



# **A Pilgrimage through Prayer**

## **A five week study course**

prepared for  
St Mark's Broomhill and Broomhall  
and the Sheffield Manor Parish  
and offered for wider use.

### **Introduction**

One of the best known pilgrim routes in Europe is the Camino de Santiago de Compostela. It has a long history, with many different starting points, and many different routes, but all leading to the same destination. Some people we know have probably followed all or part of it, encountering fellow pilgrims on the way as well as the delights and occasional pains of a walk of over 1000km across varying terrain.

There are all sorts of reasons for doing the Camino – some do it for religious reasons, others for their health, some are merely tourists. The variety is wide, as the film *The Way* demonstrates. This is also probably true for people following our pilgrimage in prayer. Whether prayer is your thing or not, there will surely be something in it for you. We're not trying to test your stamina. There may be bits that you find less interesting than others, or you feel that you've visited before. Hopefully there will be views that take you breath away. Most of all we hope that the whole experience will be worthwhile. And – as with the actual pilgrim route itself – you can do as much or as little as you want, starting and stopping in different places. But you may well find that even if your preference is to keep yourself - and your spiritual experience - to yourself, making the pilgrimage in company is very rewarding.

Someone once said

Pilgrimage has long been a metaphor for life itself... There is no doubt in my mind that we should be able to apply these experiences to the path of our daily life when the pilgrimage no longer marks the way. At the end of the day there is the Camino one walks and the Camino one lives.

Hopefully this pilgrimage, put together by five members of our two parishes, will enrich our lives individually and corporately.

**Session One**  
**Backpack, staff and shell**  
**(Preparing for the journey)**



It was a walk that  
gently changed  
our lives

*Melanie Gow,  
Walking with Angels*

**Introductory prayer**

You call us, Lord,  
to leave familiar things and to leave our comfort zone.  
May we open our eyes to new experiences,  
may we open our ears to hear you speaking to us  
and may we open our hearts to your love.  
Grant that this time spent on pilgrimage  
may help us to see ourselves as we really are  
and may we strive to become the people you would have us be.  
Amen.

*Jenny Child*

This session is designed to be a prelude to the whole series. Its purpose is to prepare us for this pilgrimage, to consider the resources we already have, and to reflect on what we hope to gain from the experience.

## Starting point

- Introduce yourself and, in a few words, share what you hope to gain
- from this course.

## Pray as you can, not as you can't ...



There are many different approaches to and interpretations of prayer, and it's a fair guess that, within this group, there will be a range of approaches, and some things which are helpful to some are less helpful to others. As we decide we are going to pray, we might decide which 'method' we are going to use.

What resources do we have in our backpack that will feed us on the pilgrimage of prayer? Many people have walked the path before and laid down tried and tested routes to prayer. Some will naturally appeal to us, perhaps we are by nature contemplative or perhaps we need to be 'doing'. The map we will have in our backpack shows many routes. There is a route to suit most. No route is better than any other, take the route that suits you best.

Some might have a natural preference for private prayer. Others can feel inspired by being part of a worshipping body participating in a familiar set liturgy such as the Eucharist. For many, it is a mixture of both, one feeding the other.

Christians generally look to their own tradition first, their backpack might contain the Bible, the writings of spiritual fathers such as St. Augustine, more contemporary spiritual writing from people such as Gerard Hughes, Rowan Williams or Paula Gooder. Some feel more at home with Common Worship or BCP. Others will find inspiration from secular literature or writings from other faith traditions. For others it will be the memories of walks and sunsets.

## Discussion Point

What's in your rucksack?

However we decide to pray, we need to make it a deliberate act if we desire a regular and active prayer life – this does not of course rule out the inadvertent or unplanned prayer that might bubble up within us as we witness a beautiful sunset or the vastness of the ocean. Some suggest setting aside a particular time of day (the pilgrims' guide advises walking in the mornings before the day gets too hot...) and if we have the luxury of space, setting aside a room or corner of a room where we can get 'into the zone'.

## Prayer as Pilgrimage

The idea of a long and often arduous journey to a place of great spiritual significance, either practically or as a metaphor for life, is a very old one, and exists in many cultures and religions. The concept is very appealing it seems, to all ages and all cultural groups. Examples abound which have been embraced by our own culture: *The Hobbit*, *Lord of the Rings*, *The Wizard of Oz*, and of course *A Pilgrim's Progress*.

The main features of a pilgrimage, it seems, are

- The journey, whether undertaken as a group, or as a solitary experience
- The destination, which is normally of particular Spiritual significance
- The special places visited on the way, which often include particular rituals
- Returning home, and the recognition of the benefits (such as learning, closeness to God, spiritual awareness and understanding) derived from the experience.

Pilgrimage has always been an important part of Christian faith. The desire of Christians to grow in their relationship with God is often described as a journey and going on pilgrimage is a way of letting the outward journey of our bodies enrich and enable the inner journeys of our hearts and minds.

*Canterbury Cathedral Website*

## Journey and Destination

It is interesting that historically the journeys were demanding and sometimes arduous. So wayside shrines and inns flourished and a range of devotions and entertainments developed to keep folk going. Hence of course the Canterbury Tales!

### Topics for discussion

- As on a pilgrimage, in our prayer lives the scenery around us changes from day to day from lush valleys to steep gruelling climbs and barren plains. How do we cope with praying in these differing circumstances?
- What do we hope for in this prayer pilgrimage? Is there a final destination in our own mind?
- To whom are we addressing our prayer? How does our prayer connect with our image of God?

Today, all of these reasons may still apply in different ways and in different regions of the world. But in the developed west, pilgrimage may be a more reflective and internalised pastime. The journey seems as important as the destination, and people often undertake a pilgrim route as a form of 'time out' or refreshing, without a specifically religious objective. In a sense, like so many aspects of contemporary culture, pilgrimage is what you choose to make of it. People travel individually, as couples, families or groups, and shape their own experience within the archetypal patterns of journey and place.

