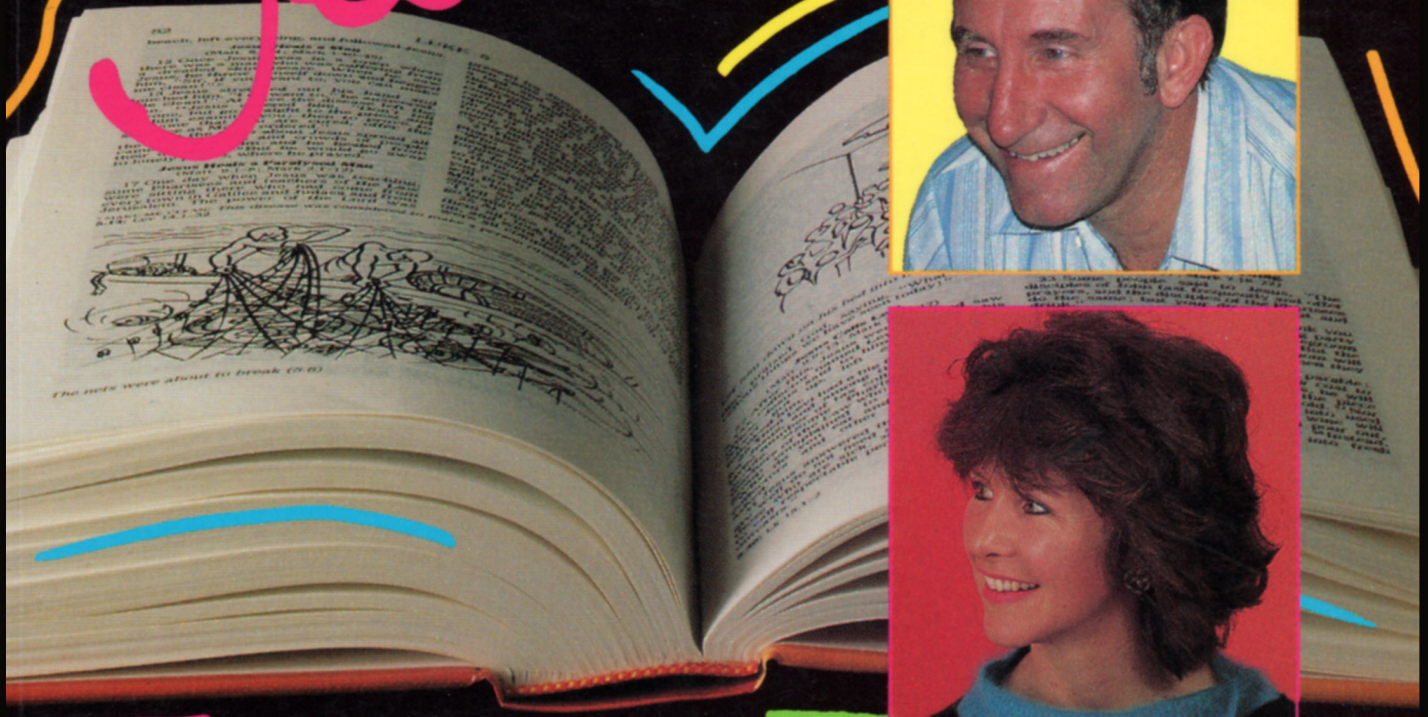
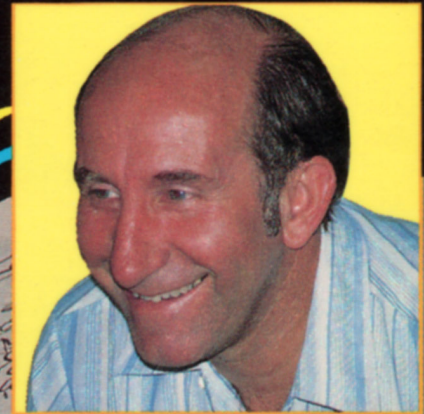


18 Scripture
meditations
for groups

Encounters with Jesus



Edited by
Craig Mitchell

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Uniting Education

Melbourne

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Edited by Craig Mitchell
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Introduction

A simple woman always walked around with a bulky Bible. Never would she part from it. Soon the villagers began to tease her: 'Why always the Bible? There are so many books you could read!'. Yet the woman kept on living with her Bible, neither disturbed nor angered by all the teasing. Finally, one day she knelt down in the midst of those who laughed at her. Holding the Bible high above her head, she said with a big smile: 'Yes, of course there are many books which I could read. But there is only one book which reads me!'.¹

Perhaps you are familiar with Bible studies that involve reading the Bible verse by verse then thinking about what those verses mean for our lives today. This book is different. It is for groups who want to explore the Bible *using their imaginations* - an approach with a long and respected history in the Christian church. Each meditation invites people to approach the gospel stories about Jesus as a way of entering a prayer dialogue with God. In this way God reaches out to us and 'reads' us through the Bible stories.

Whether you are leading a worship service, conducting a study or discussion group, or planning a spiritual retreat, this book provides a rich resource of creative, prayerful reflections based on the gospel stories of Jesus.

The book is aimed at older youth and adults. If this kind of activity is new for your group, it will be important to explain what is going to happen. An introduction for such groups, 'Using the meditations' begins on page 5.

We encourage you to seek opportunities to be a participant in meditations led by experienced leaders. You will learn much from them about how to lead sensitively. We also encourage you to be creative in developing your own meditations based on Scripture.

Our prayer is that this resource may help you and those you lead to deepen and enrich your relationship with our God through Jesus Christ.

Craig Mitchell

Editor

¹ Hans_Ruedi Weber, *Experiments with Bible Study*, WCC, Geneva, 1981.

Using the meditations

These meditations provide a wonderful opportunity for groups to explore Bible stories with fresh eyes and to become involved in a rich prayer experience. The reflection and discussion which follow the meditations will give groups the opportunity to deepen their faith sharing. They are suitable for a range of group settings and for personal use.

Whether you are leading a meditation for the first time or have long experience in this approach, there are some simple practical matters which are important. Take time to read these carefully.

Where meditation is a new experience for any of your group members, an explanation of the approach is crucial if it is to be a good experience. As leader it is important to realise that not everyone may find meditation easy at first. There are several possible reasons for this:

- * some people will have things on their minds that make it hard to focus on the meditation
- * some people may be tired and fall asleep
- * some people find it hard to sit still and be reflective at any time
- * some young people may not be mature enough to enter into extended inner reflection.

Don't be too discouraged by people telling you afterwards that they got nothing out of it, or fell asleep. This is not unusual! Meditation becomes easier with practice.

Approach the time prayerfully. Your inner preparedness does make a difference. **Treat the time as God's special gift to each person present.** While the meditation is reflective it need not be solemn, so expect that you and others will enjoy the experience.

Introducing the meditation

Here is an introduction you can use with a group if some or all of them have not participated in a meditation such as this before.

Today/tonight we'll be sharing together in a different approach to exploring a story about Jesus from the Bible. It's something you may have done before by yourself, but perhaps not in a group.

We'll each be using our imagination to explore in detail

- *what might have happened in the story,*
- *what the scene looked like, how people felt,*
- *what it was like to hear Jesus' words for the first time,*
- *what hopes and fears the people around Jesus might have had.*

After we have read the story from the Bible itself I'll be asking you to close your eyes. Then I'll guide your thoughts by re-telling the Bible story, adding some detail and questions to help you imagine what happened.

We won't just be day-dreaming about Bible times; this reflection time will be a kind of prayer. Throughout the meditation you'll be asked to think silently about how it speaks to you about your relationship with God today and how God wants you to live. So although you'll be listening to me, you need to imagine that I'm in the background, and focus on what God wants to say to you and what you want to say to God.

During the meditation time I will be pausing so you can imagine the scene, get in touch with your thoughts and feelings about the story, and talk with God in prayer about what you are experiencing. Some of the pauses will seem short, some will be longer. Don't worry about the silence; use it as your personal space to spend precious time with God.

After the meditation we'll be sharing together what we discovered through the experience. You won't have to share anything that you wish to keep personal.

If you find this activity difficult to get into, that's okay. Many people do at first. To help you we'll begin with a centring activity to help us relax and put today's concerns out of mind. In the meditation try to activate all your senses - seeing shapes and colours, hearing voices and sounds, even smelling what the scene would have been like. Allow yourself to explore the feelings you have about the story.

This time is your time - God's special gift to you today. Enjoy it.

The Setting

People will enter more easily into the meditation if they feel comfortable - if they are too comfortable they will fall asleep! If you have a choice about the room, make sure that it is not so large that the group feels small within it. Chairs that are too hard or too soft can also be a distraction. You will need to help people find a comfortable posture for the meditation. There are three common options, although others are possible:

- sitting upright on a chair with feet together and hands on lap;
- sitting cross-legged on the floor with back straight and hands in lap;
- lying on one's back on the floor.

People need enough space so that they are not touching others. You may find that a song or hymn of worship helps the group prepare for the meditation. Your vocal warmth and confidence will also help people relax.

The Bible reading

With each meditation, the section 'Setting the scene' gives an introduction which you as leader may read for your own benefit or share with the whole group. The nature of this material will tell you whether it is best read before or after reading the Bible passage. You may wish to allow comment or questions about this material before proceeding with the meditation.

Try to be creative in your presentation of the Bible reading itself so that the story comes to life and people can hear it afresh. Use of characters, responsive reading, and background music are simple ways to improve the story-telling.

In most cases the meditations do not require a particular translation of the Bible passage; you can choose which to use. In some cases the author has recommended a personal preference. Sometimes using a translation with which people are unfamiliar allows them to take extra note of what is being said.

Centring exercises

These brief exercises help people to relax their bodies and put aside the concerns and pressures of the day in order to centre their thoughts and feelings on God. Bodily tension is a sure sign of stress. Meditation involves getting in touch with our inner world, and we can do this best when we are physically relaxed (or relaxing). The centring experience itself feels good as a way of unwinding. Don't rush or avoid it.

Some of the meditations in this book require a particular introduction. In these cases use the Centring exercise printed with the meditation. For most of the meditations however you can make a choice from the exercises in the following section.

An additional aid to centring is the use of a mantra or breathing prayer. Invite people as they breathe to repeat silently a simple prayer, one phrase as they breathe in and one as they breathe out. Some examples are:

Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me

Spirit of God, fall afresh on me

Holy, holy, holy Lord, God of power and might

You can allow this to go on for at least a minute. Simple repetitive songs can help in the same manner. The music of the Taize community is ideal for this purpose.

Leading the meditation

The important thing about leading a meditation is that the main activity takes place not between you and the participants, but between each individual and God. Your role and the role of the meditation is to enable the group members to dialogue with God in prayer. How deeply this takes place is more up to the individuals participating than it is to you. This is why leading a meditation is different from story-telling. In telling a story you want to be as dramatic as possible to keep people's attention. In leading a meditation if you are too dramatic and descriptive people will focus too much on the story details and not enough on their inner prayer dialogue. This doesn't mean you should try to bore people; telling the story with feeling and drama is still important.

You must practise reading the meditation aloud to yourself beforehand at least twice. This will minimise the chance of stumbling as you read and allow you to get a feel for the emotion of the story.

Pauses in the meditation are marked with an asterisk (*). The appropriate timing for these is up to you to decide. Don't allow less than about 15 seconds, but you may certainly allow much longer. Generally speaking, the less experience the group has with meditation, the less comfortable they will be with long pauses. Ask the group for feedback on this afterwards.

At the end of the meditation, allow people gradually to return to the everyday. Don't rush them. Say something like this: 'Slowly bring your time with God to a close. When you are ready, bring yourself back to the present place and open your eyes!'

The reflection process

Make choices about what material to use according to the type of group and the time available. It is not recommended that the meditations be used without any reflection; personal reflection time is fine however.

There are generally two aspects to the reflection: describing and exploring people's thoughts and feelings from the meditation itself, and reflecting on their present faith experience in the light of the meditation. Both are important for the meditation to be helpful. You will need to decide how much time to allocate to each phase. Feel free to add your own questions or opportunities for people to express their responses with drawing, music, poetry or sculpture.

The aim of meditation is to help people have a deep experience of God, so it is important to approach it seriously and not just as a short devotion or a new gimmick. People may be quite profoundly moved through their encounter with God, even to the point of tears. Some may find that powerful memories, fears, guilt or grief are unlocked by the experience. The group reflection processes offered in this book will not be sufficient to deal with such deeper reactions. It will be absolutely critical that you help people one-to-one if this happens, either immediately by someone taking them outside to talk or straight after the group time finishes. **Please do not even attempt to lead a meditation if you are unwilling to follow through in this way.** It is even possible that people whose deep needs surface will require follow up counselling to deal with them. If this seems likely, be sure to seek advice from a minister or trained counsellor.

Using meditations in worship services

Guided meditations on Scripture passages can be used quite effectively in services of worship. However because of the unique setting a number of important factors must be taken into account, otherwise the experience can be quite negative for some people.

Firstly you need to decide whether the meditation takes the place of the sermon or message, or whether it is seen as a supplement. If it does replace the sermon, normally it will be helpful to give some commentary on the Scripture passage at the time it is read.

It is reasonable to assume that a significant number of people in the service will not have participated in a guided meditation such as these, therefore an explanation will be essential. The choice of Centring exercise needs to suit the venue. Becoming still and 'centred' may be more difficult for people in a large public gathering which has a multitude of minor distractions. For this reason it is essential that the Centring exercise is not rushed or omitted, although the form may be simplified.

In most worship services you will not have the open-ended time frame available in other settings, so it is wise to choose a shorter meditation or to abbreviate one. Again it is vital not to rush the experience. Where children are present, their attention span should be taken into account, as well as the appropriateness of the language used in the meditation. The meditations in this book are not written with children in mind, and would need to be adapted for this purpose.

As always, some reflection or discussion following the meditation is very important. This may be achieved through small group sharing, a series of questions with silent reflection, or group discussion following the service. It is much more difficult to follow up people needing individual attention, and the opportunity for this needs to be clearly explained and readily available.

Centring exercises

To help you prepare for this experience begin by doing some very energetic stretching, bending, running on the spot or whatever aerobic exercise you can cope with to get your heart really pumping. Maintain this for a couple of minutes. * Then sit in a comfortable chair and place your hand over your heart so you can feel your heart pounding. * Get in touch with how your body feels - name out loud some of these feelings. * Now take some deep, slow breaths and concentrate on calming your body down. * As you breathe more slowly and your heart pounds less, experience a deep sense of peace flowing through your whole body. * Name aloud some of the feelings now. * Enjoy the deep sense of relaxation.

(Sue Fairley)

Prepare yourself to enter into this time of meditation. Sit upright in your chair, and place both feet firmly on the floor. Slow down. Relax. * Empty your mind of all the things that usually fill it - your family, work, any concerns. * Welcome the silence. Become aware of the presence of God. * In silence, welcome God's Word. Repeat slowly in your mind the phrase, 'God of love, open my mind and heart to receive your Word'.

