Guiver (SPCK, recently re-printed by Canterbury Press, Norwich). A book specifically about the Daily Office, but which addresses in its opening chapters the whole business of why Christians should pray.

When the Well Runs Dry by Thomas H Green (Ave Maria Press, 1979; many editions since). An extremely helpful introduction to 'prayer beyond the beginnings' by a very experienced American Jesuit. Particularly good introductions to Teresa and to the Cloud of Unknowing.