The renaissance of pilgrimage in the west is rooted in this combination of ancient roots with contemporary openness. There are still specific shrines and devotions but here also is a way to explore spiritual values in the context of landscape, heritage, art and devotion. The departure point is unconstrained, the way of arriving undetermined, and the nature of the destination both highly personal and deeply resonant. Pilgrimage is recreation and re-creation for all tastes, ages, cultures and backgrounds

*Scotland Churches Trust Website*

**Destinations** are usually sites of spiritual significance.

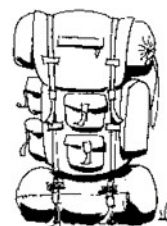
For the early Christians this meant the Holy Land, in particular sites significant in Jesus' ministry. Sites where Christians were martyred became similarly significant. The aim was normally to reach, through a spiritually significant site, a 'thinning' of the layer between God and humankind, to achieve a higher plane of spirituality.

Each of us will have a different starting point, a unique journey and perhaps a multitude of possible destinations.

### Topics for discussion – what is prayer?

- Are there places or times when you have experienced a 'thinning of the layer' between you and God?
- Is prayer a way of lobbying or influencing God? Does God need us to point things out, and is our intervention really going to make a difference?
- Does God actually listen to each individual prayer? Would it make a difference to God if we didn't pray?
- Is prayer a sitting still and emptying our minds of all distractions? Could it be the distractions?
- Is prayer looking at a tree in Autumn or a Mountain in Summer, is it experiencing a sea breeze or hearing children laugh? If so, what do you think the difference is between prayer and reflection?
- What questions do you have about prayer?

### First Steps ... checking our backpacks



*We were unprepared, underfunded, and unfit... We left home with little more than a trust in our own resources, the desire to do it, and the willingness to accept the experience.*

*Melanie Gow, Walking with Angels*

When is the right time to set out on a pilgrimage? In this case it is now, whether we feel prepared or not. For some of us, we may never feel prepared for a journey of prayer. We may be too busy, too pre-occupied, not holy enough, not spiritually fit enough, not in the mood ... there are plenty of reasons not to get started. We don't need to wait until we are ready, because we are not alone. And because every journey has to start somewhere, even if it is just one very small step. We just need to make the decision to start.

A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step

### Topics for reflection

- How do we feel as we begin this journey?
- In what ways would you like this journey to change your prayer life?
- At what point do necessary provisions spill over into becoming burdensome clutter which weighs us down and makes life harder rather than easier?

### Sharing this journey with others

We have made a commitment to set out on this pilgrimage together, as a group, though within this we may have solitary reflection time.

We will listen and share stories, discuss and reflect, and offer each other help, friendship and support along the way. In doing so, let us hope that we will find new meaning in prayer, and a deepening of our spiritual understanding, and a closer walk with God.

We end this first session with a shortened form of one of the Common Worship Daily Prayer Services.

### **Prayer During the Day (Lent)**

#### **Preparation**

O God, make speed to save us.

**O Lord, make haste to help us.**

Hear my prayer, O Lord, and give ear to my cry;

**hold not your peace at my tears.**

#### **Praise**

Jesus, like a mother you gather your people to you;  
you are gentle with us as a mother with her children.  
Despair turns to hope through your sweet goodness;  
through your gentleness we find comfort in fear.  
Your warmth gives life to the dead,  
your touch makes sinners righteous.  
Lord Jesus, in your mercy heal us;  
in your love and tenderness remake us.  
In your compassion bring grace and forgiveness,  
for the beauty of heaven may your love prepare us.

*Anselm (1109)*

### **The Word of God**

#### *Psalm*

Hear my loud crying, O God :

and give heed to my prayer.

From the ends of the earth I call to you when my heart faints :

O set me on the rock that is higher than I.

For you have been my refuge :

and my strong tower against the enemy.

I will dwell in your tent for ever :

and find shelter in the covering of your wings.

For you have heard my vows, O God :

you have granted the desire of those that fear your name.

So will I ever sing praises to your name :

while I daily perform my vows.

*Psalm 61, 1-5, 8*

**Glory to the Father and to the Son  
and to the Holy Spirit;  
as it was in the beginning is now  
and shall be for ever. Amen.**

### Short reading

Whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

*Matthew 6, 5-8*

### Prayer

Teach us, good Lord, to serve you as you deserve;  
to give and not to count the cost;  
to fight and not to heed the wounds;  
to toil and not to seek for rest;  
to labour and not to seek for any reward,  
save that of knowing that we do your will.

**Amen.**

*Ignatius of Loyola (1556)*

The Lord's Prayer is said.

### The Conclusion

May God bless us and show us compassion and mercy.

**Amen.**

## Session 2 Valleys & Pastures (With the wind at our backs)

### Introductory prayer

You call us, Lord,  
to leave familiar things and to leave our comfort zone.  
May we open our eyes to new experiences,  
may we open our ears to hear you speaking to us  
and may we open our hearts to your love.  
Grant that this time spent on pilgrimage  
may help us to see ourselves as we really are  
and may we strive to become the people you would have us be.  
Amen.

*Jenny Child*

Last week we packed our rucksack and prepared for our journey. Today we begin.

Our journey through prayer begins with prayer when life is good, when our spirits are high. We find ways to pray when we are worried, frightened or fearful, but what and how do we pray when we are comfortable, content and safe? Are we sometimes tempted at these times to live in our own strength and put God back in a box, forgetting how God has helped us in the past or that we will need God in the future?



For the pilgrims walking the Camino having a routine that is embedded at the start of the journey, when they are rested and well provisioned, will sustain them when the aches and pains start to kick in, the weather turns or the walking becomes more difficult. Likewise, having a routine for our prayer life gives us a foundation to help sustain us through both good and not so good times.

### A routine of prayer

Those who live a monastic life have at the centre a routine or 'rule' for their prayer life. The word 'rule' derives from the Latin

'regula' which means 'rhythm, regularity of pattern, a recognisable standard' for the conduct of life. Esther De Waal has pointed out that 'regula' 'is a feminine noun which carried gentle connotations' rather than the harsh negatives that we often associate with the phrase 'rules and regulations' today. This rule is used to create a balanced framework of prayer, work, rest and play. This rhythm becomes embedded in life, a daily reminder of the presence of God to sustain, comfort and rejoice in.