(Hugh McGinlay)

Relax and take up a comfortable position with your legs uncrossed, your back straight, your hands resting gently on thighs or knees. * For a short while we will be leaving the twentieth century behind with any of its problems, plans, or other matters. To help you do this, picture a basket on the floor beside you. * Think of any worries, concerns, problems, plans that are in your mind at the moment, and in your imagination drop these into the basket to stay there until the end of this meditation. They will still be there for you to take away again, unless you have handled them in some other way. Take a short time to identify these possibly distracting thoughts and put them aside for a time. *

(Keith Pearson)

Lie on your back on the ground, far enough away from others that you can stretch out your arms without touching them. Lie with arms outstretched and feet apart in a star shape. Close your eyes and take a few moments to start to relax. * As you breathe, imagine your whole body becoming lighter and lighter, your weight gradually disappearing. * You begin to feel so light that your body could float on air. Sense this lightness in your body. If any part starts to feel heavy, imagine the weight drifting away from it. * Your body is so light it could float on a cloud. Imagine yourself floating on a beautiful, fluffy, white cloud in the sky. Around you the sky is clear and blue, the sun is shining. Enjoy the freedom and warmth. * The wind gently blows your cloud along. Sense the gentle movement. Imagine yourself drifting high above the land and ocean. * Now the cloud gradually lowers your body through the air towards the earth. * Feel yourself gently being placed back on the ground. Relax into the security of the ground below you. *

(Craig Mitchell)

To prepare for this meditation, sit as comfortably as possible, with legs not crossed and with hands not touching each other. Close your eyes. * Become aware of the tension in your body. Focus your attention on each muscle group in turn, and consciously allow them to relax. Begin with your feet, then calves, then thighs, buttocks, stomach, chest and back. * Pay particular attention to the shoulders, for much tension from anger and frustration finds its way into the shoulders. Allow your arms and hands to

relax. Let the chair or the floor do all the work of holding your body up. * Relax your neck muscles, keeping only enough tone to hold the head upright. Be aware of the muscles around your eyes and mouth, and let them relax. Make sure that your teeth are not clenched. * Then become aware of your breath. Do not try to control it. Your breathing is completely automatic. As your body relaxes, your breathing will become slower and deeper. As this happens, be an observer of your breath. Just allow the air to flow in through your nostrils and mouth down into your lungs, where the oxygen is automatically exchanged for carbon dioxide as you breathe out. Breathe out your tension. With every breath allow your whole self to become more and more calm, peaceful, and relaxed. *

(Ted Witham)

Find a comfortable position, sitting upright but relaxed, feet and hands uncrossed, eyes closed. * Become aware of your breath as it comes in and leaves your body. * Take 3 deep breaths. * Relax every part of your body - your legs, * your stomach, * your back, * your arms, * your shoulders, * your neck. Let all tension drain out of body. With each breath you take imagine tension being released so that you feel warm and relaxed. * For a moment imagine yourself in a place that feels good for you - maybe a secluded beach, maybe deep in a rain forest, maybe sitting by a log fire on a cold winter's evening. * Picture yourself in your place, relax and enjoy the feeling of peace and contentment that comes with being somewhere special. ** Take a deep breath. Stay in the same relaxed position and begin to focus your attention now on the setting of the Bible story.

(Colin Ray)

Find a position where you can be relaxed but alert for the meditation. * Take a few moments to pay attention to your body and adjust until you are in a relaxed position. * Observe the symbolism in your posture - the floor or the chair supports you; God holds you. * Listen to any sounds that might be present - in the room, outside the room, in the neighbourhood. Try not to resist or resent the sounds, just allow them to be present. * Begin to notice the rhythm of your breathing - the gentle rhythm of life itself. As you breathe in think about breathing in life, goodness, stillness. As you breathe out think of anything you might wish to release to God. * Use a word that helps you to recollect the presence of God or Jesus - 'Jesus', or 'love', or 'peace'. * Stay with your word and the quietness for four or five minutes. At some point offer an unspoken prayer that the Holy Spirit will help you to pray and reflect.

(Ann Siddall)

Stand in a circle and face one direction (clockwise or anti-clockwise). This relaxing exercise will begin with some walking around the room in this circle. You need to avoid bumping into other people and respect their space. Although we will walk with eyes open we will be using our imagination at the same time. Begin to walk in the direction you are facing at a strolling pace. * As you walk gently swing your arms, allowing them to loosen from the shoulders down to your fingers. * Now be aware of the feeling in your legs as you walk. Enjoy the feeling of this stroll as you step and stretch your legs. * As you walk imagine yourself outdoors on a grassy field. The sun is shining and the day is warm. * There are trees nearby and you can hear birds singing. You may recognise the place as somewhere that is special for you. Enjoy the scene. * You see a shady tree, so you stop and sit. * Close your eyes and imagine the beauty of your surrounds. See the colours of the grass, the trees and flowers. Feel the warmth of the sun. Breathe deeply of the clean air. Feel a deep sense of peace in this place. * Now prepare to move in time within your imagination.

(Craig Mitchell)

Concentrate on your breathing, particularly upon the passage of air as it enters and leaves your nostrils. * Count slowly to three for each inhalation and each exhalation. As you do this allow all distractions to leave your mind. Do not rush this process. * Imagine that the air entering your body is God's Spirit, cleansing and renewing your being. * Imagine as you breathe out that God's Spirit is removing the impurities of your life. * Sense the peace that this brings. Enjoy this peace for a while. * If you are distracted, return to focus again on your breathing.

(Arthur Pearce)

Walking on water

Matthew 14:22-32

Setting the scene

This story of a storm at sea is clearly similar to the stilling of the storm by Jesus, both in terms of Jesus' demonstration of power and authority, and in the disciples' lack of trust. However unique to this report is that Jesus' command of the elements produces in them a declaration of faith and worship. So the event is as much about the nature of discipleship as it is about Jesus' power. As those sent out into rough waters by their Lord the disciples are to trust him even when their lives seem to be at risk. At such times, Jesus' words 'Courage! It is I. Don't be afraid!' bring profound comfort.

Bible reading: Matthew 14:22-32

Centring exercise

Move into a relaxed position. Close your eyes and gently become present to yourself, * how your body feels. * Sense the movement of air in and out as you breathe, * the sounds you can hear around you. * Let the sounds flow away and gently become aware of your breathing again. * Feel the cool air as it passes through your nostrils and the warm air as you breathe out. * Feel your breathing become more relaxed as it settles into its own gentle rhythm. You will find that you are being breathed, or your breath is breathing you. * Be aware of God breathing in your breath, and surrender right into the breathing of the Spirit in you. *

Now imagine yourself somewhere by the sea. * What time of day is it? What is the weather like? * Look at the sea. What are its colours? Is the sea rough or smooth? * Hear the sound of the waves. * What are you doing? What do you want to do? * Stay there near the sea, feeling the wind and the sun, hearing the waves break. *

Meditation

Now move in your imagination and feelings into the gospel story Matthew tells. What do you see as you stand on the shore of the Sea of Galilee? * Who is there? * Which of the disciples do you notice particularly? What do they look like? * What are they doing? * Where are you and what are you doing? Are you by yourself or with someone? * Can you see Jesus? What is Jesus doing? * Does he notice you? What happens? * Jesus tells the disciples to sail across the lake. You are longing to get into the boat with the disciples, or maybe you are one of the disciples. Picture how it happens that you find yourself in the boat. * How do you feel? * What do you do and who are you with? * Have you noticed what Jesus is doing? The gospel says he went up into the hills by himself to pray. * Do you see him going? What are you wondering? *

As you begin to sail off, what do you see as you look back to the shore? * Who are you with and what are they saying to one another? to you? Perhaps they are talking to each other about the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand that has just happened. * As you sail, it changes from afternoon to evening very quickly. Night comes and it is totally dark; the waves are very rough. There is nothing in sight and the boat begins to rock dangerously. * What are you feeling? * Let yourself feel fully the sense of being caught in a long battle with wind, waves and exhaustion. * What do you do? * What are the others doing and saying? * Suddenly, you cannot believe your eyes because you can see a figure walking across the water towards you! * The disciples near you are quite terrified. What are they saying? What do they do? * What do you feel? * What is the fear like? How do you show you are afraid? * Of what are you afraid? *

You are amazed and relieved when you hear the familiar voice of Jesus saying, 'Courage! It is I! Do not be afraid!'.* What do you feel then? * What do you do? * You are even more amazed when Peter asks Jesus to tell him to come to him across the water. What do you feel then? about Peter? about yourself? * How does Jesus respond? * Listen to him say the one word: 'Come!'. What do you feel as you hear that? * Perhaps you have become Peter, or perhaps you watch marvelling at his daring as he gets out of the boat and begins to walk on the water. What are you feeling? * Do you have any sense that Jesus is saying 'Come!' to you? *

You watch Peter caught in the strong wind, you see the fear in his face, and you feel fear. Your heart lurches for him and for yourself. What is in your mind and heart at this moment? * You see him stretch his hands out in desperation, and in the howl of the wind you hear him call out 'Lord, save me!'.* You find you are calling out loudly to Jesus too. What are you calling? * What do you need Jesus to do for you? *

You see Jesus reach his hand out to Peter and to you. * You see Peter take his hand, and you too place your hand in the hand of Jesus. * Between your tears of joy and relief you look into Jesus' eyes and you hear him say, 'Why did you doubt?'. * As Peter and Jesus get into the boat, you notice that the sea is calm. There is a clear sky and gentle breeze. * You are amazed, and you see the total astonishment on the faces of the other disciples. * You see them bow down before Jesus in wonder and worship. What do you do? What do you say? * Stay in this moment for as long as you wish. *

Personal and group reflection

1. Share what you like of your experience in the meditation.
2. Do you remember a time when you had a sense that Jesus was calling you to come to him? How did you respond? What were the things that held you back from a fuller response?
3. When has there been a time when you felt great fear or terror? What happened? Where was Jesus in that experience?
4. Draw Jesus saying 'Come' to you. Draw your response.

Closing prayer

Read Psalm 27 in sections as follows: verses 1, 2 and 3, 4, 5 and 6, 7 to 10, 11 to 14. Invite people to pray aloud or silently after each set of verses. Finish with this prayer:

*Lord Jesus Christ,
as we seek you amidst the wild storms we face,
speak again your words of peace and assurance:
'Courage! It is I. Don't be afraid!'.
Be for us the rock of hope and truth.
May we confidently reach out to others in times of chaos
with your strong hands and words of comfort,
bringing your calm.
Amen.*

Elizabeth Cain

The Scripture quotations used in this meditation are from the Good News Bible.

Who's in charge here?

Matthew 21: 33-46

Setting the scene

This parable is part of a section dealing with the issue of Jesus' authority. Previous questions by the chief priests and Pharisees regarding the origin of Jesus' power have displayed a wrong understanding of authority. Only God has authority and the Son of God, like everyone else, can do authoritative actions only when these acknowledge and show God's authority. Any other view leads to rejection of God's servants, God's Son, and even to a denial of God's authority ultimately.²

Bible reading: Matthew 21:33-46

Read the passage as a dialogue between the storyteller and some listeners who read verse 41, then a narrator who reads verses 45-46.

Centring exercise

Sit or lie down comfortably, close your eyes and let us take a mental holiday. * Clear your mind of thinking and just listen to your breathing for a few moments. Let it become slower and deeper until you feel truly relaxed. *

We are driving in the country on a lovely late summer day with clear blue skies and a comfortable warmth of the sun. * There are signs of the coming autumn in the paddocks and on the trees. * We see no humans as we drive along, only animals resting or grazing. * The breeze is very pleasant and we can really appreciate the beauty of the natural landscape. *

Meditation

Now we have come to some farms. There are vineyards lining the low hills around this valley. * We turn into the entrance of one of the vineyards and proceed slowly up the long dirt road towards the house. * It takes some time to climb the hill and we wind between the rows of grape vines lush with leaves and ripe bunches of grapes. It looks like it has been a good season - those bunches are so long and large. We've never seen so many bunches on one vine. There's plenty of work for the pickers this year. *

Here's the winery at last. Quite an impressive building. Let us find the office. * No one here. Maybe they are out the back working. * No, the place seems deserted. They've gathered quite a bit of the harvest in already. The smell is almost overpowering. Let's see if we can find someone at the house. * 'Hello, anyone home?' * It sounds like afternoon tea time.

'Hi, Bill asked us to collect the rent. He's away for a while. * What do you mean? No? You owe him that money! * But it is obviously a great year! You've made a packet. * Hey, wait a minute! Take your hands off. You can't do that! Leave her alone. * Hey, that's not fair. Ouch, that really hurt! Let go of me! * Stop that immediately! No, no let us go! * You've killed her, you fools! * We'll be back in force. Come on, let's get out of here now.' *

That was a near escape. Let's 'phone the boss. 'Boss, we'll need to take quite a few with us. That's a nasty crowd. They killed two of us and beat up the rest. * OK, we'll try again for you.'

'Hello, your payment is due and we want no funny business this time. * We're here on his authority. He's the owner, after all! * You owe it to the owner! We're just employees like you. It's his business, not ours. * Hey, no matter how many we are, we've got no chance against that! HEL-L-L-P!'

Personal reflection

Allow ten minutes for people to reflect individually as follows.

Write or draw your feelings and thoughts after being beaten up and maybe killed in doing your job for the owner.

How do you feel about those tenants?

How do you feel about the owner?

What do you think of his orders?

How do you feel about his support of you?

How realistic is the owner?

What rights do the tenants have?

What are their responsibilities to you and the owner?

Group reflection

1. Invite people to share their individual work with the others in the group, either all together or in small groups.

2. Now re-read the parable. Discuss the parallels for prophets and Christians over the centuries who have tried unsuccessfully to get the religious group in power to listen to God's word for change. Who are the servants today being beaten up by the current tenants of the Kingdom vineyard? What are our responsibilities towards them?

3. The chief priests and Pharisees realised the parable was speaking about them. Of whom is it speaking today?

4. Note how the parable itself does not declare the punishment of the tenants in verse 41. Who makes this judgment in Matthew's Gospel? What might be the consequence or implication for Matthew's readers? How does it affect us today?

5. How much authority does God have in this story? How much power? When and how is that power used? What are the limits of human power in the story? How true are those for today?

Closing prayer

Recall the feelings of hurt and pain for the servants. For some in the group, this pain may be very real. Gather the pain and offer it to God, asking for healing of those wounds. Make confession for times when the pain has driven you away from being a servant - when you saved your life rather than die to enforce God's authority.

For others, make confession for times you have beaten up the servants and killed the prophets or the Son to hold onto power that was not rightly yours; things that did not belong to you.

Make intercession for servants today being beaten in the cause of the Kingdom of God. Pray for the families of those who have been killed: that bitterness may not drive them from God.

Elizabeth Nolan

² Daniel Patte, *The Gospel according to Matthew*, Fortress Press, p. 291.

Release from paralysis

Mark 2:1-12

Setting the scene

Jesus has returned to his home. And everyone in town wants to see him, hear him or get in touch with him. So they crowd in and around the house, their attention rivetted on Jesus. The one who is paralysed may or may not have had any expectation of a cure, but those who take him to Jesus seem to expect this. It is not unusual for caring people to want healing for those they carry around. And it is not unusual for those who are used to being carried to become dependent on their care givers more than they need to be. It is common for frustrated care givers to look to even more competent healers than themselves to work the miracle that their care has not achieved. A belief of the time was that illness was a punishment for sin - some act or attitude that offended God.

Bible reading: Mark 2:1-12

The New International Version is suggested.

Centring exercise

Participants may be seated on a chair or lying on the floor on their backs.

Choose a centring exercise from the earlier section.