For those not living a monastic life the hope of achieving a daily routine can seem daunting, but we start small and we work within our own lifestyles and commitments...

### Starting Point

Do you have a favourite hymn, psalm or bible passage that you find helpful, that perhaps comes into your mind in times of concern or in times of joy that you can share with the group? It doesn't have to be long; maybe just a line or sentence.

These small snippets can sustain us when we need them or feed us. There are several ways of building a routine of prayer into your life and tonight we want to explore just a few.

The Common Worship Daily Office is a routine of short services including Morning Prayer, Prayer during the Day, Evening Prayer and then Night Prayer or Compline, although the most commonly used tend to be Morning and Evening prayer. Each short service contains three key elements of praise, intercession and engagement with scripture. Some of us may already be familiar with this and perhaps attend church to share this time with others. It can also be done alone at home or wherever you happen to be. There's even a free Daily Prayer app which gives you everything you need on your phone or tablet.

The Daily Office is just one way of creating a routine of prayer into your day using pre-set readings and liturgy, but prayer is about more than just words.

### Using our whole bodies when we pray

St Paul says; "do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you" (1 Cor.6:19), and when King David brings the ark of the covenant back to Jerusalem "David and all the house of Israel were dancing before the Lord with all their might, with songs and lyres and harps and tambourines and castanets and cymbals." (2 Sam.6:5). Now dancing may not be everyone's idea of praise and worship, but there is a long tradition of using our whole bodies in worship and prayer, even if it only to kneel, or how we use our hands when we pray.

Body Prayer is a way of reinforcing or supporting or words when we pray. Some people struggle with words or find that something visual or physical helps them to engage, but there is plenty of evidence in the Bible of how prayer and worship involves our whole selves.

### Exercise

#### Lord's Prayer Body Prayer

*Instructions on p44*

*You may like to join in the Body Prayer, as one of the groups leads us.*

There are several versions of the Lord's Prayer Body Prayer, but putting simple hand and arm movements to this well-known prayer can help us to focus our prayer and engage more deeply with the words. Used in the morning the simple actions could be used to wake our bodies or at night as a slowing down before we rest.



### Discussion topic

How did you find that?

The Daily Office and Body Prayer are just two ways of praying that may or may not appeal. There are so many ways in which we can pray – through art, music, dance, silence etc. Maybe it is more helpful to think about what we want to pray about, or why we want to pray; this may then help us think about how to pray.

## Prayer and relationships

Building on the idea of prayer being something that comes from the whole of who we are - our whole bodies — the teaching of the Body of Christ comes to mind. St Paul talks about Jesus' followers as the Body of Christ, all different but all equally loved. He also talks about the interconnectedness of those following Jesus.

In the Old Testament we find that when someone fell on hard times would be supported. It was the responsibility of first the close family and then wider family up to the level of an individual tribe to ensure that no one went without and that poverty would not spiral out of control affecting future generations. Society was built on the idea of 'we' not 'I'. If one suffers, all suffer, if one is honoured, all rejoice together.

Just like the Camino pilgrimage, where you are bound to spend time walking and resting with others on the way, prayer, whether we pray alone or in a group is always about more than just ourselves. Prayer is a relationship-building process – a relationship with God, a relationship with others and a relationship with the whole of creation.

Think about a relationship in your own life – if it is a healthy, positive relationship there will be times to speak and times to listen, times to rejoice and times to console; it will be something that is nurtured regularly and not just used when one person needs help from the other. This kind of relationship binds us together until we realise that we have become part of a 'we' rather than just a 'me' or an 'I'.



## Mindmaps

Another way of praying that might help us to see these connections is using a technique called mindmapping. Starting with a blank sheet of paper, start in the centre with yourself, then you might add branches that go out to friends, family, your church, the

environment or particular concerns. From there you might start to see that some of these areas link, a friend that is linked to a particular concern such as poverty or a charity because they are in need of help themselves or because they are in need of help themselves or because they are supporting this cause. You can keep returning to the map and adding to it, drawing in connections. As you pray about each branch or item you might find that God helps you to see connections.

### Exercise

On a piece of paper, have a go at this exercise yourselves.

### Discussion topic

Do you see yourself as part of a 'we' rather than an 'I', connected not only to others and God, but the whole of creation? Do we live in a society that naturally does this? If we are able to tune in to this connection, what difference does it make to what you want to pray about and for?

## Examining our lives

We spoke at the start about the temptation to live in our own strength when times are good. We then thought about how a routine or regular practice of prayer helps us develop our relationship with God. This develops how we connect with God, but also each other and the whole of creation. But maybe we're still finding it difficult to connect with God, to see God, hear God, and experience God in our everyday lives within our routine or comfort. We might have stared at your blank sheet of paper and found it difficult to begin

Some of us may be familiar with Ignatian spirituality which is rooted in the experiences of Ignatius Loyola (1491–1556), a Basque aristocrat whose conversion to a fervent Christian faith began while he was recovering from war wounds.

"The world is charged with the grandeur of God" This line from a poem by the Jesuit Gerard Manley Hopkins (Ignatius founded the Jesuits) captures a central theme of Ignatian spirituality: its insistence that God is at work everywhere—in work, relationships, culture, the arts, the intellectual life, creation itself.





As Ignatius put it, all the things in the world are presented to us “so that we can know God more easily and make a return of love more readily.” Ignatian spirituality places great emphasis on discerning God’s presence in the everyday activities of ordinary life. It sees God as an active God, always at work, inviting us to an ever-deeper walk with God.

Prayer opens our eyes and ears as well as our hearts and minds to God’s presence in the world and invites us to work with God.

Prayer is active, involving our hands and feet as much as our heads and hearts. Prayer is exercise for our soul, and as with any other type of exercise, we need to engage in it regularly to build up and maintain our spiritual fitness.

### **The Examen**

Ignatius created the Examen to be a very short form of prayer that can be used at any time. It’s a way of reviewing the day and looking for God’s presence within it. We review our recent past to find God and his blessings, but we also look for the things that didn’t go so well, when we were hurt or made a mistake. We give thanks for the blessings and ask for healing and forgiveness for the mistakes and hurt. After reflecting day, we then look forward and ask God to show us the potential challenges and opportunities and ask for his help and guidance as we meet them.