Meditation

Focus your attention on the back of your eyelids as though they were a movie screen. * Become aware of any light, colour or movement you see there. * As you watch, you find yourself in another time inside a dimly lit Eastern house in a small town. *

You look around at the mud brick walls and earthen floor. You notice the rammed earth ceiling, and in the darkness you become aware of a figure lying on some thin bedding on the floor. * You move closer to see more clearly. * You see that this person is paralysed in some way. Take note of the ways in which their body is disabled. * Pay attention to any sounds made by the person on the floor. * Watch any movements that occur. * How would you like to respond to the disabled one? * You become aware that some other people have come into view. They are excited and eager. They speak to the disabled one. 'Come on, we'll take you to Jesus', they say. You watch them as they lift up the bed and carry the disabled one down the street. Take note of anything that happens as they go. *

Down the street you see a crowd milling around outside a house. You realise Jesus is inside, but you can't see or hear Jesus. Those carrying the bed try to talk their way through the crowd, but people are intent on reaching or hearing Jesus. They do not let the group pass. What do you feel at this moment? * You listen as the carers plan to break into the house through the roof. What is your response to their decision? * Follow them up the stairs on to the roof. They begin to dig a hole in it. Notice what happens as they dig. *

As you peer through the hole, the others let the person on the bed down through the roof, right at the feet of Jesus. You realise that Jesus is looking up at you. 'You've got a lot of faith', Jesus says. What do you say to Jesus in reply? * How does Jesus respond to you? * Then Jesus looks down at the paralysed one and says, 'Child, your sins are forgiven'. You see the faces of the onlookers go rigid with disapproval. 'Only God can forgive sins', they say. How do you respond to that? *

'Which is easier to do', asks Jesus, 'to declare someone forgiven or to heal them?'. Make your own response to Jesus, and note what Jesus says to you. * Jesus turns

again to the person lying immobile on the floor. 'Get up!', Jesus says, 'Pick up your bedding and go home'. How do you react to this order? * The figure on the bed stirs, straightens, gets up from the bed, picks it up, and walks out of the room. What is your response? * Tell Jesus about it, and listen to the reply. Continue the conversation with Jesus until it is complete for you. *

Personal and group reflection

1. Invite people to complete individually one or more of the following activities:
 - a. Write down the occurrences of the meditation as though you were the paralysed person.
 - b. Write down anything you found noteworthy or puzzling in the meditation.
 - c. Write, draw or act out a 'before' and 'after' sketch of the disabled person. Choose one or more of the behaviours of the released paralytic that you will practise this week. Practise it mentally now.
 - d. Carry on an imaginary dialogue with any character or object from the meditation from whom or which you would like to learn.
 - e. If Jesus were to come along now and tell you to get up and do something, what would it be that you would do?
2. In the whole group or small groups share anything from the above reflection that participants are comfortable sharing.
3. Ask group members when they have been
 - a. too intent on hearing, seeing or getting in touch with Jesus to notice the needs of a disabled person.
 - b. so concerned about forgiveness of sin as to be unable to help another get on with life.
 - c. so concerned about helping another that you would 'tear the roof off' to get help.
 - d. so willing to release another that you would risk offending the church leaders to do it.Repeat the same questions, asking when others have behaved this way in response to individual group members' needs.

Closing prayer

Thank you Jesus for recognising our faith when we bring others to you for healing. Thank you that you trust our ability to get up and do what we can do. Thank you that sin can no longer hold us. We accept your transforming, enlivening energy for our lives. Amen.

Ann Hobson

The storm stiller

Mark 4: 35-41

Setting the scene

The Jews were most afraid of the sea. They believed that if you sailed too far you would fall off the edge of the world into the 'waters beneath the waters'. This fate was total oblivion.

The Jews believed that God was more powerful than anything in God's creation. High praise was given to God for ruling the seas, particularly stormy seas. The Psalmist required praise for God, who 'commanded, and raised the stormy wind, [and] lifted up the waves of the sea', scaring the sailors out of their wits. But then, God 'made the storm be still, and the waves of the sea were hushed'. (Psalm 107:25,29 NRSV)

The Mediterranean was the western boundary of the Jews' world. But even the Sea of Galilee, in the midst of their country, struck fear into their hearts. This large lake is notorious for sudden treacherous storms, and the tough Galilean fishermen of Jesus' time were held in awe for braving Lake Galilee.

Bible reading: Mark 4:35-41

Centring exercise

Choose one of the centring exercises from the earlier section.

Meditation

Picture in your mind a lake. * It is a very calm lake, stretching to the horizon in nearly every direction. You cannot make out the shore on the other side, although here and there you can see high hills in the far distance. * It is pleasantly warm here on the edge of the lake, even though it is nearly evening. You are sitting on the dry sandy shore looking over the lake. * You are feeling quite relaxed. It has been a busy day for you. You are one of the small group following the teacher Jesus around the province of Galilee. You remember some of the day's events. *

Most of the day has been spent with the other disciples. It has been a working day. You hear your friends coming down onto the beach. They are preparing a boat for sailing. * They call you over, and you help sort out sails and ropes. *

You set off in the boat into the lake. The lake is very calm, and from your position down in the boat the water seems even flatter than before. * Your companions are quiet, relaxed, calm, doing only what is needed for the boat in the slow steady breeze. Jesus is already asleep on the stern seat of the boat. *

It grows darker. * You think for a while that the darkness is just night drawing on, but then you see dark clouds coming out of the horizon. * Ahead of the boat you see the black water flecked with white as the wind picks up water and turns it into turbulent waves. *

Suddenly the boat is in the storm. Imagine the storm - thunder, lightning, wind - the tossing, the turning, water spilling over into the boat, the desperate reaching and grabbing, trying to reduce sail, to secure belongings, to hold on tight and not be thrown out. * Feel your fear. Feel the tension in your body, in your hands and arms, in your back. Feel the fear in the pit of your stomach. You fear for your life. *

Jesus is still asleep at the stern, untroubled by the storm. The other disciples begin to shout, their voices puny against the wind. 'Jesus, wake up! Jesus, we're going down! Don't you care? Jesus, live up to your name and save us! Help us!' Feel their despair and frustration. * See Jesus stand in the stern, rocking, holding himself against the sides until he has his balance. * When he is standing, see him raise both hands,

and hear the boom of his shout above the boom of the wind, the tearing and flapping of sail, the cracking of ropes and stays: hear his voice commanding, 'Stop! Be still'. *

Imagine the confusion in your mind and in the sky. Sea and sky teeter for a moment caught between a last orgy of their destructive power and an immense still invisible barrier of energy holding back the force of the storm; holding, holding, and finally conquering its power. * Then the stillness, still as when a boat is becalmed. * No wind, no movement on the water, the boat still and high in the water. The clouds gone, the moon reflects in the still water, making a shiny yellow swathe across the black. *

Feel your body relax again, find its calm again. * Feel the tension go out of your jaw, your shoulders, your stomach, your hands. * Let all the tension go. Let the calm enter into your body. Experience the complete peace after the storm. * Remember that Jesus is near you. * Reflect on that earth-stopping power which brought the storm to an end. * Feel his strong calm, his peace flow into you. * In your imagination, go over to Jesus, kneel or stand before him, and tell him how you feel about his power and his way of protecting you. *

Personal and group reflection

Give each person some lined paper and a pen for journal writing. Ask them to use the following cues for reflection. Afterwards share responses. Alternatively use the points for immediate discussion.

1. Identify things in your daily life which trouble you or make you afraid.

We all have obstacles that prevent us from being calm and relaxed - people, things or situations. Some of these obstacles are actually helpful, because they call on qualities like perseverance and courage. Others are destructive and need to be recognised as bringers of fear. Identify which obstacles bring out your strengths, and which sap your energy. How can the presence of Jesus help you cope with the things that regularly trouble you?

2. Identify places and times in your daily life where you feel relaxed and calm.

Oases of calm are necessary in busy lives to provide a rest. We need to resolve to use the places and times of quiet that God provides, otherwise they simply slip past. How can you use the oases you have identified? You might like to draw a picture of your oasis.

3. Identify things in the natural world which frighten you.

Most people have an understandable respect for dangerous animals and powerful waterfalls or volcanoes. But many people also carry that fear into their minds and are frightened by their imaginations. Identify the animals and situations which bring you fear in your dreams. Do these symbols help you identify things in the real, human world that disturb your calm?

4. Have you ever been scared to death?

Retell in your journal an incident in which you felt in great danger. Do you ever relive some of the feelings of the original experience. How do you cope with those feelings? Identify concrete ways in which the risen Lord Jesus can help you face these fears.

5. Do you recall an incident when the strong stillness of God brought an end to confusion and chaos?

Often people experience periods of great turmoil for which there seems to be no resolution, except that suddenly things fall into place and life goes on in a more

ordered fashion. We often forget to look for God's hand in bringing peaceful resolutions. Recall incidents in which you can now see that God was at work, and give God thanks for that intervention.

6. Identify ways in which you can maintain a sense of peace in your life.

Add your suggestions to these:

Regular prayer, opening yourself to God's presence;

Relaxation and meditation;

Using prayer time to face fears and obstacles;

Identifying fears which arise from no immediate cause and asking God to heal the past source of those fears;

Talking to others about the continual sense of peace which can underlie all our daily ups and downs.

Closing prayer

Stand, hold hands in a circle, and say this benediction, either in unison, or with the leader speaking it phrase by phrase and the group repeating each phrase. Look each other in the eye as you speak.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding,

keep our hearts and minds in the knowledge and love of God: and the blessing of God almighty,

the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit,

be with us all evermore. Amen.

Ted Witham

The Scripture quotations used in this meditation are from the New Revised Standard Version.

Jesus and Mob

Mark 5:1-20

Preparation

You will need a large sheet of newsprint and a felt pen.

Setting the scene

'Mob' is the name of this insane person in the story. When Mark heard the story back in the first century, the name was 'Legion'. To people of the time, that meant a massive Roman military force of 4,000 to 6,000 people, heavily armed and brutally effective in wiping out enemies.

The word 'legion' is still in our language, but the terrifying destructive power it meant may be more clearly pictured in our time if we think of an uncontrollable mob on the rampage. Other words in the story are also less familiar today, but we recognise what they mean. We may not speak of unclean spirits or demons or unclean animals as Jesus and Mark did. But we say things such as 'I don't know what possessed her to do that', or 'What got into you? That's not like you at all!'

This is a story about the power of God, seen in what Jesus did then, and still to be experienced in the face of conflicts that leave us feeling powerless.

Bible reading: Mark 5:1-20

Five people can read these sections with pauses between each: verses 1_5; 6_8; 9_13; 14_17; 18_20.

Centring exercise

Invite everyone to echo the disturbed person's experience in silence as follows. This can be done with eyes open or closed.

wandering screaming - mime a scream of agony

hurting himself - bite your fingers hard

meeting Jesus - mime fear of punishment

accepted by Jesus - mime incredulous joy

sitting at peace - sit relaxed, still, smiling

Meditation

I ran away, of course. The whole thing was so scary. * I don't understand what happened, but I'll try to say what I saw with my own eyes. First, remember that pathetic wild thing who lives in the cemetery and carries on like a werewolf or something. Terrifying, but really not dangerous to anyone but himself. Should you chain them up, people like that? * It does no good anyway. It's sad, but there's nothing you can do. *

The guru from over the border walked right into trouble, though. Oddly enough, they seemed to recognise each other - the strange teacher and the mad person. * The mad one called him big religious names, as if the teacher was almost God. He knelt down, but I think he wasn't worshipping, just begging to be left alone. * The guru talked to him quietly - asked who he was and what he wanted. *

Now here is the frightening part. The crazy was pointing at our pigs, who were doing nothing to hurt anyone. All of a sudden they went mad. I nearly got run over. Something got into them and they went like a lot of lemmings over the edge into the lake and drowned themselves. * When you remember that this guru and all of them over there have a horror of pigs, there's something sinister about it all. *

We were glad to escape, I can tell you. We went to town to tell everyone, and we warned all the farmers they'd better look out for their pigs. If every lunatic around is going to get this stranger to curse their herds there'll be no jobs for any of us! *

And this miracle worker isn't offering to look after anyone. The poor wild thing who isn't wild any more wanted to go back to the border with him, and the guru wouldn't take him. Told him to go home and tell everyone that God is good. * What sort of a life is that? Well, he gets listeners of course. Our whole region recognises that what used to be a wild thing is now a human being. But what a price to pay!

We all went together to this guru, healer - Jesus. We asked him to get out of our country. All we want is to be left alone. * There was quite a mob. Some were screaming with anger at such lack of concern for our livelihood. Others were on their knees, just begging him to go away, for God's sake. * So he got into his boat and went back where he belongs. *

Personal and group reflection

1. One message of the story is about power amid our personal and inter-personal battles. Invite everyone to think about four kinds of power that we can see in the story, in other people, and in ourselves.³ (Write the headings on newsprint.)

Personal power: Strength, self-esteem, confidence. Sometimes obvious, attractive, even charismatic; sometimes hidden but no less real. It brings light, life, warmth, and also reveals darkness and weakness. It is open to misuse.

Dominating power: Force, control, the threat of punishment, chaining up, tying down. It keeps things and people in order, but it breaks the spirit.

Enabling power: Help, delegating, high expectations, responding to hopes, setting free. It results in people discovering unrecognised gifts and acting effectively.

All of these kinds of power are limited. All of them may reach points of helplessness. There is a fourth kind of power which we cannot develop or control, but which we can recognise when it breaks into our experience:

Cross power: God's power to bring good out of what seems to be hopeless, evil or disastrous. This gives us hope when there is no reason for hope except stories and experiences that follow the cross-resurrection pattern.

2. Using the newsprint or individual sheets, make four columns and list examples of each of these kinds of power that we find in the story of Jesus and Mob; in the actions or attitudes of other people; and in ourselves.

3. What causes expressions of power to be diffused or transformed? What does the Bible story reveal about this?

4. Where is chaining-up power used in the church? What should we do about it?

5. Do we really want Jesus in our territory? Why or why not?

Closing prayer

Lord Jesus Christ, by the power of love, you have changed people: some who were evil have become really good; some who were out of control have become calm leaders; some who were destroying themselves have become helpful, healing people. We confess the points where we need to be changed... We believe that you can cleanse us and save us... We are glad you have come into our lives. Amen.

Colville Crowe

³ Donal Dorr in *Integral Spirituality*, Collins Dove, Victoria 1990, pages 104-112.

Blind Bartimaeus

Mark 10:46-52

Setting the scene

Jesus' healing of Blind Bartimaeus is the last miracle recorded in Mark's Gospel. This healing occurs in Jericho as Jesus prepares for the final stage of his journey to Jerusalem, and the events which ultimately lead to his rejection and death on the cross. As with many other miracle stories, Mark seems to portray the story of this incident on two levels. On one level the physical sight of a blind beggar is restored. On the second level, however, Mark portrays Bartimaeus as one who, even before his physical sight has been restored, perceives that Jesus is the promised Messiah. Bartimaeus' faith is evidenced by the fact that he immediately follows Jesus on the way.

In contrast to this, Mark presents the disciples as those who continue to miss the point of Jesus' teaching. Whilst Jesus shares with them that he must go to Jerusalem to pour out his life for humankind, the disciples argue about such things as who of them is the greatest and which one of them will hold the position of greatest honour in the Kingdom of God.

Bible reading: Mark 10:46-52

After the above introduction to the passage by the leader, group members read silently through the story two or three times.

Centring exercise

Choose one of the centring exercises from the earlier section.

Meditation

Imagine that you are one of many travellers making your way to Jerusalem to celebrate the Feast of the Passover. It is hot and dusty as you trudge wearily towards your destination. The little township of Jericho is just coming into sight reminding you that you don't have too much further to go. *

As you have made this journey, you have formed some deep friendships with other travellers. You have shared in conversation about a certain Jesus of Nazareth and the impact that he has made around the region. Some people are even claiming that this Jesus is the Great Deliverer promised by the prophets; others however have seen him as a dangerous heretic who should be silenced. *

Not only, it seems, has this Jesus performed many miracles, but he has also challenged a lot of the teachings of the priests and teachers of the Sacred Law. He has also shown great compassion on such people as foreigners and those with disabilities and sicknesses.

You have even heard that there is a plot developing in Jerusalem to kill Jesus. Even though some of his closest disciples have pleaded with him not to go there, Jesus has stated that he must go in order to be faithful to the mission assigned to him by God. *

As you draw up to the outskirts of Jericho, you become aware of a crowd that is forming in the street ahead. You notice that the crowd is very excited, with people rushing to get a good vantage point. * You and your companions hurry to see what all the excitement is about. One of the people from Jericho explains that Jesus of Nazareth will soon pass by. Excitedly you line up on the side of the road and strain to catch a first glimpse of this Jesus. * Soon word passes down the line that Jesus is coming. People begin to shout their greetings to Jesus, and then he comes into your sight. *

This seems to be the signal for a blind beggar who has been sitting quite close to you on the side of the road to cry out in a loud and raucous voice, 'Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!'. * The people of Jericho become impatient with this man. 'Be quiet Bartimaeus', they shout at him. But Bartimaeus only cries out louder. *

Then Jesus comes into sight. How do you feel as you catch your first sight of Jesus? How do you feel as Bartimaeus clamours for Jesus' attention, despite the cries of those in the crowd for him to be silent? * As Jesus draws almost level with you, he stops. He has heard the cries of Bartimaeus. Ignoring the protests of the crowd, Jesus asks that the blind beggar be called to him. * Bartimaeus throws away his cloak, rises to his feet and stumbles through the crowd, pushing past you to stand before Jesus. The crowd becomes silent as this drama unfolds. *

What thoughts pass through your mind as Jesus fixes his gaze on Bartimaeus and asks him, 'What do you want me to do for you?'. * How do you feel as Bartimaeus replies without hesitation, 'My teacher, let me see again.'? *

Jesus reaches out to Bartimaeus and says, 'Go; your faith has made you well'. A gasp goes around the crowd as Bartimaeus regains his sight and moves to join Jesus and his disciples on the road. * As Jesus prepares to move off, he catches your eye. For a moment he fixes his gaze on you in an enquiring way. You recall the question that he asked Bartimaeus: 'What do you want me to do for you?'.

As Bartimaeus prepares to move off with Jesus on the road to Jerusalem, Jesus' eyes seem to invite you to join him on the way. What do you do? What new insights about yourself and about God do you now see? *

Personal and group reflection

Allow participants time to work individually at writing significant insights from the meditation on paper.

1. Share something of your experience of the meditation.
2. How did you feel when you caught your first sight of Jesus? What did you notice about him that sticks in your memory? Did Jesus appear any different to what you may have imagined he would look like?
3. How did you feel about the persistent cries of Bartimaeus? Was there anything you wanted to say to him? Was there anything about Bartimaeus that reminded you of an aspect of yourself?
4. What impressions crossed your mind as Bartimaeus brushed past you to respond to Jesus' invitation? How does that remind you of your faith?
5. What flashed through your mind when you sensed that Jesus' gaze was fixed upon you? How did you respond when he asked you 'What do you want me to do for you?'
6. What areas of blindness in your own life need the liberating touch of God?
7. How did you respond when Jesus invited you to follow him on the costly road to Jerusalem? What resistance were you aware of within yourself to following him?

Closing prayer

1. Share in a period of silence together as you reflect on what has been experienced by the group in the meditation.
2. Invite group members to pray for any concerns or needs that have been shared by others in the conversations.
3. Invite individual members of the group to pray for personal issues that have been raised for them through the meditation.

4. Pray that leaders of church and state throughout the world may have their eyes opened to their responsibilities to God and God's people and creation.
5. Pray that men and women throughout the world may come to see God through eyes of faith, and follow Christ on the way.

Arthur Pearce

The Scripture quotations used in this meditation are from the New Revised Standard Version.

The fig tree

Mark 11:12-25

Setting the scene

This incident comes towards the end of Jesus' ministry. He has foretold his death and has entered Jerusalem in triumph. For the next three days, his life will be full of controversy as his enemies become increasingly unhappy and threatened by his teaching.

So the background to this curious incident of the barren fig tree is the question of Jesus' authority, the anger of his enemies and the growing hostility between them that will lead to his arrest and condemnation.

Bible reading: Mark 11:12-25

Centring exercise

Choose one of the centring exercises from the earlier section.

Meditation

Imagine you are in Jerusalem. Early Spring. The days are still sharp and cool; the nights very cold. It is the evening of what will be known as Palm Sunday. * Recall what happened today. Remember the crowds?... the shouts... the yelling of the children? You could almost cut the atmosphere it was so exciting! *

You are in the crowd again. Look around. Look at the donkey, the branches and cloaks spread around it. Look at the faces in the crowd. * Pick out the Twelve. You can tell them by their excitement and sense of importance. Focus on the chief priests and the teachers of the law. They're the ones with the suspicious faces and the airs of superiority. Listen to the children; they're enjoying the party! *

Look at the man on the donkey. What does he think of it all? How does he feel? excited? afraid? worried? just happy to be there? aware of his own destiny and what God wants him to be and do? * How do you feel? *

It is the next day. With Jesus and the Twelve, you have left Bethany and are approaching Jerusalem. It is cold. Everyone is a bit edgy. What will happen today? Will the crowds still be there? * Jesus sees the fig tree in the distance and says he is hungry. Imagine the scene. * He comes close to the tree and discovers it has no figs. He curses the fig tree, 'No one shall ever eat figs from you again!'. *

This is absurd, it isn't the season for figs. It isn't the fig tree's fault. What is the matter with Jesus? Why does he react so angrily? Reflect on what is happening here. *

Now imagine that you are Jesus. What are you doing? What are you thinking as you react so angrily to the fig tree? You are hungry. Are you also afraid? Are you frustrated? Are you ashamed of the Twelve? Are you terrified of what is to happen to you? Are you cold with fear, with rage, with frustration? And have you taken it out on this tree? *

And now we've moved into the Temple area. Look around at the scene. What do you see and hear and smell? What can you see? The tables of the money-changers, haggling with the pilgrims who have come from all over the world to offer sacrifice in the Temple. * What can you hear? The noise of the buyers and sellers, the buzz of the crowd, the bleating of the sheep and goats, the cooing of the pigeons? * What do you smell? The smoke from the sacrificial fires, the food being sold by the hawkers, the animal smells? * What is the atmosphere like? Is it exciting and noisy? * As a Jew visiting your most holy place, how do you feel? Proud? A sense of belonging? Humble before God? *

But stop! Look at what's happening. Jesus has taken a whip and is overturning the tables! He's scattering the chairs of the pigeon sellers; he's driving out the money changers. * Listen to what he is saying, 'My Temple will be called a house of prayer for the people of all nations. But you have turned it into a hideout for thieves!'. * Think of the panic. Listen to the protests of the money changers and the pigeon sellers. Hear the sounds of the animals and birds as their cages are overturned and they run all over the Temple precincts. Listen to the sound of the whip as Jesus lashes out in anger and dismay. * How do you react? What do you make of it all? *

It is the next morning. You are once again one of the followers with Jesus on the Bethany road. You come near the fig tree. Look at it. Examine its leaves and branches. They are withered and dead all the way down to its roots. How do you react? with fear? wonder? disgust? terror? *

Listen to Jesus comment: 'Have faith in God'. He seems to say, 'Don't bother about this tree. It is telling you about God's authority and power. Trust God!'. And he adds some sentences about the power of prayer, 'If you believe enough, God will do astonishing things for you'. Think about this teaching * Now say this to yourself slowly - 'Because I have this special relationship with God, a relationship I deepen through prayer, I commanded the fig tree to wither'. * If you believe and pray and deepen your relationship with God, you too can expect great things from God. *

Personal and group reflection

1. In groups of three, describe the part of the meditation which stands out most sharply in your memory. Why was this part significant for you?

2. Read this aloud: *In writing his Gospel, Mark sometimes uses a process some people call his 'sandwich' process: sometimes he separates two parts of a story or incident with another story. This middle story, the meat in the sandwich, gives us a clue to the meaning of the 'bread' on the outside. Here the story of Jesus cursing the fig tree breaks off and we find him using a whip to throw the money changers out of the Temple. Then we come back to the fig tree again. The incident in the Temple is the 'meat' that gives meaning to the rest of the sandwich. It is suggested that the meaning of the entire passage (Mark 11:12-25) is this: any thing or person or process or ritual that promises fruit but does not bear fruit is to be condemned.*

3a. How do you respond to this interpretation of the passage? Take the incident of the fig tree and interpret it in the light of the cleansing of the Temple.

b. What aspects of your life could be compared to the elements in this Bible passage?

c. What was God's word to you through the meditation?

d. What aspects of your church's life could be compared to the elements in this Bible passage? What do you think God's word to your church from this story would be?

4a. Mark uses the story to talk about Jesus' authority and the power of prayer. Consider what has happened and will happen in these three days that begin with chapter 11. Why is the question of Jesus' authority important at this point in the Gospel story?

b. Jesus teaches that effective prayer is associated with our relationship with God. What aspects of prayer have you found helpful in deepening your relationship with God?

c. How would you summarise Jesus message about prayer in verses 22 to 25? What would it mean for you to pray as Jesus taught? What would help you to grow in the confidence in God described by Jesus?

Closing prayer

Either place a small growing pot plant in the room, or pass a piece of fruit around the group. As each member considers the plant or the fruit, they are invited to pray for themselves and for their community or church - for the gift of bearing fruit; for confidence in their relationship with God; for openness to receive God's answers to their prayers rather than their own answers.

Hugh McGinlay

The Scripture quotations used in this meditation are from the Good News Bible.

Singing in the dark

Mark 14:12-42

Preparation

You will need hymn or song books, and accompaniment if necessary.

Setting the scene

The title of this session 'Singing in the Dark' comes from Mark 14:26: 'When they had sung the hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives'. The last words of the Master in the Upper Room have been spoken and Christ stands now in the dead of night on his final journey. The dark moment of tense silence is broken by a triumphant 'song of hope' that comes from the lips of Jesus (Psalm 118): 'O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever', and through the gathering dark, words of faith ring out, 'I shall not die, but live'.

Bible reading: Mark 14:12-42

Centring exercise

Choose one of the centring exercises from the earlier section.

Meditation

It's 33 AD. It's daytime. You are in the city of Jerusalem. * You live in a small room on the ground floor of a double-storey house. The house looks like two boxes with a smaller box on top. Picture the scene. * You are one of two servants and your Master and his family take up most of the ground floor of the house, except for a couple of small servant rooms. * There's a knock on your door and in comes your Master with a strange instruction. He says to you, 'Here's a water pot. I'd like you to go to the well and collect some water'. You're not really very keen about doing the task but you do as you are told and head down the street. * You get to the well. You fill up the water pot and put it on your shoulder and you head for home again. *

You glance back over your shoulder; you have an uneasy feeling that you are being followed by a couple of fellows. 'Surely they are not going to pick on me in the main street', you think to yourself. * You're glad to get to your house. Your Master greets you at the door but before you can do anything else the two fellows who have been tailing you join in and say, 'Our Master sent us for the room you have ready for us where we will eat the Passover Supper'. Your Master seems to be expecting them and says, 'Welcome, come this way', and proceeds to lead them up the side stairs to the upper room. *

It's later that same day now. The number upstairs has grown to more than a dozen. You put your feet up and think of days gone by. Your thoughts are interrupted every now and again by the conversation above. It's some time now since the Supper upstairs began. * You notice that a cloaked figure is coming down the outside stairs. He heads straight out into the night. You say to yourself, 'I wonder what he's up to?'. * The cross currents of speech above have subsided somewhat, and now the voices seem to have come together again in a round of Hebrew community singing. They are singing with gusto a final hymn. In fact you know the hymn also. You stand and stretch your limbs and gladly sing along in the dark with the voices above. *

Hymn or song

[The Passover Service concludes with some of the 'Hallel' Psalms (such as Psalm 118) and these psalms are probably the final hymns that Jesus and his disciples would have been singing. Choose a hymn or song which contains some themes from this

psalm. If the group need to open their eyes to sing, you may wish to have the lights dimmed to fit the atmosphere of the story.]

Now there is a shuffling of feet and very soon the people from the upper room try to slip quietly down the stairs. They reach the street and walk silently away. * You decide that you'll follow them in the dark to see what's going on. As you walk closely behind the group you hear the leader quietly say, 'All of you will desert me'. Above the whispering that follows comes the strident voice of the noisy one, 'No matter what the others do I will never desert you'. * And the leader gives a very calm, deliberate answer, 'Before the cock crows a second time tomorrow morning, you will deny me three times'. The noisy one continues to protest, as do some of the others. *

You arrive now at an olive grove in a garden. Most of the group stop there but three are chosen to go with the leader. It's still dark so you decide you'll try to follow on a little further with this group. * Then the leader tells them to sit and take watch. The three quickly sit down on the ground. The leader falls to the ground and seems to be in agony. To whom is he talking? 'Father, all things are possible to you... Take away this cup from me... Yet not what I want, but what you want', he says. *

You are almost caught hiding behind the tree as the leader gets on his feet and briskly walks back to the small group of three. He gives them a bit of a roasting: 'Asleep? Couldn't you watch with me even one hour?'. * No sooner has the leader said this than he about turns and heads back to his little spot among the olive groves. He seems to be continuing his pleadings. * And then back to the three to once again catch them asleep. They are the sleepest three fellows you can imagine. *

You decide you've had enough and start to head for home. As you go out through the gates a great mob of people are heading down the street. * As you walk up the street you whistle your 'song in the dark' once again.

Optional group song

Choose a suitable song to close the meditation.

Personal and group reflection

Use these questions with the whole group or small groups.

1. Take a few moments to share one aspect of the meditation which was significant for you.
- 2a. In what way was this 'Singing in the Dark' more than just whistling in the dark to keep up a false front of courage?
- b. Recall a time in your life when you have 'sung in the dark'. Share something of this. Has it been helpful for you to sing when problems or darkness come? How has the 'song of hope' been experienced?
- c. How does what happened in the Upper Room show us how to meet the shadowed hours that will come to us all?
- 3a. Are there times when you can't sing, or think you can't? What do you do about the emptiness or the pain or the sense of being betrayed at those times?
- b. 'When tragedy strikes it shatters lives that have within them no song of faith'. Discuss whether you believe this to be true.
4. Read again verses 22-24.
- a. How did this activity contribute to Jesus' and the disciples' readiness for what was to happen?
- b. Why in this day do we especially remember these words and replay these actions? How would you explain this Christian celebration to a non-Christian?

5a. 'Remove this cup from me', said Jesus, 'Yet not what I want, but what you want'. Have you ever prayed this prayer? What were the results? How easy or how difficult is this kind of prayer for you?

b. Share with the group a time when you have called on the inner resources of God.

6. In what ways do you identify with the betrayal or denial by certain of Jesus' disciples? Is there some action you should take or a prayer you should offer in confession for your moment of betrayal or denial?

7. It has been suggested that when Jesus went to Gethsemane, he wanted human fellowship and God's fellowship. In time of trouble, we want someone with us. We do not necessarily want them to do anything. We do not necessarily even want to talk with them or them to talk to us. We only want them to be there. Share with the group if you had an experience similar to this.

Closing prayer

Individually write a prayer poem or prayer prose that begins with a few lines that express for you a cry of despair.

Now imagine that Jesus is here and that he can completely change the situation for good. Turn the next few lines into a song of hope. You might recall that some of the psalmists write in this fashion. Share these as a whole group if people are comfortable.

Close your eyes and think about your cry of despair. In your imagination invite Jesus into your scene and tell him silently of your cry. Ask Jesus to speak with you and turn your cry into a song of hope. You may play soft music in the background during this quiet time of reflection, forgiveness and freeing from despair.

Colin Ray

A meal in Simon's house

Luke 7:36-50

Setting the scene

This graphic incident in the life of Jesus is found in this form only in Luke's Gospel. In John, the woman is identified as Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus; none of them describe her as a sinner. The emphasis there is on Jesus' acceptance of a valuable gift despite others' complaints of wastefulness.

Two practices from the first century should be noted - first, the courtesies involved in greeting a guest. However clean the visitor may have been before setting out, dusty roads and sandalled feet led to the need for 'freshening up' with an offer to wash the guest's feet, as Jesus did at the Last Supper. This would be done by a servant or, if none was available, by the host. The second is about the woman's presence in Simon's house. We would be gate-crashing if we were to go to someone else's dinner party uninvited, but not so in the first century. Invited guests would sit at the table, but others could gather around when a visitor from another place came to the town. This was one way news was spread, before newspapers, radio and TV were available.

Bible reading: Luke 7:36-50

This is optional at this stage, as the meditation itself includes the passage very much as it is written.

Centring exercise

Choose a centring exercise from the earlier section.