### **Prayer Activity**

To finish we’re going to try an example of the **Examen** prayer of St Ignatius.

- Make yourself comfortable and spend a few moments clearing your mind and settling.
- There are lots of themes you can use to pray the Examen. As we ponder during this course both the ups and downs of prayer, acknowledging tonight the need to build ourselves up in prayer when times are more positive to sustain us when life is not this way, the theme tonight is on life giving and life draining.
- Firstly, spend a few moments in gratitude, thanking God for one or two small blessings that you have received today
- Now look back over the day and ask God to reveal the moments that were most draining. If you can, imagine yourself back in that situation with God beside you. As you remember what you were feeling at that point during the day, share those feelings and thoughts with God. If you handled that situation well, thank God, but if it didn’t go so well, ask for his peace and understanding.
- Spend a short time listening to see if God has anything to say to you about this situation.
- Now review the day again but this time look for those times and situations that were life-giving, when you felt positive and at peace. Bring these to God to and all that you were feeling at that point in your day. Give thanks and then again, take a few moments to listen to what God might have to say to you about this.

The session finishes with the Grace.

### Session Three Mountains (Changed perspectives)



#### Introductory Prayer

You call us, Lord,  
to leave familiar things and to leave our comfort zone.  
May we open our eyes to new experiences,  
may we open our ears to hear you speaking to us  
and may we open our hearts to your love.  
Grant that this time spent on pilgrimage  
may help us to see ourselves as we really are  
and may we strive to become the people you would have us be.  
Amen.

*Jenny Child*

Welcome to the mid point of our journey of pilgrimage.

Along the path of Camino itself there are mountains to view and traverse although depending on which route is taken, there will be rather more steep climbs, or less.

In many faith traditions mountains are regarded as holy, sacred or 'thin' places, and the Judeo Christian tradition is no exception. We remember Moses' meetings with God on top of Mount Sinai (Exodus 19, 34); Elijah encountering God in sheer silence on Mount Horeb (1 Kings 19), and the accounts of Jesus' transfiguration in all 3 synoptic gospels (Matt 17, Mark 9, Luke 9).

If we turn to think of hills and mountains as places of pilgrimage in themselves, we might look first to the Psalms of Ascent (Ps 120-134) sung as pilgrims climbed up towards Jerusalem, the holy city. Closer to home, we might visit Croagh Patrick in County Mayo, where the July Reeks still draw huge crowds, many of the pilgrims climbing the mountain barefoot.

But as in this course we are exploring 'mountains' as one aspect of the spiritual life and experience, our main focus in this session will be on the experience of the mountain itself; of ascent, reaching the summit and descent, and the effect that this can have on individuals.

#### Starting Point

- Think about a time when you have been to a very high place – a mountain, fell, hill, clifftop, tower etc
- When and where was it- and how did you get to the top? – did you walk, climb, drive, use a lift or cable car, train?
- And how did you come down again?
- Describe what you remember most about the experience.

#### Climbing the mountain



If our spiritual journey can be likened to going up a mountain, then, like any ascent, at least two very basic attitudes are necessary at the start: we have to want to, and we have to believe that it's possible to do so. It might seem a daunting prospect, but thinking about actually going up the mountain can make it less so.

No one tackles a steep incline by trying to go straight up in a direct line. More often, routes are rather like a zig-zag: there's a gradual ascent one way, then back the other. Actually the spiritual journey, in fact any journey of personal growth, is more like a spiral of gradual ascent. We can sometimes get disheartened by encountering the same problems or difficulties we thought we had once overcome. But this simply means that there is more healing work to do, but we are at a higher level.

The following passage plays with this idea further.

I like to think that the fundamental metaphor of the religious life itself is climbing the spiritual mountain all the time, day in and day out, wherever we are and whatever were doing. There are many paths up that mountain, many ways that we can reach the top (although very few people actually get to the summit of the high mountain of spirituality). Those paths may be rough or smooth, steep or gentle, boring or colourful, tiring or exhilarating. Yet ... ultimately they all converge at the very top, as mystics of all religions have told us. For most of us who aren't mystics, though, the point is to experience the journey – to find fulfilment in our pilgrimage on the mountain itself - rather than to miss everything along the way in pursuit of the summit....

The first challenge is ... to pick a path and start ... The next (question) is whether to wander, or to proceed along marked trails and paths. Of course, it's possible to make progress by striking out on one's own and bushwhacking through the brambles and undergrowth. That may seem to promise the most excitement and fun. But it's also a lot easier to get lost this way, to start going around in circles, to become exhausted and burnt out. It can become lonely and frightening if you're by yourself without a path."

*"The Spiritual Mountain" a sermon by Scott McLennan, March 2014.*

### Topics for discussion

- Does this metaphor resonate with you?
- How is your experience similar or different to this?

### On 'Top of the World'

The phrase "mountain-top experiences" may or may not be familiar to us. In the context of our spiritual journey, it refers to those moments of heightened illumination or awareness that can have a profound effect on our lives. In his book *Mysticism* F.C. Happold puts it very well:

Mystical experience is not something confined to those who have risen to the heights of Contemplation ... it can be present in a less developed form in quite ordinary men and women. An experience of the sort may, without unjustifiably stretching the meaning of the word mystical, happen to anyone, sometimes quite unexpectedly; but, when it occurs, it is clearly recognisable. It may happen only once in a lifetime; but when it does happen it brings an illumination and a certainty which can rarely, if ever, be reached by rational consciousness and may change the whole tenor of a life.

*F.C. Happold Mysticism (3<sup>rd</sup> edition).  
Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd. 1970, 129.*

[Here are two personal accounts of such experience.

The psychologist Dr R M Bucke experienced the following: "I was in a state of quiet, even passive enjoyment, not actually thinking...all at once, without warning of any kind, I found myself wrapped in a flame coloured cloud. For an instant I thought of fire, an immense conflagration somewhere close by in that great city; the next instant I knew that that fire was all in myself. Directly afterwards there came upon me a sense of exultation, of immense joyousness, accompanied or immediately followed by an intellectual illumination quite impossible to describe. Among other things, I did not come to believe. I saw that the universe is not composed of dead matter, but is, on the contrary, a living Presence; I became conscious in myself of eternal life ... that I possessed eternal life then. I saw ... that the foundation principle of the world, of all the worlds is what we call love. The vision lasted a few seconds and was gone; but the memory of it and the sense of reality of it has remained...."