Meditation

Let us go back through the centuries to the time when Jesus was living in the country now called Israel. * In your imagination, join Jesus and his disciples on one of their journeys north to Galilee. *

Jesus and his disciples, as they travel, come into a small town, and are invited by an important civic leader, Simon the Pharisee, to his house for a meal. They arrive at the house. Following the practice of those days, the guests gather on couches around the table, resting on their left sides. * As well as the guests around the table, quite a number of the town people have come into the house. This is quite natural - they are accustomed to dropping in to hear what a visiting guest or teacher has to say. They stand around the room and listen, even though not invited guests. * And you are there too, watching, listening and taking it all in. *

After a while, as you look at Jesus sitting at the table, you become aware that a woman has come in from the street, and has stood right behind him. She has brought with her a white, shining container with sweetly scented oil. This is somewhat embarrassing because she is a notorious woman in the town, regarded as a sinner, and it could be that this scented oil is part of her trade. * Everyone tries to ignore her, but this becomes hard to do. As she stands close to Jesus, she loses some of her composure and suddenly she begins to weep. As her tears flow, they drop from her eyes and fall onto Jesus feet. Every one is watching; it is hard to pretend that nothing is happening. *

As she becomes aware that she has wet Jesus' feet, she wonders what to do. She feels she ought to dry them, but, worse still, she uses her hair as a towel. The woman has the audacity to touch Simon's guest as she dries his feet. As if this is not enough, she opens her bottle, pours the fragrant oil and rubs it into his feet. * People start to look shocked and to murmur to each other. What about the host? Look over and see Simon. He does not appear to be saying anything, but the expression on his face

shows what he is thinking. He thought he had invited a young prophet to his house, but it seems that he has made a mistake. Surely anyone who was a real prophet would know without having to be told that this was a woman of low repute who was making all this fuss over him. He should not allow it to go on! Why doesn't he stop her? And, look, Jesus seems to be accepting her attentions quite naturally. What sort of a prophet is this? *

Jesus is aware of Simon's discomfort and decides to speak to him: 'Simon, I have something to say to you'. Simon answers, 'What is it Teacher?'. Jesus then goes on to tell a parable to Simon. 'A certain creditor had two people who owed him money. One owed a very large sum of five hundred denarii; the other owed fifty. Neither could repay the debt and this man forgave them both and wiped out the debts. Now which of these two will love him more?' *

Simon answers, 'I suppose it would be the one who had the bigger debt wiped out'. 'Right', says Jesus. He looks at the woman then continues speaking to Simon: 'Do you see this woman? I entered your house, you gave me no water to wash my feet, but she has wet my feet with her tears and used her hair as a towel to wipe them'. * 'You gave me no kiss of greeting, but she has continued to kiss my feet. You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. So I tell you, her sins, though they are so many, are forgiven, because she loved so much. But people who have little to be forgiven, love little'. *

Jesus then speaks to the woman and says to her: 'Your sins are forgiven!'. * What a stir this creates! The other invited guests at the table with him start to say to each other, 'Who does this person think he is? What right has he to forgive sins, particularly the sins of this woman?' * Jesus says to the woman, 'Your faith has saved you, go in peace'. That seems to bring Simon's dinner party to an end and all the people begin to disperse, most of them talking and whispering among themselves about what has happened. *

Stay with the scene for a while longer. As you walk away from Simon's house, you find Jesus is walking beside you. Talk to him about what went on, how you felt and what you thought about it. What did you think about the woman's actions? How do you think Jesus felt? Talk with him about it. * What about the way he handled Simon? * You remember Jesus saying, 'Simon, I have something to say to you'. Perhaps Jesus might have something to say to you. Hear him speak your name and say, 'I have something to say to you'. What might it be? * Spend a little time talking with him about your life and what you would like to see happening in it. * And when you have finished talking, just enjoy being together. Two good friends can have times of silence as well as speech. * It will soon be time to leave the region of Galilee and come back to this room, but don't feel hurried. Take your time to say good-bye for the present and to come back to the group. * Then look around you, stretch and become comfortable again.

Personal and group reflection

Invite responses to these questions from the group, but avoid the practice of going around the circle. Allow people to pass.

1. Think back over the meditation time and recall how you were feeling. Try to think of one word to describe it. Share this feeling with the group and, if you like, add a word or two about the experience. Write a sentence prayer based on this word. If your feeling word was one like peace, joy, feeling good, being loved, it might be a prayer of thanksgiving. If the word was something like sadness or shame, your prayer might be confession. (These sentence prayers will be used in the closing prayer.)

2. Describe your conversation with Jesus as you were walking away from Simon's house.

3. There were two responses from Jesus: Simon was rebuked; the woman received forgiveness and the opportunity to start life again. What makes the difference? What does this say to ordinary Christians like you and me?

4. We can talk to Jesus about what is happening in life from day to day, our disappointments, our hopes, our joys. Reflect now on what it is that you want most in life. For Simon, it might have been no disturbance and no rocking of the boat. For the woman, it might have been the experience of real love. What do you and I want most in our lives? Take a few moments in silence to talk to Jesus about what you want from him.

Closing prayer

Give opportunity to those who are prepared to offer aloud their prayer sentences. Conclude with this or a similar prayer:

We thank you, Jesus, that in the Bible, you still continue to meet with your people, to challenge, to encourage, to forgive and renew us. We acknowledge that like Simon, we have been self-centred and inclined to despise others. We acknowledge that like the woman, we have been unfaithful in small things or in greater things and we ask your forgiveness. And we remember your words then are also your words to us: 'Your sins are forgiven ... Your faith has saved you ... Go in peace'. We thank you, Jesus, our Lord and our Companion on the journey. Amen.

Keith Pearson

The Scripture quotations used in this meditation are adapted from the New Revised Standard Version.

Telling others about Jesus

Luke 10:1-12, 17-20

Setting the scene

Each of the first three gospels has the story of Jesus sending out his twelve apostles in pairs on an evangelistic mission, and then their return somewhat surprised at its success. Jesus then tried to take them away for a quiet time together, but this was foiled by the crowd's demands for Jesus' teaching and healing. Luke alone follows with our story of sending out of another seventy of his followers on a similar mission.

When travelling today, most people would consider it prudent to go well prepared, with at least one change of clothing, money for emergencies, some food for a snack on the way, perhaps copies of the Scriptures and other helpful evangelistic material. But not here - they are to travel light and depend on others rather than themselves for the supplying of their needs. Jesus impresses on them the urgency that surrounds them - it is just as if the harvest was ready and any loss of time would risk losing it.

Perhaps for this reason, they are to forget some of the courtesies of civilised living. You meet a fellow traveller on the road and are forbidden to greet this person! Why might this be? You are told not to go visiting from house to house (that belongs to another form of evangelism). But would you not then pass up some opportunities for contacts and speaking for Jesus? Why would Jesus say this? And if people choose not to listen to you, is this not their democratic right? Why, then, this angry response of denouncing them and showing what you think of them by shaking your feet, so that you do not take away even dust from their town? Does this seem somewhat petulant? What is behind it?

Few would be attracted to a task of being sent out as lambs in the midst of wolves (v.3), and some trepidation and holding back would be understandable. But read verse 1 again and see that the disciples' task is not so much to be an A-grade preacher or a super-healer in their own evangelistic programs. Rather it is to go ahead of Jesus and to let people know that he plans to come to their town. It is his mission they are on about, not their own. Does this make any difference?

Bible reading: Luke 10:1-12, 17-20

The passage can be read aloud or silently.

Centring exercise

Choose a centring exercise from the earlier section.

Meditation

Jesus depends on his followers to join with him in reaching out to people with the good news of the Kingdom. As well as sending out the twelve whom he had chosen, he sends out a bigger group. You and I are about to be among the seventy he sent out two by two. Try to put yourself in the picture that is coming to your mind, rather than just be an observer of what others are doing. *

You are with Jesus as he prepares to go to Jerusalem. His disciples are there, and so are many more of his followers. Imagine your surprise when he calls you to be one of a group of seventy whom he is sending out to visit some towns and villages which are strange to you. Does this make you excited, or scared, or have you some other feeling about it? *

Somehow you have been paired with another person. See who it is. * Is this someone you know already or a stranger to you? How do you feel about having this person as your companion and co-worker? * If you have a bag, wallet or purse ready,

leave it behind - because Jesus is asking you to travel light. If you are uncertain about what he wants you to do, listen again:

‘Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals; and greet no one on the road. Whatever house you enter, first say, "Peace to this house!". And if anyone is there who shares in peace, your peace will rest on that person; but if not, it will return to you. Remain in the same house, eating and drinking whatever they provide, for the labourer deserves to be paid. Do not move about from house to house. Whenever you enter a town and its people welcome you, eat what is set before you; cure the sick who are there, and say to them, "The kingdom of God has come near to you". But whenever you enter a town and they do not welcome you, go out into its streets and say, "Even the dust of your town that clings to our feet, we wipe off in protest against you. Yet know this: the kingdom of God has come near".’ * How does this make you feel? Confident, scared, resistant, or some other feeling? * Some others of the seventy have begun to move away, some in one direction, others choosing another.

[Optional addition. This is not taken from Luke, but picks up Jesus' ongoing invitation to his disciples to identify with him and to walk in his footsteps. If you plan to use it, continue reading; if not, pick up after this box:]and your friend seem to be delaying, perhaps because of anxiety in one or both of you. See Jesus walking over to you to give you some encouragement as you set out. * Jesus, as he looks at you, notices that your sandals are wearing thin and takes off his own and gives them to you to wear on the journey? * What does this do to you? * Have you anything to say to Jesus as you put them on? * Does this change how you now feel about going out? *

So now you are on your way, walking and talking with your companion about what it means to be one of Jesus' followers. * You come to your first town, knock on the door of a house and hear yourself saying: ‘Peace be to this house. I and my friend are here to tell you that Jesus is coming this way. Through Jesus, God's kingdom is coming to you'. What is it like to say something like this to another person? * Imagine yourself continuing to meet people, to speak to them about Jesus' way, to help them . **

Time has passed and you have come back to meet again with Jesus and the others. But you are a little ahead of the rest and have time to sit down with Jesus and talk about the experience. What have you to say to him or to ask him? Talk for a while, and if you find yourself with nothing more to say, don't walk off - just sit with him and enjoy his company until we are all ready to come together. * Now draw your time with Jesus to a close. When you are ready return to the present day and open your eyes.

Personal and group reflection

Invite responses from the group, but avoid going around the circle for each to speak. It is OK for people to pass.

1. Think back over the experience and your meeting with Jesus. Which part of the incident stands out most clearly as you look back? What feeling was strongest?
2. What happened in your conversation with Jesus on your return from the journey.
3. What parts of the experience said something important to you about what it means to be a disciple?
4. That experience took us back some two thousand years. What are some similar situations where Jesus wants us to speak for him in this year, 199-? Does our meditation give any clues for handling modern situations?

Closing prayer

As a lead into a short time of prayer, invite people to say aloud, in a word or two, any thought or feeling that came to them while they were with Jesus. (Random calling out, rather than asking for replies formally and in order.)

Conclude with this or some other prayer:

*Jesus our Friend and our Master,
we have just met with you and look what has happened to us! You have disturbed us.
You have challenged us. You have supported and befriended us.*

You are the one who continues to meet with your people, to forgive us and renew us. You still call ordinary people like us to continue the work you were doing while you lived your life and earth.

Help us to be faithful to you in this and in all our contacts with other people, so that through meeting us, they may also meet you. Amen.

Keith Pearson

The Scripture quotations used in this meditation are from the New Revised Standard Version.

A tale of two sisters

Luke 10:38-42

Preparation

For the meditation you will need drawing paper and crayons or coloured pens for each person in the group.

Setting the scene

Luke, having just illustrated Jesus' command to love our neighbour, goes on in this passage to explain the meaning of the commandment to love God. While Martha is busy sewing and working, Mary sits at Jesus' feet listening to his teachings; by so doing she acknowledges him as her Lord. Jesus mildly rebukes Martha for being preoccupied with all that needs to be done, whereas he commends Mary for choosing devotion to her Lord as her priority.

Bible Reading: Luke 10:38-42

Centring exercise

Explain the following to the group:

As we share in this meditation, you will have the opportunity to respond to what you experience using the paper and crayons or pens. You can choose to do this by drawing pictures, or by writing words, or both. The important thing is that what you draw or write is meaningful for you. Don't worry about what others will think of it. You will be given time to do this.

Distribute the sheets of paper and crayons or pens. Choose a centring exercise from the earlier section.

Meditation

Think of a time in your home life when you felt overworked or unappreciated, when you felt that you were doing more than your share of work. Focus your thoughts on such a situation where another person was involved - a brother or sister, spouse, child, flat mate, or friend. * Now try to recreate the details of that scene. Where were you? Visualise the place you were in. * What were you actually doing? Recall your actions. * How did you feel at the time? Try to name the feelings. *

Take some time when you are ready to open your eyes and express your feelings using colours or words. Focus on specific feelings. *

I invite you to close your eyes again. Think now about the other person involved in this situation. Who was it? Picture their face before you. * What actually happened? Did you argue or were you ignored? In your imagination replay your interaction. * What were your feelings towards that person? *

Once again open your eyes and take some time to represent how you felt towards that person by using either colours or words. * When you have finished close your eyes.

In your imagination see Jesus standing before you in that situation. * Look at Jesus' face and allow him to speak to you. Just be still for a few moments and allow his spirit to speak to your spirit. * Feel his peace penetrating your entire being. Listen to what he says to you. *

When you are ready you may write or draw those thoughts. * Now close your eyes again.

Now something unusual is happening. You thought Jesus was going to praise you for being so busy and helpful. Instead he rebukes you for placing too much emphasis

on something which is not so important. What does he say to you? * What would Jesus identify in your life as having become more important than it should be? *

Take time to jot down your thoughts. * Once again, close your eyes.

You may feel rejected or put down by Jesus. Listen to what he says to you now that you have recognized that your priorities are not the same as his: `Sometimes you allow yourself to get so involved with meeting the needs of others that you neglect our relationship. I need you to spend time with me so you will know how much I love you and know my priorities for your life. Do you know how special you are to me? I have called you by name, you are mine. Always remember that'. * Take time to let those words sink in.

Open your eyes and again use the colours to illustrate how Jesus' words make you feel. * Now let us bring our meditation time to a close.

Personal and group reflection

In small groups of three, take three or four minutes each to share your responses to the meditation. One person will share, one will be the listener and one person the observer.

When you are sharing you may like to focus on the different feelings that you experienced during the meditation. You may also describe your drawing, sharing why you chose certain colours or symbols.

When you are the listener focus on doing just that - LISTENING. You are simply to encourage the person who is sharing without commenting on their experience.

When you are the observer try and use all your senses to pick up the verbal and non-verbal messages that the sharer offers. Let them know when their time is up, then share anything that you feel may be helpful to them. Be positive in your feedback.

Once one person has shared, change the roles so that after three rounds everyone has had a turn at each role.

Closing prayer

As a closing act of prayer, invite everyone to form a large circle, and to place their sheets of paper on the floor in front of them. Encourage people to pray sentence prayers of thanks in relation to what they have experienced of God's love through this meditation.

Sue Fairley

The Good Gift-giver

Luke 11:1-13

Setting the scene

This particular section of Luke's gospel contains some of Jesus' clearest comments about prayer, and it is interesting to see the context in which Luke has positioned these words of Jesus. He has been talking about those aspects of life to which we should give high priority. As disciples of Jesus, we will have counted the cost of our discipleship (9:57-62), we will focus on him whatever our circumstances (10:38-41), and empowered by his Spirit we will sacrificially love our neighbour (10:1-37).

Luke unites all of this with something he has a deep interest in - prayer. For Luke, listening to the words of Jesus, loving our neighbour, and prayer, are equally important components of meaningful Christian discipleship. Here in these verses Luke brings together Jesus' model prayer, and some bold commentary on the process of prayer.

Obviously the disciples were impressed by the way Jesus prayed. One of them, unnamed, but presumably one of the twelve, asked for help with his (or their) praying. How many of us have come to Jesus with the same request, 'Help us to pray'. How many of us should come that way?

Bible reading: Luke 11:1-13

Suggested translations are the Good News Bible and the New International Version. Read the passage together aloud or assign different parts to people (narrator, disciple, Jesus, first friend, second friend) and read it as dialogue.

Centring exercise

Invite group members to remain seated, with eyes closed, legs uncrossed, feet on floor and hands on knees.

Imagine you are a child again. Picture your home, your room. * Look around and notice the well-loved things that are there. * Think about the best gift you received as a child, or the best gift you would have liked to have received. * Why did you like that gift? What was it? Was it really the best thing you could have received? What could have been better? * Who gave you the gift? Why did they give it to you? * Put the gift back wherever you found it. * In your mind, return to the present, and silently wait for God to speak to you. As you wait, turn your hands palms upward, leaving them in that position for the meditation exercise.

Meditation

You are in your favourite chair, your quiet space in a busy, involved world. You are alone, and yet you don't feel alone. You sense the presence of Jesus with you in the room. * You hear his gentle, yet powerful, voice say just these three words to you 'ask... seek... knock'. * You think for a while of all the questions you've ever asked, all the favours you've sought, and all the requests you've made of God and of others. Then you consider all the things you've looked for - important things, silly, things. You recall that sometimes the things you thought were important became unimportant as time went by. Then you also remember those trivial things you forgot about that one day became so important to you. *

As the third word, 'knock', echoes around of your mind, you think back to all the doors you've knocked on in your life - real ones of friends, enemies, employers, employees, teachers and others; and also those doors that seemed more solid than timber, locked tighter than any deadlock. These doors had behind them the

relationship you needed, the hope you desired or the dream your mind couldn't contain.

*

As you quietly sit there, you are taken back to a time long ago in a faraway land. * You are with Jesus. You are one of his friends. You have been with him for many weeks, years even. You have travelled long distances with him, visiting friends and foes, sharing love, light and life everywhere his little band has been. * You have long been impressed by his relationship with his Father God; his ability to communicate freely with God; his discipline of regularly sharing his joys, sorrows, successes and failures with God. You look at Jesus from a distance as he prays. * You're speechless at his humility, his frailty and yet his strength. You stare open-mouthed at him. *

Later on, you pluck up enough courage to ask Jesus to teach you to pray. You're pretty hesitant, in fact you barely mumble out your request for fear of ... what, you're not sure, but it seems so personal, so insignificant. Then you remember his words to Martha the other day, and you wonder if prayer has anything to do with choosing 'the right thing'. * 'Lord, teach us to pray...' You know that the words are quite simple, but already you sense that the request has profound significance. Your heart is beating faster. A strange warmth begins to fill your being. A glorious glow fills the space between you and Jesus. Your mouth feels dry. What will he say? *

'When you pray, say this:

"Father: May your holy name be honoured;

may your Kingdom come.

Give us day by day the food we need.

Forgive us our sins,

for we forgive everyone who does us wrong.

And do not bring us to hard testing".'

His response seems short at first. Yet a picture fills your mind - a picture of God, the loving and forgiving Father, the intimate Friend, the bountiful Provider. * You feel greatly encouraged. You realize that you have been shown something very special. * Once again Jesus has taken the initiative and revealed himself to you, and pointed you to his Father. You remind yourself to try to align yourself with God when next you pray, rather than attempting to align God with your own desires, your long agenda. You are also deeply challenged. *

But Jesus goes on. Already you have enough to think about for more than a few hours, but his gracious voice continues. His words contain promises: that when you pray, you will be heard; that God is never bothered when a humble child approaches; and that you should go on asking, seeking and knocking. The penny drops: life is a search. Your faith in Jesus is a journey - an exploration, a quest that never finishes; a long obedience in the same direction, but one with regular special moments along the way. *

As you excitedly and expectantly allow your mind to return to the present, you feel buoyant, full-of-faith and quietly confident. * You think of your life, your relationships, your needs, and your place in a world that seems to have lost its way. You feel equipped to face it all, not arrogantly, but empowered by the Holy Spirit your Father in heaven will freely give. *

Personal and group reflection

Invite people to share thoughts and feelings about the meditation, either in the whole group or in smaller groups. Discuss these questions.

1. This poem was written by a young soldier injured in the American Civil War. Discuss its content.

'I asked for strength that I might achieve;

I was made weak that I might obey.

*I asked for health that I might do greater things;
I was given infirmity that I might do better things.
I asked for riches that I might be happy;
I was given poverty that I might be wise.
I asked for power that I might have the praise of all;
I was given weakness that I might feel the need of God
I asked for all things that I might enjoy life;
I was given life that I might enjoy things.
I have received nothing I asked for, all that I hoped for;
My prayer is answered.'*

2. Life is full of disciplines. From childhood on there are activities that we have to work at to achieve - study, sport, friendships, etc. What does this say to you about prayer? How does it relate to your experience of prayer?

3a. All of us have experienced disappointment at one time or another. Share about a time someone disappointed you because they didn't keep a promise.

b. We feel happy when people keep a promise they have made to us. Share an experience like this with the group.

c. What are the promises contained or implied in Luke 11:1-13? Talk about a time God has expressed faithfulness to you.

Closing prayer

Pray together the Lord's Prayer in this way: the leader says a phrase of the prayer, then group members repeat it aloud, followed by a brief silence. Ask people during the silence to allow visual images or symbols to come to mind in response to the spoken words. Close with a song or hymn.

Paul Cameron

Scripture quotations in this meditation are from the Good News Bible.

Tax reform!

Luke 19:1-10

Preparation

You will need a blank sheet of paper and pen for each person, some coins, a receipt book and a tax group certificate.

Setting the scene

Have you ever

- * felt small and insignificant;
 - * wanted to find someone but your paths have not crossed;
 - * not been able to see properly and got annoyed;
 - * been in a crowd where people deliberately blocked your view;
 - * felt powerless in a crowd;
 - * felt sorry for something you have done and wanted to right my wrong;
 - * wanted to repent and have done so and changed;
 - * been challenged and responded in a way which has led to a change in your lifestyle.
- Reflect on one or two of your similar experiences, explore how you reacted, and reflect on the causes.

Zacchaeus must have had all these feelings and more!

Bible reading: Luke 19:1-10

Either arrange for someone to read the passage aloud, or do a dramatic reading. For the dramatic reading select a narrator, Jesus, Zacchaeus and ask everyone else to be the crowd.

Then hand out a sheet of paper and ask people to head it like this:

ZACCHAEUS

JESUS

CROWD

If the passage has been read aloud, read it through again very slowly. If the reading was a drama, hear the reading aloud from one person. Then invite the participants to list the verbs (doing or action words) for Zacchaeus, Jesus and the Crowd.

Centring exercise

Sit in a comfortable position and look back over your three columns of action words. Close your eyes and reflect silently on these questions as I read them.

Note which column has the most action words. * Have there been times when you have been like the crowd? * How many action words are attributed to Jesus? What do these words say to you about Jesus? * Notice the range of action words for Zacchaeus. * Have you been trying to see Jesus and encountered a blockage? * How have you responded to Jesus and his direction?

With eyes closed, repeat these words as a silent prayer. Say them over and over as you breathe in and out.

*'Lord meet me like Zacchaeus;
remove the spiritual blocks in my life!'*

Meditation

Imagine that you are a part of a large crowd waiting to see Jesus pass by. * You are trying to see and being courteous. Out of the corner of your eye you notice Zacchaeus * He is one person you don't like for many reasons. He is the tax officer. He has a rude nature. * He has treated you unfairly. So you try to block him out. * Zacchaeus ignores you and then you notice he has gone. You sense a great feeling of relief. *

The crowd becomes excited. You know it must be Jesus coming now. * You catch a glimpse. What do you feel towards Jesus? * Then you notice Jesus stopping and looking up into a tree. Many things run through your mind. What can Jesus see? * It must be important. Is Jesus going to perform a miracle? Is he going to tell a parable? Is he going to confront to the Pharisees? You feel excited. *

Then you notice someone coming down from the tree. * Hold on, it looks like Zacchaeus. You wonder if Jesus is going to tell him off for his nasty lifestyle. 'I hope so', you think to yourself. * Wait a moment. Zacchaeus is going off with Jesus, and what's more they all look fairly happy! You can't believe this. * What's going on? You follow them. Fair go, Jesus is going into Zacchaeus' home. * This is really puzzling. What would Jesus have to do with Zacchaeus? *

You go home in absolute amazement. The next day at work you tell your friends what you experienced the day before. * Just as you were finishing someone said, 'But did you hear what happened to Zacchaeus?'. You wonder what could have happened? * Then your work colleague said Zacchaeus has given half of his possessions to the poor and he is paying back those he has cheated four fold. At first you can't believe it. * Then you realise Jesus can change lives if he can change Zacchaeus. * So you start to think, 'What about my life?'. *

Personal and group reflection

Allow the group time to reflect on the meditation privately. Invite people to describe their thoughts and feelings during the meditation. Then as a group share their responses to one or more of the following questions.

1. Display the tax group certificate. Invite people to share how they view the tax system. What would you change and why? What does this say about our Christian witness?
2. Display the coins. Invite people to share how they view money and its place in our society and the church.
3. Display the receipt book. Invite people to share their feelings about business practices in our country. Should the church be taking a more active stand in the area of business ethics?
4. Think of a time when you had someone pigeon-holed in your mind as a certain type and then they changed. What did you feel about the person and yourself? How did you cope? What did it say to you about the loving nature of God?
5. Can you think of situations where long standing Christians have had problems with new converts joining the church? What has caused the problem? What can be done to help both groups so that the unity of the Spirit is maintained?
6. Who are the 'Zacchaeus types' within our community? How can the church minister to them?
7. What trees have we climbed in our life that have enabled us to see Jesus more clearly?

Closing prayer

Close with the group in a circle. Invite group members to offer a petition for a particular blockage in their life that has been overcome, and a thanksgiving for something that has allowed them to see Jesus more clearly.

Bill Ray

Disciples on the journey

Luke 24:13-35

Preparation

You will need a sandshoe - preferably a well worn one - a candle and a dish in which it may stand, and a coffee mug.

Setting the scene

As the passage opens the disciples are running away from Jerusalem. The women in their group have given witness to the resurrection, but these two find it impossible to believe. On the way to Emmaus the risen Lord joins them and listens to them. Jesus explains all that has happened, interprets the Scriptures for them, consoles them, accepts their hospitality, and reveals himself to them. The passage finishes with the disciples returning to Jerusalem to proclaim the resurrection and continuing the journey of faith in the Gospel.

In this passage Luke further develops themes found earlier in his Gospel:

1. Discipleship as a journey;
2. Faith as seeing properly God's activity; and
3. Hospitality and welcome as ways of discovering and recognising the Lord.

In some way each of us can associate with the disciples. In the passage the disciples' discovery of Jesus took place over a meal. It is the hospitable disciples, by encouraging the stranger to join them who welcomed the risen Lord. In this exercise we also are invited to walk with these disciples, to explore our own questions along the journey, and to be open to the quiet revelation of Jesus.

Bible reading: Luke 24:13-35

The New Revised Standard Version is recommended.

Centring exercise

Participants sit in a circle on the same level so that each person can see every other person present. Introduce the three symbols - shoe, candle, mug - to the group. Pass them around the group and then place each one in the centre.

This **Sandshoe** represents the journey of discipleship. The lace is the love of God that holds the shoe to the foot. The eyelets are those challenges and people we have known that God has used to keep the shoe tight. The heel of the shoe is where our faith connects with life. I invite you now to pick up the shoe and to bring to mind your walk as a disciple in the last week.

(Light the candle.) This **Candle** is the symbol of Christ's light, which illuminates each one of us and the entire world. The light of Christ helps us to see what is essential in life. As you take up the candle bring to mind an area where you have increased in understanding in the last week.

This **Coffee Mug** is a symbol of welcome - the sharing of a warm drink, the conversations exchanged over steaming mugs. It was a cup that Jesus passed around at his Last Supper. As you take up the cup bring to mind a drink or meal that you have shared with another in the last week.

Next choose a centring exercise from the earlier section.

Meditation

It is sunset. You are in a panic. You look over your shoulder and see the silhouette of Jerusalem against the horizon. But you don't stop until you have left the city far behind. You and your companion are covered in sweat and short of breath, but not just

because you are running. You are both choked with fear and confusion mixed with unbelievable joy. Smell the evening breeze. * You can't recall feeling like this before in your life. As you both sit on a rock your head swims with so many thoughts. *

It's six months since you left your farm in Galilee. Perhaps you should have listened to your family, and not to him. It was wonderful. He was unlike anyone that you have ever met; the way he talked to people - he even healed some of them. * You remember the sense of jubilation you felt as you all entered Jerusalem not more than a week ago. You felt as though nothing could stop you. The Pharisees had tried, but he stopped them every time. You'd have told them where to go in no uncertain terms, but not him. He even loved them! *

But that was all before Thursday. It seems like an eternity now, but it was only three days ago. You were in a garden, tired and happy from the day. When all was going so well, they came, they came so quickly. With their sneers, their mocking and their laughter. One of them barked orders in Latin. In a moment they were gone and he with them. You ran away; you ran so fast, your heart pounding like a drum. * You hid in the trees that night, afraid to move. Some came with torches. You didn't know who they were, and you didn't want to know. *

In the morning you went down to the city. You walked about for hours, avoiding eye contact with anyone. In the street you saw someone you knew from your village. You turned and walked away when they called out your name. * There was a roar in the distance and you joined the crowd that thronged towards the Roman buildings. You felt the crowd pressed against you as you were jostled into the square along with the mass.*

For a time you were unsure who the brightly dressed figure is up on the platform. You kept looking, trying to make out the face, but deep down you already knew. You stood there paralysed * You stood there but you don't know for how long. You were almost sick. The crowd kept roaring, with anger and laughter. You tried to run but the crowd was so tightly packed. * Then they dragged him from the platform and out into the street. The crowd ran trying to catch sight of the action. This was your chance to escape. You were unable to run. You were so scared. * When you were clear of the crowd you broke into a sprint. You had never run as fast in your life. You dared not look back. *

The following days are a blur. You remember a journey to Emmaus, meeting a stranger. * You remember finding an inn. You remember the talk around the fire. * Although you did not sleep for the first night by the morning you were exhausted and fell into a deep sleep. It was disturbed by nightmares. When you woke you were drained. Downstairs there was food being cooked on a fire. Feel the exhaustion. Smell the food. You ate some food. *

By nightfall you left the inn. You saw two from your group and you ran to them. Their eyes were alight. They were chattering, and kept talking about what Mary said. They shook their heads and spoke at each other without making much sense. You tried to keep up with the discussion. Then they turned to you. `Mary says that he is alive!!'. They repeat the words. 'Mary says that HE IS ALIVE'. **

Personal and group reflection

Invite participants to break up into groups of between three and five. Discuss these questions.

1. How do think the disciples felt on Easter Saturday?
2. If you had have been a disciple do you believe that you would have expected the resurrection to really happen? Why?
3. Can you recall a time when belief in the resurrection was difficult? Describe this.

4. In the Scripture passage the disciples recognise Jesus through their hospitality. Can you recall a time when you have experienced a sense of God's presence when welcoming guests?

5. In the Scripture passage the disciples talk with Jesus and he explains the Hebrew Scriptures to them. Which passages from the Old Testament speak to you of Jesus?

6. How and where do you recognise the presence of the Risen Lord in your life?

Closing prayer

Gather again in the large group. Pick up each symbol and pass it around the group, praying together the following:

The Sandshoe

God who is close, give us the energy and the enthusiasm to continue walking with you. Teach us to put our feet firmly on the ground, and to journey on to make your kingdom a reality in the world.

The Candle

Jesus, be our light. Make clear all that we need in order to discover the truth. Illuminate the path, be a beacon for us and our society.

The Coffee Mug

Spirit who binds us, as you revel in welcoming us, give the warmth and acceptance to welcome others. Even more, show us something of Jesus in the stranger, and the Risen Lord in all the guests we welcome.

Nick Ryan

Blind at the pool

John 9:1-12

Preparation

You will need cups of water - one between two people.