*From William James, The Varieties of Religious Experience  
quoted in FC Happold p136*

We are told that Simone Weil avoided prayer as she feared its power of suggestion and wanted to keep her intellectual integrity, yet, she experienced the following

It was during one of these recitations (*of George Herbert's poem 'Love'*) that, as I told you, Christ himself came down and took possession of me. In my arguments about the insolubility of the problem of God I had never foreseen the probability of that, of a real contact, person to person, here below, between a human being and God. I had vaguely heard tell of things of this kind, but had never believed them ... Moreover, in this sudden possession of me by Christ, neither my senses nor my imagination had any part; I only felt in the midst of my suffering the presence of a love, like that which one can read in the smile of a beloved face ... God in his mercy had prevented me from reading the mystics, so that it should be evident to me that I had not invented this absolutely unexpected contact. "

*From Simone Weil Waiting for God  
quoted in FC Happold p141]*

### Topics for discussion

- In recalling "mountain-top experiences", people often talk of a profound change in their perspective. What would you wish to see, or see differently from such a place?
- How could that actually happen?

If the group has looked at the two accounts above:

- What do you make of these accounts?
- Do they remind you of any experiences you may have had?

### Coming down - leaving the mountain

When it comes to "peak experiences" the phrase "what comes up must come down" describes both a necessity and the reality of experience. Whether we examine Biblical references such as the Transfiguration narratives or the writings of the mystics, we see a return to the plain.

As Teresa of Avila observed

This is the reason for prayer, my daughters, the purpose of this spiritual marriage: the birth always of works, good works.

*Teresa of Avila The Interior Castle.  
K Kavanagh, O Rodriguez (trans) Mahwah: Paulist Press. 1979, 190*

Meister Eckhart said

No person in this life may reach the point at which he can be excused from outward service. Even if he is given to a life of contemplation, still he cannot refrain from going out and taking an active part in life.

*D. O'Neal (ed). Meister Eckhart: from whom God hid nothing.  
Boston: New Seeds Books. 1996, 3*

The gift of a profound experience does not make one special, for life carries on and the same challenges are there to be faced.

As the Zen saying has it

Before enlightenment, chop wood, carry water;  
after enlightenment, chop wood, carry water.

But perhaps how and why you do the tasks may have changed. For what is key is that the traveller now carries the inner treasure of a changed perspective, and this can profoundly affect the way they continue their journey, the way they relate to others and their environment. Such experiences may take time to integrate and involve much hard work as the pilgrimage continues.

As we come to the end of this session, it is worth putting in a word of caution here. It is not uncommon after experiencing moments of illumination for the individual to experience a period of despondency, which can for some be quite profound. It is often useful to journey for a while with a spiritual accompanier who has some experience of such changes in the landscape.

### Topics for discussion

- What significant experiences have led to changes in your own perspective?
- How might these have brought about a change in the way you relate to others, yourself and/or God?
- What treasures has your journey during Lent yielded up so far?

### Prayer Activity - Lectio Divina for the group

Lectio Divina is a way to slowly and contemplatively pray the scriptures. Simple to learn, it offers a way to see and interpret Bible texts differently, enabling changes of perspective.

#### To begin

A time of silence is held (1-2 mins) for everyone to relax and begin to set aside the thoughts and conversations from earlier in the session.

**First reading** - the text is read slowly and carefully aloud. Listen carefully, try to be open and receptive - to *listen* with the "ear of your heart."

What phrase, sentence, or even one word - stands out to you?

You may wish to share it with the group, or keep silent

### The Transfiguration

Mark 9.2-9 (NRSV)

Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves.

And he was transfigured before them, and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them. And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus. Then Peter said to Jesus, 'Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.' He did not know what to say, for they were terrified. Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, 'This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!' Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them any more, but only Jesus.

As they were coming down the mountain, he ordered them to tell no one about what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead.

1 minute's silence is held.

**Second reading** - another person reads the same text aloud.  
You are invited to *reflect* on the text.

Try to be aware of what touches you- a thought or reflection that is meaningful.

You may wish to share it with the group, or keep silent.

1-2 minutes' silence is held.

**Third reading:** The passage is read again by somebody else.

You are invited to *respond* spontaneously to the word of God.

Be aware of any prayer that rises up within that expresses the experience.

You may wish to share it with the group, or keep silent.

1-2 minutes' silence is held.

**Fourth reading:** the passage is read for the final time.

You are invited to *rest* in the word, to reflect or to pray and allow God to speak in the silence. Silence is kept.

2-3 minutes' silence is held.

The session finishes with the Grace.

**To extend the practice at home:** After the resting, take the phrase, sentence, or word into your daily activity and listen to it, reflect on it, pray over it, and rest in it as time allows during the day. Allow it to become part of you.

*Some Lectio material drawn from  
[www.contemplativeoutreach.org/.../field-file/lectiodivinalistening.pdf](http://www.contemplativeoutreach.org/.../field-file/lectiodivinalistening.pdf)*

## **Session Four: Deserts and Wilderness (When prayer seems pointless)**

### Introductory Prayer

You call us, Lord,  
to leave familiar things and to leave our comfort zone.  
May we open our eyes to new experiences,  
may we open our ears to hear you speaking to us  
and may we open our hearts to your love.  
Grant that this time spent on pilgrimage  
may help us to see ourselves as we really are  
and may we strive to become the people you would have us be.  
Amen.

*Jenny Child*

### Setting the Scene

The Meseta Central (Inner Plateau) is a vast plain in the heart of Spain which several routes of the Camino pass through. The people of the Meseta have been defined as sober and ascetic with perhaps a touch of visionary madness! It is in the Meseta that the mystical St John of the Cross and the visionary and stubborn St Teresa of Avila find their place. The landscape is neither wilderness nor desert, in fact much of the land is fertile, but for the walker it often demands a great deal of resolve as the flat landscape can be boring and arduous for different reasons.