Setting the scene

'I am the light of the world', says Jesus in chapter 8 of John's Gospel. This theme is played out in chapter 9, with the healing of the blind man at the pool contrasted against the Pharisees' failure to see what God is doing in their midst. Clearly the man's inner blindness as well as his physical blindness are healed by Jesus. The pattern of the healing followed by the washing at the pool carries a strong connection to Christian conversion and baptism.⁴

John's Gospel is the only one to state that the man has been blind since birth. According to Barnabas Lindars, this is to highlight the fact that Jesus' act is not restorative but creative. This dimension is emphasised when Jesus, in another action peculiar to John's account, mixes saliva and dirt, a striking parallel to God's creation of human beings from dust. In this way John once again continues his reference to the Word which existed in the beginning becoming flesh in Jesus of Nazareth.

Bible reading: John 9:1-12

Read this with two parts - narrator and Jesus.

Centring exercise

Invite people to sit in pairs facing one another. Explain that one person in the pair will imagine themselves to be the blind person and the other will take the role of Jesus. Ask them to decide who will take each role.

This meditation involves some physical action. As the blind person in the story stretches out their hand, the person with that role stretches out their hand. The person with the role of Jesus will stretch out their hand and follow the other actions described, including using the water to touch the blind person's eyes. Imagine the scene from the viewpoint of your character. Remain seated for the meditation.

Next do one of the centring exercises from the earlier section..

Meditation

The day is hot and dusty. You are sitting in a familiar place in the market. * The smell of over-ripe food and sweaty animals is not new to you, nor are the flies that swarm about your face. * The air is filled with voices - local merchants soliciting passing customers, the gossip of elderly folk, the laughter of children. *

You sit alone in silence with a hand outstretched, begging for small change from faceless figures in the crowd. * You have been blind since birth, and cannot imagine the kaleidoscope of colour which surrounds you. The world of sounds and smells is familiar to you, yet lacking something you cannot name. * Blindness has brought you solitude. Distanced from the hustle and bustle of the marketplace, there is much time to think. What feelings surface as you reflect on your life as a blind beggar? What longings do you feel? What thoughts do you have as you contemplate your past and future? *

You hear approaching voices engaged in earnest discussion. A few men and women, maybe six in number. * As you stretch out your hand, more out of habit than hope, the voices stop in front of you. * What is happening? Sometimes a coin is thrown in your direction, sometimes a kick, but no-one ever pauses for an instant. You cringe, expecting to be struck or spat upon. * A woman speaks. 'Teacher,

whose sin caused this person to be born blind? Was it their own or their parents' sin?' What strange words? How do they make you feel? *

A man replies. His rich voice sends a shiver down your spine. Although young he speaks with father-like gentleness and authority. 'This one's blindness has nothing to do with their sins or their parents' sins. This person is blind so that God's power might be seen at work in them. I am the light that this one needs, that the world needs'. * What an astonishing statement? How do you react? Is it with wonder or fear? * 'God's power might work in me'. What hopes arise in you? *

Impulsively you reach out your hand towards this voice. A warm hand grips yours. You are startled. No-one has ever touched you like this, but the firm and friendly grip brings its own reassurance. * You hear the man spit, although now you do not flinch. He releases his grip and places a hand under your chin. * You feel his gentle fingers, damp with water and mud, caress your eyelids. * A warmth flows through his hands, a strength, a mysterious power. * As this person speaks to you, you remember the name you heard - Jesus. 'Go and wash your face in the pool', he says. What does he mean? What has he done? *

Hands grab and propel you towards the nearby pool. You fall shaking to your knees, and thrust your hands into the cool water. * You splash the refreshing liquid on your face, and peer through the caked mud. A flash! Something stabs your mind, dim and getting brighter. Movement, shapes, colour! * Glistening water, and a reflection in the pool of a stunned face - your face! 'I can see! I can see!'. A miracle! * You turn around, overwhelmed by joy and gratitude. Share with Jesus your feelings at this time. *

Now imagine yourself confronting the disbelieving Pharisees, your bewildered family called to testify to your former blindness. * The Pharisees accuse you of blasphemy and lies and throw you out. * Imagine what happens next in your life. *

Personal and group reflection

Ask people to write down words or phrases which express something of their feelings and thoughts during the meditation in the form of a free verse poem. Allow five minutes for this.

Invite people to find a new partner who played the opposite role. Each person will ask the other these questions.

1. If you are willing, read your poem to your partner.

2a. Blind person

* How did you feel when you imagined your life as a blind person? What feelings or longings did you have?

* What was your reaction to Jesus' arrival? How did you picture him?

* How did you respond to Jesus' touch?

* Tell us about your sight coming. Were you excited or afraid?

* What did you say to Jesus afterwards? How did you feel?

* What situation in your life comes closest to producing the feelings of the blind person? What causes these feelings?

* What is your image or experience of God in relation to this situation? Close or distant? Loving or fearful? How does this affect your prayer or lack of prayer about this situation?

* What would Jesus do for you in this present 'blindness'? What will be the consequence for your life?

2b. Jesus figure

* How did you feel when you first saw the blind person?

* What was the attitude behind the words to the disciple? annoyance? rebuke? encouragement? proclamation?

- * How did you feel reaching out to heal the blind person? Did you feel comfortable or uncomfortable?
 - * Describe how you experienced God's healing power flowing through you to the blind person.
 - * How did you feel to see the blind person regain their sight? happy? surprised? confident? thankful?
 - * Who in your life is closest to representing the blind person to you? What is their 'blindness' or need?
 - * How do you feel about re-presenting Christ to them? confident or hesitant? Why? What is your image or experience of God in relation to this situation? Close or distant? Loving or fearful? How does this affect your prayer or lack of prayer about this situation?
 - * What would Christ's healing touch through you mean for this person? How would it happen?
3. Pray for one another in pairs, asking for freedom from 'blindness' and strength to be agents of healing and hope for those who are 'blind'.
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Closing prayer

Lord Jesus Christ, you have made us your own.

*We have felt your healing touch, we know your liberating love,
we are giddy with joy at seeing the colours of God's new commonwealth.*

Send us to bring the news of this freedom to your world.

In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Craig Mitchell

⁴ Barnabas Lindars, *The Gospel of John*, New Century Bible Commentary, Eerdmans, 1972.

The vine and the branches

John 15:1-11

Preparation

Participants will need pens and paper. A picture of a grape vine, or even some leaves, branches and grapes would help to stimulate people's imagination.

Setting the scene

The setting is the Last Supper, and Jesus' final conversation with the disciples before his crucifixion. Because it was such an important occasion, we might surmise that his words were not said lightly and that they contained some of the central truths about what it meant to live in relationship with him. In the Old Testament Israel was often referred to as 'the vine'. By referring to himself as the 'true vine', Jesus indicated that he was the fulfilment of God's purpose for Israel.

Every branch of a vine grows from the main stock. This is tended by the gardener so that it will have all the conditions necessary for its growth and fruitfulness. But the gardener cannot force the vine to do the correct thing - there is an interdependency in the relationship. When the branches do not bear fruit they are taken off the vine and burnt. When they do bear fruit they are regularly pruned right back and spend most of the year abiding in the vine. The vine is a plant which spreads out - like the Kingdom of God. At the heart of Jesus' teaching in this passage is the word 'abide'. If we live in Christ and Christ in us our lives will bear fruit. If we live out of an intimacy with Christ our prayers will be wise and we will ask for what is right.

Bible reading: John 15:1-11

Use the New Revised Standard Version or the Jerusalem Bible. Read the passage slowly for the group, pausing briefly between some of the important statements.

Centring exercise

Choose one of the centring exercises from the earlier section.

Meditation

This is a meditative form of prayer in which you will be invited to reflect on certain words, feelings and images. It may be that you find it difficult to respond to, or that you feel nothing very much is happening, or that you are distracted. If this is the case, relax. The most important thing about praying is just being here with Jesus. You don't have to be wise, or to perform well. Christ meets you and cares for you just as you are.

Jesus says, 'I am the true vine'. In your imagination picture a grape-vine. Maybe it is in your garden at home, or a friend's garden or a vineyard. Look at the vine carefully - notice the stock, and the branches; the leaves and the grapes. * And notice the setting - the soil, the surrounding area, the sky. *

Jesus says he is the true vine. His words give us an image which is the symbol of a great truth. 'My father is the vinegrower.' This is an important role. The vinegrower has to make sure that the conditions are right for the vine's growth and well-being. God is the vinegrower. Think about that role; picture it if you can. * 'I am the vine, you are the branches.' Now look at the branches on the vine, how they connect to the stock. * It is by being connected to the stock that they have life and bear fruit. The life that is in Christ Jesus is in each of us because we have a relationship with him; because we live in him. How do you feel about your relationship with Jesus at this present time? Are you experiencing or accepting that connectedness; or is it a time when you resist it; or perhaps feel that you have been abandoned? Take a few

moments now to reflect on your relationship with Jesus, the real vine, and then to talk to him about that relationship. Who are you for Jesus? Who is Jesus for you? *

Now think of the people that you relate to - family, friends, colleagues, members of a group or church or committee. Think of them as branches on the same vine. You are all individuals, often with very different ways of seeing life. But in Jesus - in the stock of the vine - you have a common source, a true community. It is the way we were created to relate to each other. Does this put a different perspective on any of your relationships? *

Jesus said, '(The vine grower) removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit'. When the vinegrower prunes, the vine is cut back so that it can just abide in the stock until it is time for new growth and time to bear fruit. Pruning sounds painful, but it is not about God taking delight in denuding us of things and people for the sake of it. The reality is that God sometimes asks us to let go of something we are holding onto tightly, in order that we can just rest in Jesus and find the source of life there. Does this in any way relate to your present experience of life? *

Jesus talks about seasons of life in the Spirit - of a time for growing, a time for bearing fruit, a time for pruning, a time for abiding. Do you have any sense of what might be the season you are invited to live in now? * Can you respond to that in the way that you presently order your life? Jesus said 'I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit'. Remember, Jesus isn't talking about busy-ness; about productivity; about doing many things. He is talking about bearing fruit, and that is something different. Where are you experiencing the kind of fruitfulness Jesus is talking about? * 'If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.' These are powerful words! They are an invitation to live in the kind of intimacy with Christ which forms and transforms us; which makes us wise and helps us to ask for the right things and to have the right intentions. What prayer arises within you as you reflect on those words? What is it that you want to ask? *

'As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you; abide in my love.' This is an invitation. It is addressed to you personally. Take some moments now just to rest in the love of Christ in whatever way seems most appropriate to you. Perhaps it will help you to picture Christ with you. Notice what Christ does and says. * Jesus said, 'If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love'. Begin to reflect now on your daily life - the people, places, tasks, hopes and dreams that are part of that. Do you have a sense of being 'in tune' with Jesus' commandments; his way of life? Do you need to ask for his help? *

Jesus said, 'I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete'. Is there anything else that you would like to bring into this conversation with Jesus? Anything you would like to talk to him about? * When you are ready, begin to leave the scene that we have just been reflecting on. See again the rich images Jesus spoke about - the vine, the branches, the fruit. In your own silent prayer, respond to what has taken place for you. *

Personal and group reflection

1. Invite participants to take about 15 minutes now and to write or draw a response to the questions below. Afterwards invite people to break up into groups of three and to share whatever they feel comfortable about from the meditation.

2. Discussion questions:

- a. What words, images and feelings stood out for me during that meditation?
- b. Where was God or Jesus for me?

c. Did I sense any movement, invitation, challenge during that time; something that I need to do more thinking, praying, sharing about?

3. Invite the groups to come together again and to share any insights or questions which have arisen.

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Closing prayer

Ask the group to sit in quietness for a moment, recalling the image of the vine and the branches. Invite them to join hands to symbolise their unity in Christ. Ask them to pray quietly for each other, as branches on the vine. Conclude by inviting them to join in the Lord's Prayer which makes reference to our relationship with God and with each other.

Ann Siddall

The Scripture quotations used in this meditation are from the New Revised Standard Version.

Mary at the tomb

John 19:17-20:18

Preparation

Each person will be asked to make two quilt squares. You will need scraps of coloured material, and pieces of backing card or material (20-30 cm square, two squares per person). You can also use glue to make the quilt design permanent.

Setting the scene

Mary Magdalene was the essential and only witness of Jesus' death, his burial, the empty tomb and the first to see the risen Christ. Mary, a woman once robbed of normal life by mental illness, remained faithful in the bitter times. Her understanding of Jesus and therefore of herself was transformed by this resurrection experience. Instead of a woman who clung to the familiar patterns of life, she was challenged to become the announcer of world overturning news: Jesus is alive! She was compelled to be a speaker and a leader instead of a follower. Despite the societal boundaries that limited a woman's role, Mary, filled with courage, raced to announce the startling news. How does the risen Christ urge us to leave familiar paths to follow him once more into new and dangerous adventures?

Bible reading: John 19:17-20:18

The New English Bible or Revised English Bible are suggested.

Centring exercise

For those who are able, sit cross-legged in a circle on the floor with your head bowed and hands clasped tightly. * Grip your hands and feel the pressure pulse through them. * Centre on your hands. See them grasping old ways of life. Imagine hands wringing with pain and grief. *

Relax your hands slightly and listen to the meditation. Imagine yourself as Mary Magdalene, a woman follower of Jesus with a history of mental illness. * When Jesus speaks to Mary raise your head slightly and open your hands, palms up. At the conclusion of the meditation, stand and stretch your arms upward. You will feel the release of tension as you uncurl your body from its trapped position and open yourself to God's freedom. Now journey in time to the scene of Jesus' crucifixion. *

Meditation

'No!' The scream echoed through my fevered brain. 'He's tired, hurting, bleeding, dying. Why can't you leave him alone?' I could do nothing. I was powerless to help this one who had been such a faithful friend. How could I, a woman, stop the awful machinery of the law that was grinding this man Jesus into the dust? All I could do was wait and watch as women have through all time - waiting for birth and watching at deaths beyond control. * Think about the powerlessness of the women who stood at the cross while Jesus was crucified. * Remember your own powerlessness and inability to act when you are caught by circumstances or by your own fear. *

The sun climbed high in the sky as I stood on the hill with Mary, Joanna and John. We were glad to have John's protection in that crowd that fed on its own evil. Heat burned my face and dust swirled around my feet. My stomach was knotted in pain. My breath strangled as I watched Jesus struggle to breathe. * I remembered how his pierced hands had once touched my head in healing forgiveness. I felt a numbness seep through my flesh and bone as the terrible scene glazed my eyes. The clamour of the crowd, the stench of blood soaked dust, and the blistering sun faded as we clung together, beyond thought and word. Finally the end came. Pain ripped open my

consciousness as Jesus cried out, 'It is finished'. * What was finished? Reflect on what Jesus ended by his death. *

Slowly we followed his body to the grave. We lingered while Joseph wrapped the body and laid it in that dark cave. We noted its position carefully so that we could return after the Sabbath. * Then we plodded home, but no place felt like home any more. I was a stranger amongst alien people. Nothing seemed real. The noise of the crowd was just a murmur as I wrapped my blanket of grief around me. *

Saturday was an empty day. I had no activity to take my mind out of despair. Nothing to distract me from seeing Jesus in that cold and dark place with no friends of solace. So often he had asked us to stay with him while he prayed, or talked to others. It seemed that he needed our company; that we were important to him. It pained me that now he was truly alone and this knowledge intensified my own loneliness. * Never again would I see his smiling face or watch his eyes dancing with light as he told stories about the goodness of God. Never again would I experience the miracles that leaped into the air when people came to him for healing and restoration. My world closed in on me just as the stone had closed the dark tomb. * When have you felt closed in, trapped, without hope? *

In the dark before dawn on Sunday morning I made my way to his grave. The day seemed futile and empty. * The rising sun was in my eyes so at first I thought I had taken a wrong turn. Fearfully, I moved closer wondering who could have moved that huge rock. * Looking in, I saw only the linen wrappings folded neatly on the bench where a strange man was sitting. * He said that Jesus wasn't there any more. We urged him to tell us where they had hidden the body. I could not understand what he was saying. * I turned to see if someone else would give me some sensible answers. I pleaded with a person who stood in the shadows. 'Where have you taken the body from this grave?' Suddenly, that familiar voice said my name, 'Mary'. My fear dissolved. I felt laughter bubbling up within me and the moment seemed suspended in time. I laughed. *

Consider the conversation between Jesus and Mary. What might Jesus have said to lift Mary from her grief? *

I didn't understand at first why he told me not to hug him or to touch him. * What is the most treasured image or experience of Jesus to which you cling? *

Later I began to realize what he wanted me to see. I had focussed on his death so much. I had become absorbed in the past and could think of nothing else. Jesus wanted me to let go of the limitations of the past, my preconceived ideas of the world. He offered me a new vision; an image of life filled with the glory and power of God. By letting go, I could move into this new world of freedom and joy. * Filled with anxiety and anticipation, I had to respond. I ran to tell the other disciples the good news: Jesus was alive! I realized that Jesus was with me always. Never again would I feel the utter despair that had engulfed me. I had come to find Jesus and discovered the Christ! I raced to the house where the disciples and other friends were gathered. I shouted with joy, 'I have seen Jesus. He is alive!'. *

How is Jesus asking you to let go of an old, comfortable faith and to move into a bold, new understanding of God? *

Personal and group reflection

1. Individually reflect on your experiences with Jesus. Select a few treasured memories of exciting or meaningful times in the past when Jesus was very close to you. Using the materials provided, place pieces of coloured material onto the backing card or material to create a quilt piece which symbolizes that time. You might think of a symbol to represent the value of that relationship or experience with Jesus.