On week four of our pilgrimage through prayer we meet the challenge of the mundane, the terrain of boredom and, sometimes, the arid landscape of disillusionment.

The Meseta is ... a part of Spain known among pilgrims for its wide skies, dry heat and flat lands, all of which mess with perceptions of time and distance. It is also anticipated as a part of the Camino that is likely to get under your skin, test your mind, confront your heart, and make you wonder a little bit about your connection to this world.

*Nic Freeman, Four days of solo walking through the Spanish Meseta, 2012*

### Starting Point

Have you ever been lost?  
Tell the group, briefly, what happened and how you felt.



### Prayer can be boring

There are many ways in which we can feel lost in our pilgrimage through prayer. It can happen when prayer becomes boring or monotonous or when we feel as though we have lost all connection from God. It is something that we are not very good

at sharing with others and it can provoke a desire in us (and others) to want to “fix it”.

This session does not approach the experience of wilderness as a problem to be solved but as an experience to be acknowledged, maybe even embraced?

In his book, “A Sunlit Absence” Martin Laird writes,

What do we do when a way of praying that had once been satisfying, nourishing, and fervent is now expressed as dry, boring, futile and paralytically unsatisfying? This is no easy matter...

Whatever the case may be, there are important times in the life of prayer when all the juice seems to have run out, and our prayer life seems to have evaporated...

Many, indeed very many, stop praying altogether when met by this brick wall of boredom...

The reason for this aridity is not that prayer is suddenly dying. Aridity sets in for more or less lengthy and difficult periods when our prayer life is deepening and the nature and dynamic of prayer is beginning to change.

*OUP 2011; p90, 9*

### Topics for discussion

- How have you found prayer to be “satisfying, nourishing or fervent”?
- What does it feel like to you when “all the juice seems have run out”?
- Have you ever experienced a sense of aridity or dryness which has heralded the deepening of prayer or a change in the way that you pray?

### Struggling with prayer

Even with the gloss of hindsight, I have to admit that third day was nothing but a hot, torturous drag of burning pain, worsened by bruise-belted stones underfoot and the dreary road-side view that dominated most of the way. As I struggled to pull myself together, keep my head up, focus on the idea of an end, I felt as though my body had failed. Here I was, young, fit, doing ‘all the right things’ to look after myself, and I was being overtaken by people more than twice my age and being given kindly, sympathetic looks from the Spanish nannas who watched pilgrims pass. It was a stab to my ego for sure, and therein lay one of the lessons of my solo Camino: letting go of ego is the best way to carry on with what is good for you (in this case, a slow, pathetic, teeth-gritted plod all the way to Carrion).

*Nic Freeman*

*Four days of solo walking through the Spanish Meseta, 2012*

### Psalm 77: 1-9

I cry aloud to God,  
aloud to God, that he may hear me.  
In the day of my trouble I seek the Lord;  
in the night my hand is stretched out without wearying;  
my soul refuses to be comforted.  
I think of God, and I moan;  
I meditate, and my spirit faints.

You keep my eyelids from closing;  
I am so troubled that I cannot speak.  
I consider the days of old,  
and remember the years of long ago.  
I commune with my heart in the night;  
I meditate and search my spirit:  
'Will the Lord spurn for ever,  
and never again be favourable?  
Has his steadfast love ceased for ever?  
Are his promises at an end for all time?  
Has God forgotten to be gracious?  
Has he in anger shut up his compassion?'

### **Psalm 143. 6-8**

Like thirsty ground I yearn for you.  
Quick, Yahweh, answer me before my spirit fails.

The deep suffering of the soul in the night of sense comes not so much from the aridity she must endure but from this growing suspicion that she has lost her way. She thinks that all spiritual blessing is over and that God has abandoned her. She finds neither support nor delight in holy things. Growing weary, she struggles in vain to practise the tricks that used to yield results, applying her faculties to some object of meditation in hopes of finding satisfaction. She thinks that if she is making a conscious effort to do this and still feels nothing, then she must be accomplishing nothing. Nevertheless she perseveres, plagued by reluctance and fatigue. In truth, though unaware, the soul has been basking in spaciousness and quietude, free from the manipulations of her faculties.

*St John of the Cross, Dark Night of the Soul  
translated by Mirabai Starr. Riverhead Books 2002 p67*

There are many reasons why we struggle with prayer, some of them far too personal to share with a group. However, we often feel that our struggles mean that we don't know how to pray or that we are failing at prayer when in fact they reveal that there are times when prayer is tough or when the way that we pray needs to change.

One of the features of the desert or wilderness is that there are no paths. Whilst the Camino has physical paths it is often the mind and the life of prayer which can wander away from that which is nourishing and leave us feeling dry and empty.

### **An exercise for personal reflection**

You may choose to share this later but please feel free not to.

You will need a blank piece of paper and colouring pencils.

Take a moment to think about your own personal journey through prayer. Where did it begin? What have been the high points and low points for you? When have you felt close to the divine? Can you identify what was happening for you then? Have you ever felt abandoned by God? Can you identify what that felt like?

You may like to try to draw a map or a life-line to help you consider your own pilgrimage through prayer. Try not to judge your experiences but notice, if you can, the different landscapes we have already explored together. Note especially today any desert or wilderness experiences.

(Discussion points are on p34)

The following resources may help you during this personal reflection, or you may choose to read them after the session.

My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end, nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road, though I may know nothing about it. Therefore will I trust you always though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone. Amen.

*Prayer of Thomas Merton*



The dark night is about being fully present in the tender, wounded emptiness of our own souls. It's about not turning away from the pain but learning to rest in it.

*St John of the Cross, Dark Night of the Soul  
translated by Mirabai Starr. Riverhead Books 2002 p23  
, That Night and Day shall be a single whole*

Give me a candle of the Spirit, O God,  
as I go down into the deeps of my being.  
Show me the hidden things,  
the creatures of my dreams,  
the storehouse of forgotten memories and hurts.  
Take me down to the spring of my life,  
and tell me my nature and my name.  
Give me freedom to grow,  
so that I may become that self,  
the seed of which you planted in me at my making.  
Out of the deeps I cry to you, O God.

*George Appleton – adapted by Jim Cotter –  
Cairns for a Journey*

This Beloved of ours is merciful and good. Besides, he so deeply longs for our love that he keeps calling us to come closer. This voice of his is so sweet that the poor soul falls apart in the face of her own inability to instantly do whatever he asks of her. And so you can see, hearing him hurts much more than not being able to hear him... For now, his voice reaches us through words spoken by good people, through listening to spiritual talks, and reading sacred literature. God calls to us in countless little ways all the time. Through illnesses and suffering and through sorrow he calls to us. Through a truth glimpsed fleetingly in a state of prayer he calls to us. No matter how halfhearted such insights may be, God rejoices whenever we learn what he is trying to teach us.

*Teresa of Ávila, Interior Castle translated by Mirabai Starr*

At the end of this time, you are invited to discuss with a partner anything you are comfortable sharing. If you would prefer not to do this, please feel free to sit out.

- How easy or difficult did you find this exercise?
- Have you reflected on your own pilgrimage through prayer before?
- Were there any surprises?
- Is anything troubling you?

### And Yet...

Bidden or not bidden, God is present.

The desert is the logical dwelling place for the man who seeks to be... solitary and poor, and dependent upon no one but God  
*Thomas Merton, "Thoughts in solitude" (Burns and Oates, 1975) p21*

When we come across the wilderness in our prayer life we can feel disorientated and detached from the God we have previously felt close to. It can masquerade as a loss of faith but even the desert can bloom. Desert or wilderness experiences can be among the most frightening of our spiritual journey, and the most enriching – rarely both at the same time and often one seems to cancel the other out.

It is important to listen to our experiences and trust that God is deep within them, even when we have lost all confidence in what that means. Sometimes these experiences can deaden us, sometimes they transform us. The work of the desert is the work of discernment.

To know the dark, go dark. Go without sight,  
and find that the dark, too, blooms and sings."

*Wendell Berry  
Quoted in Barbara Brown Taylor, Learning to Walk in the Dark*

Everything is raw material for prayer, including the darkest parts of our lives... asking for help is only the beginning of prayer, not its end. If God does not immediately remove our difficulties, we have to find a way of working through them; this is where the mysterious business of saying “yes” to God begins.

*Angela Ashwin “Prayer in the Shadows” p15*

#### Verses from Psalm 22

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

Why are you so far from helping me,  
from the words of my groaning?

O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer;  
and by night, but find no rest.

Yet you are holy,  
enthroned on the praises of Israel.

In you our ancestors trusted; they trusted, and you delivered them.

To you they cried, and were saved;  
in you they trusted, and were not put to shame.

But I am a worm, and not human;  
scorned by others, and despised by the people.

All who see me mock at me;  
they make mouths at me, they shake their heads;  
'Commit your cause to the LORD; let him deliver—  
let him rescue the one in whom he delights!'

Yet it was you who took me from the womb;  
you kept me safe on my mother's breast.  
On you I was cast from my birth,  
and since my mother bore me you have been my God.

Each time the Psalmist expresses despair at the abandonment of God, he/she also discovers a new sense of trust and confidence in the God who is deeper than the sense of absence.

#### Topics for discussion

- Has anything new struck you in this session?
- Is there anything you would like to leave behind in this session and not carry away with you?

#### Prayer Activity

The prayer activity to end this session is to share a time of silence together. Some of us will find 10 minutes of silence very easy, others will find it drags on. Some of us will feel that it is prayerful, others that it is empty. The labyrinth, printed on the next page, is only there if you would find it helpful. You are invited to use your finger to trace the journey, as if you were walking it, allowing it to take you into a deep silence, beyond thoughts, beyond the need for understanding, beyond time and place...

O God of the desert pilgrims  
we who are wearied by monotonous days in the sun,  
who are battered by the monstrous whirling winds,  
surprise us yet with a monstrosity of wonder,  
a revelation of love,  
an oasis of refreshment.  
a taste of the harvest,  
a moment of grace.  
*Jim Cotter (Darkness Yielding p114)*

The session finishes with the Grace.



## Session Five The Beach (Resting and doing nothing)

Introductory prayer

You call us, Lord,  
to leave familiar things and to leave our comfort zone.  
May we open our eyes to new experiences,  
may we open our ears to hear you speaking to us  
and may we open our hearts to your love.  
Grant that this time spent on pilgrimage  
may help us to see ourselves as we really are  
and may we strive to become the people you would have us be.  
Amen.

*Jenny Child*

### Starting Point

What is your favourite beach?  
What is it about it that particularly appeals to you?



*Nosa Senora da Barca*



*Coastline at Muxia*

Santiago de Compostela is not actually on the coast. But the sea is only a few miles to the west, and in the film *The Way* Tom Avery and his oddly matched companions go on to Muxia where legend has it the body of St James actually came to rest on the Spanish shore near the shrine church of Nosa Senora da Barca. The main shrine is on a rocky headland, but Muxia also has a number of beaches, and it is these that give us the inspiration for our final session. The pilgrim might well want to go and collapse on one of these to recover at the end of so arduous a journey. In this place of rest we can discover that prayer is simply about stopping: about stopping doing, and stopping thinking: just being - and enjoying it.

Rowan Williams once got hold of this perfectly:

### Sunbathing

Sometimes, it's the surprising images that help people. I think here about sunbathing. I'm not much of a one for sunbathing myself; too much lying around and I get fidgety and a bit guilty. But there is something about sunbathing I think that tells us more about what prayer is than any amount of religious jargon.

When you're lying on the beach or under the lamp, something is happening, something that has got nothing to do with how you feel or how hard you're trying. You're not going to get a better tan by screwing up your eyes and concentrating. You give the time, and that's it. All you have to do is turn up. And then things change, at their own pace. You just have to be there where the light can get at you.

Now people often get the impression that prayer is anxiously putting on your best clothes, and finding acceptable things to say in the right sort of language, generally getting your act together – oh, and concentrating, of course. But when in the Bible Jesus advises his friends about how to pray, he tells them not to worry about any of this.

Just say, 'Father,' he tells them. Just be confident that you're welcome as you would be at home. All you need to do is to be where the light can get at you – and in this case, the light of God's love.

So you give the time and let go of trying hard (and actually that's the really difficult bit). And God is there always. You don't need to fight for his attention or make yourself acceptable because he's glad to see you. And he'll make a difference while you're not watching, just by radiating who and what he is in your direction. All he asks is that you stay there with him for a bit, in the light. And for the rest, you just trust him to get on with it.

*From Pause for Thought with Terry Wogan, Radio 2, 18-10-05*  
© Rowan Williams 2005

### Topics for discussion

- One of the charms of sunbathing is feeling the sun warming your skin, the breeze rippling over it. What occasions can you think of when you have had a similar experience of being warmed or cossetted by God?
- How do you think you could practise doing nothing when you're praying?

There's a type of praying – for some people, for instance, it is regularly saying Morning Prayer or being part of public worship – that is like being thigh-deep in a gently rolling sea, standing on fairly firm sand (though always aware that it's changing beneath your feet with the ebb and flow of the waves), with your back facing towards the gentle waves that break against you, roll around you, wash up you. It's a bit like being immersed, like being washed and held by the waves of the church's long history of worship and spirituality. It keeps you in touch with all that, and sustains you, even if quite often the eye and the mind are caught and distracted by something happening on the seashore, or indeed simply bubbling up seemingly inconsequentially in the mind itself.

Then there's a more trusting sort of prayer, when you let yourself go, lie on your back, trust the sea to hold you. You have to know something of the sea and something of the right position to be in, and it's risky, involving letting go, and it needs real trust, leading you don't know where. This type of prayer can suddenly break in – often only momentarily – when you're resting on the tradition, or it can follow on from it, or just happen somewhere, spontaneously. Or you can simply say 'today I'm going to try and float'. But because it's frightening, unknown, not in your control, unpredictable, it's easy to fight shy of it.

Mark Oakley observes that

Because prayer is a relationship of presence we can often feel frustrated when there appears to be no presence of God with us and we can be tempted to abandon the exercise.

Those who have known lives of prayer have disciplined themselves into necessary routines in order that our response to God is not simply based on our changeable moods and feelings.

*Mark Oakley, The Collage of God, London: DLT, 2001; 72*

### Topics for discussion

- How do you sustain your praying from day to day? If you find standard/set forms of prayer helpful, even when they don't seem to be 'doing' very much, why is this? If not, what do you do to 'keep in touch with God'?
- There isn't only one way in which to pray. So in what ways might it be useful to let one form of praying be the place where you allow yourself to launch or drift into another? What are the benefits and what are the perils?

Using rest in this manner, apparently doing nothing, is a way of becoming more aware of God. One of the authors of this course puts it this way:

I have never had an intimate relationship with God or Jesus in the way that many Christians talk about it. Indeed, I often seem to relate to God as I do to the horizon. It is always there, an inescapable feature of living on earth. As times the horizon is bounded, fenced in as it were by the garden hedge. Sometimes it is purple and knobbly, both comforting and beautiful, like the distant ridge of the Malvern Hills seen from many parts of the Severn Valley. Sometimes it is immense and breath-taking, a seascape calm, blue and distant; sometimes darkly grey, threatening and very close. So with God: God is always there. The analogies are true. But as I cannot always be in touch with, aware of the horizon, so it is with God.

And yet this awareness is not like any other knowing. It is not demonstrable to sense, by sight or sound. It is an act of faith, and like every act of faith it is a risk, it may not be true: it could be a human creation, a projection, a personification of our need to have something of greater, of ultimate value.

But if it is true, then I find I am relating to the God who is the ground, the source, the purpose of all Being, of my being; closer to me than I am to myself. And yet at the same time I'm aware that God is utterly different, Other, greater than the greatest we can think or imagine.

### Topics for discussion

- There is a long Christian tradition of contemplative prayer, but the very name and idea puts many people off. Neville Ward describes contemplation as 'the kind of prayer in which the mind does not function discursively but is arrested in simple attention'. In what ways does the material in this session help us
  - to experience contemplation for ourselves?
  - to understand prayer as simply being 'in the presence of God'?
- Modern thought categories – eg an existentialist based understanding of God such as is expressed in the previous extract – are often seen as being in conflict with traditional Christian understandings. In what ways does the image of prayer as resting, as doing nothing, help provide a bridge between our spiritual lives and our intellectual understanding?

- **Prayer activity.**
- Sit up as straight as possible, feet firmly on floor, body relaxed, hands joined in your lap
- Close your eyes
- Concentrate on the physical feelings of breathing in and breathing out
- Focus on feeling the cold air entering your nostrils and the warm air when you exhale
- (most people find their breathing becomes deeper and slower; if you start becoming breathless, stop)
- Let the in-breathing express all that you long for and the out-breath express all that you want to let go of
- Alternatively, as you breathe in say 'Lord Jesus' and as you exhale say 'Have mercy' (this is the simplest form of the Jesus Prayer, one of the uses of which is to focus our attention away from ourselves and on to Jesus/God)
- Keep doing this for five minutes.

This is an exercise of finding stillness, for putting ourselves on the beach, under the sun, for allowing ourselves to stop and rest on God.

The session finishes with the Grace.

We shall not cease from exploration  
 And the end of all our exploring  
 Will be to arrive where we started  
 And to know it for the first time.

*T S Eliot, Little Gidding*

Always we begin again.

*Rule of St Benedict*

The body prayer exercise

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sxWOfNqobNY>

Our Father in heaven	starting with prayer hands, circle up
hallowed be your name,	circle up
your kingdom come,	circle down
your will be done,	circle down
on earth as in heaven.	circle down
Give us today our daily bread.	circle up and open hands
Forgive us our sins	open out arms
as we forgive those who sin against us.	cross arms over chest
Lead us not into temptation	open crossed arms up
but deliver us from evil.	keep arms up
For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours now and for ever. Amen.	circle down to prayer hands



The Grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,  
and the love of God,  
and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit,  
be with us all evermore.  
Amen.