2. Take time to listen to your heart, mind and body. Where is the uneasiness that suggests Jesus is calling you into a new relationship? Does Christ want you to trust him again in a new but frightening way? Are you resisting this call? Create another quilt patch that represents this new image. This patch may not be as detailed but rather may represent the fluid nature of your emerging understanding.

3. Come together as a group. In your midst place the first patches in a square and the second patches around that inner square. Each person takes time to explain the meaning of their patches and the insights they discovered during the meditation. [The patches could be permanently fixed as a spiritual quilt to remember your past, present and future journeys with the risen Christ.]

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Closing prayer

Comforting God, it is so much easier to stay wrapped in our old patterns of relating to you. The good old days seem fresher and more meaningful than the drudgery of today's normal living.

Disturbing God, make the pin-pricks of injustice that we see daily become a stabbing pain that demands healing. Help us to hear your voice in the sighs too deep for words of our work mates, our family, friends and foes.

Creating God, call us to a new vision of your acting in the world. Help us to race out with the good news that life is sacred, that you have power over death and can set free people broken with pain. Give us the resurrection joy and excitement of Mary. So be it!

Christine Gapes, with help from Karen Tye and Martha Mehl.

Do you love me?

John 21:1-19

Preparation

You will need two journal pages for each person. On page one print the following sentences evenly spaced down the page.

Do you love me?

Take care of my lambs

Do you love me?

Take care of my sheep

On page two print these sentences, also evenly spaced:

Do you love me?

Take care of my sheep

Follow me!

An option to close this meditation is to share in either a simple meal or Holy Communion (Eucharist).

Setting the scene

This compelling story of Jesus' resurrection appearance mirrors a number of images found in the gospels - the disciples fishing without success, the unrecognised Jesus, the full fishing net, Peter's leap into the water, a shared meal.

The main focus of the meditation is on Jesus' dialogue with Peter. Commentators have a variety of explanations for the three-fold question and charge. One opinion is that Peter is asked by Jesus three times 'Do you love me?' because he has denied Jesus three times. There is nothing in the story to confirm or deny this. Another popular view described by Barnabas Lindars expounds Jesus' use of two different words in the Greek for 'love'.⁵ In verses 15 and 16, the word Jesus uses refers to 'agape' love, the highest form of God-like love. Yet in answer to those questions when Peter says 'You know that I love you', he speaks of 'philo' or friendship love. The suggestion is that Peter knows he cannot live up to Jesus' request. Consequently Jesus limits his third question to 'philo' or friendship love to which Peter replies affirmatively. According to Lindars this interpretation is fascinating, but would make more sense if Jesus asked more of Peter instead of less each time. Likewise the variation in the charge to Peter is probably not significant.

The repeated questions imply that Peter is being asked to be certain about his response. Similarly the meditation invites people to probe their inner response to Christ more deeply each time they answer.

Bible reading: John 21:1-19

This can be read in three parts: the narrator, Jesus, and Peter (a third person or the remainder of the group in unison).

Centring exercise

Explain that this meditation will involve some written reflection. Hand out sheets of paper with the sentences listed on them. Explain that when it is time to write you will instruct them to open their eyes.

Do one of the centring exercises from the earlier section.

Meditation

It is cold. Feel the coolness in your skin and limbs. * It is dark. Sense the darkness of night, with moon and stars overhead. * You are moving. Feel the rocking of the waves from within a fishing boat. * You smell sea air and salt water, and feel spray on your

face. Hands and feet are wet. * You hear sounds - the creaking of the boat's timbers, the splash of water against the hull, the voices of those fishing with you. * Light slowly dawns in the east. A long night in a boat comes to an end as the sun peeps over the horizon. *

A ghostly figure stands on the shore - a person or an apparition? You are not quite sure. * A voice calls out, 'Have you caught anything?'. What a joke! The nets lie empty in the boat. 'Not a thing', someone replies. * And then an amazing event that stirs a strong memory in you: the stranger shouts a suggestion, and next the nets come in full of fish! * 'It is the Lord!'. Jesus, appearing again, here on Lake Tiberias! Full of excitement you leap into the water and swim to shore. *

You emerge dripping from the water to see Jesus standing by a fire. How do you feel? What do you say and do? * The nets are dragged ashore. 'Come and eat', Jesus says. As a group you gather around the warm fire in the half-light. Smell the wood smoke. * Jesus passes bread and cooked fish around the small circle of friends. This meal also stirs strong memories in you. Enjoy this special moment with Jesus. *

Jesus stands and walks along the beach. You decide to follow, and fall in step alongside him. * Then Jesus stops and turns to face you. See his face, his eyes before you. * 'Do you love me more than these others?', says Jesus. You are startled. Why is he asking this? You remember that once you denied even knowing him. What feelings and thoughts do you have? What do you say in reply? * Jesus nods slightly and says, 'Take care of my lambs'. What does he mean? What is he asking you to do? What do you think and say in reply? *

Now open your eyes and write down what you say in response to Jesus' question and command. * Close your eyes again. Jesus is still talking with you. He again asks, 'Do you love me?'. Allow the question to sink deeper into your heart. Why has Jesus asked this again? What does he expect you to say? How do you feel this time? What do you say in reply? * 'Take care of my sheep.' Who are the sheep he is talking about? What does he expect you to do for them? * Now open your eyes and write down what you say in response to Jesus' second question and command. *

Again close your eyes. Picture Jesus' face once more. 'Do you love me?', he asks a third time. Why does he ask again? 'Doesn't he believe me?', you wonder. Allow this question to sink even deeper into your heart than the previous questions. Reach for a deeper response from within yourself. Talk to Jesus. * Open your eyes and write down your response to Jesus. *

Close your eyes once more and return to the scene. * One more time he says to you, 'Take care of my sheep'. What is Jesus asking you to do? See the faces of the 'sheep' in your life he is calling you to care for. * Now picture yourself caring for them in the way Jesus would want you to. * Open your eyes and write a reminder of what Jesus is calling you to do. *

Close your eyes one last time. * How do you now feel within yourself? How do you feel towards Jesus? * Jesus takes your hands in his and looks you in the eye. In that voice which always grips you so deeply he says, 'Follow me!'. * Tell Jesus what you want to say in reply. Allow yourself to enjoy this special moment. *

Personal and group reflection

Be particularly sensitive in this time to people who may not wish to share their responses. Invite people to sit in groups of three to discuss these questions.

1. Through which of your senses (sight, hearing, etc.) did you experience the meditation most vividly? Describe this.
2. At what moments were you most surprised? Why?

3. Describe your experience of Jesus as a person.
 4. What was your feeling at the close of the meditation?
 5. Allow each person to share any responses from their written journal with which they feel comfortable. Let one person share all they wish before moving on to the second person. Avoid discussing the responses, instead ask questions like:
What caused you to feel this way?
What was Jesus really trying to say to you?
How did this affect your relationship with Jesus?
What particular people was Jesus calling you to care for?
What particular actions was Jesus calling you to take?
 6. What does the call of Jesus to love God more deeply through our lives require of us?
When is this difficult for us?
 7. Why do you think Jesus asked the question of Peter three times? Why did Jesus give the command to care three times?
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Closing prayer

1. Invite people to pray sentence prayers of adoration beginning with the words 'Our God, we love you because...'
2. Read 1 John 4:7-11, breaking the verses into short phrases, and asking the group to repeat aloud each phrase in unison.
3. Close with this prayer from St. Augustine:
*Lord God, the light of the minds that know you,
the life of the souls that love you,
and the strength of the wills that serve you:
Help us so to know you that we may truly love you,
and so to love you that we may fully serve you,
whom to serve is perfect freedom,
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*

Craig Mitchell

⁵. Barnabas Lindars, *The Gospel of John*, New Century Bible Commentary, Eerdmans, 1972.

The Bible and the imagination

In recent years, many Bible scholars have encouraged Christians to focus their attention on the Bible as narrative or story. The Bible as a whole is a story of cosmic proportions describing God, the universe, and God's love for the world. The Bible is also a unique library containing many different kinds of literature, one of which is narrative or story. Treating the Bible as a special story should affect how we study it, preach it, and pray with it.

Often in Bible study we try to draw from a passage of Scripture the main point or principle it seems to make. Then we forget the story itself to focus instead on the biblical principle. However in doing this we can close our minds to other possible meanings contained within the story. One reason we may cringe inside when we hear the story of the Good Samaritan `again' is that we think we know its meaning backwards.

Tell a group of people a story and then ask each person what it meant - you will get a variety of answers. Paul Ricoeur speaks of stories as having a `surplus of meaning': layers of message like the skin of an onion or the range of colours in a rainbow. Jesus used stories to communicate because they held people's attention, but also because the truth he communicated was richer than what could be stated as a simple principle.

As a story-teller of renown, Jesus must have known that stories are meant to be told with feeling and drama. Before the Bible was written down, much of it existed in the form of stories which were told orally in worship and teaching over and over. We can allow the richness of the Bible to come to life today by dramatically re_telling it orally (not simply reading publicly in a monotone!).

Songs, stories, dance and drama capture our attention in worship not only because they have entertainment value, but also because our imagination is a vital aspect of our faith. Imagination allows us to believe in what our eyes have not seen; to know that there is a spiritual or transcendent dimension to what we can see, hear, touch, taste and smell; to explore possibilities for our future - and ultimately to know our unseen God. Notions of `conversion', `kingdom of God', `salvation', and a host of other areas of Christian faith would mean little without our ability to imagine God's possibilities for ourselves and our world.

Imagination stimulates both our intellect and our emotions. It helps us to see, know and experience deep truths about God and our lives that would not have the same impact if they were merely spoken as abstract doctrines. Handel's `Messiah' and Norman Habel and Pro Hart's `Outback Christmas' move us to faith in a different, more intimate manner than would a theological statement on the incarnation. Recent research on the human brain seems to confirm that the right and left hemispheres apparently specialise in different ways of thinking. The left is more rational, analytical, verbal and linear, and the right is intuitive, symbolic, non-verbal and sees patterns. So there are two different ways of knowing truth, both of which must be activated and held together if we are to see the whole picture.

Studying the Bible

Scholarly research of the Bible is essential, otherwise we would never know how Jews regarded Samaritans or how the Roman Empire governed the Middle East, or even what was meant by `crucifixion'. Things that we assume people have always known

about biblical times are the product of such research in the past. However, while doing this research is important, the danger is that we may fail to go on to make connections with our lives today. If we treat the Bible simply like an object to be dissected on a laboratory bench, we will not necessarily be open to the Bible 'reading us' as God reaches out to us with God's Word.

In studying the Bible we want more than to examine abstract truths about human existence or fascinating historical data. We want and need to experience God's Word as revelation of God's love for us. Whereas theology and academic biblical study help identify, interpret and summarise this revelation, it must also be communicated to us in some primary sense. Kathleen Fischer in *The Inner Rainbow* says, 'It is also on the level of the imagination that we formulate our initial response to the encounter with the divine; faith finds expression first as myth and ritual, sacrament, symbol, image and story. Only later does it become dogma and institution... As revelation, [the text] is not simply information; it is a relationship in which we are called to participate'.⁶ Engaging our imagination in prayerful reflection on Scripture provides a channel for this primary experience of communion with God.

The Bible and our imagination may be linked in several ways:

1. If the Bible describes aspects of human life which are universally true, then through our imagination we may identify our present experience with the past experience of others. Peter's denial of Jesus, or Job's mixture of suffering and trust, or Hagar's rejection may all be 'true' for us in this way. These links are not only conscious. The process of meditation taps into the depth of our unconscious selves to resonate with these universal dimensions in profound ways. (Jungian psychology offers an insightful explanation of this connection with the archetypal aspects of human existence.)

2. Through imagination we may fill in the missing details of a Bible story. This may help our modern minds make sense of an ancient story or may help us explore the motivation of the various characters. This regularly happens in discussion groups. 'Why do you think Jesus went off by himself to pray?' 'What would have been going through the minds of Peter and Andrew when Jesus asked them to give up fishing and follow him?' The danger with this is that our imagining may obscure or even contradict the thrust of the story. For this reason alone our 'imaginative' and 'intellectual' study should be done side by side. To say that the text has a surplus of meanings does not imply that any meaning is possible. Both the text itself and the message of the Bible as a whole make some meanings illegitimate (for example, the use of the Old Testament to justify apartheid).

3. We draw parallels between the Bible and our present day lives using our imagination. Here the focus is not on imagining the details of the Bible story, but on seeing different possibilities for the way we live today in the light of what we have learnt from the Bible. The difference from point 1 above is that often this is a conscious activity which begins with examining a biblical principle rather than with a meditative reflection. Again this use of our imagination is quite common in Bible study: 'How would controlling your speech make a difference to the way you relate to people at work?' 'What might it mean to love neighbours who are suffering on the other side of the world?'

4. We use our imagination when we share in prayerful encounter and dialogue with God. Perhaps in one sense all prayer involves the imagination, however in this

particular sense the biblical story serves as a springboard for prayer. While we may be imagining details of the Bible story, the goal is to move beyond this to a deep communication with God about ourselves and our lives. The story becomes a window for a clearer image of who God is (and who we are). Yet we don't try to manipulate the essence of the picture or dialogue - we receive and respond. So although we start with a particular Bible story, the prayer dialogue may take us in surprising directions. Such imagining moves us beyond simply picturing the past or present to intuitive knowledge of the nature of God. Both the Old Testament prophets and the Christian 'mystics' through the ages have tried to give poetic verbal expression to this kind of experience.

This book of meditations involves people's imagination in all of the above ways, although the aim of prayerful encounter with God is central.

Many Christians through the ages have developed and used imaginative approaches to studying and praying the Bible. Ignatius of Loyola, the Spanish founder of the Jesuit order, developed his famous *Spiritual Exercises* in the early 16th century. These exercises form the basis for a solid, systematic process of spiritual formation under the guidance of a spiritual director. The basic form of the exercises involves a 30 day retreat in which several hours each day are spent engaging in an in-depth meditation. In a broad sense a number of meditations in this book fit the Ignatian tradition of imagining oneself within or as an observer to a biblical story. However Ignatius' *Exercises* themselves contain a theologically systematic and spiritually rich approach to prayer which is quite intense and worth their own investigation.

Recently Walter Wink has developed a Bible study method which seeks to bring together the use of biblical scholarship, psychological insights, and creative responses in *Transforming Bible Study*. While this does not make guided meditation central, it does involve creative exploration of the impact of the Bible on our lives today.

⁶ Kathleen Fischer, *The Inner Rainbow*, Paulist Press, New York, 1983.

Further reading and resources

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STEP INSIDE THE GOSPELS!

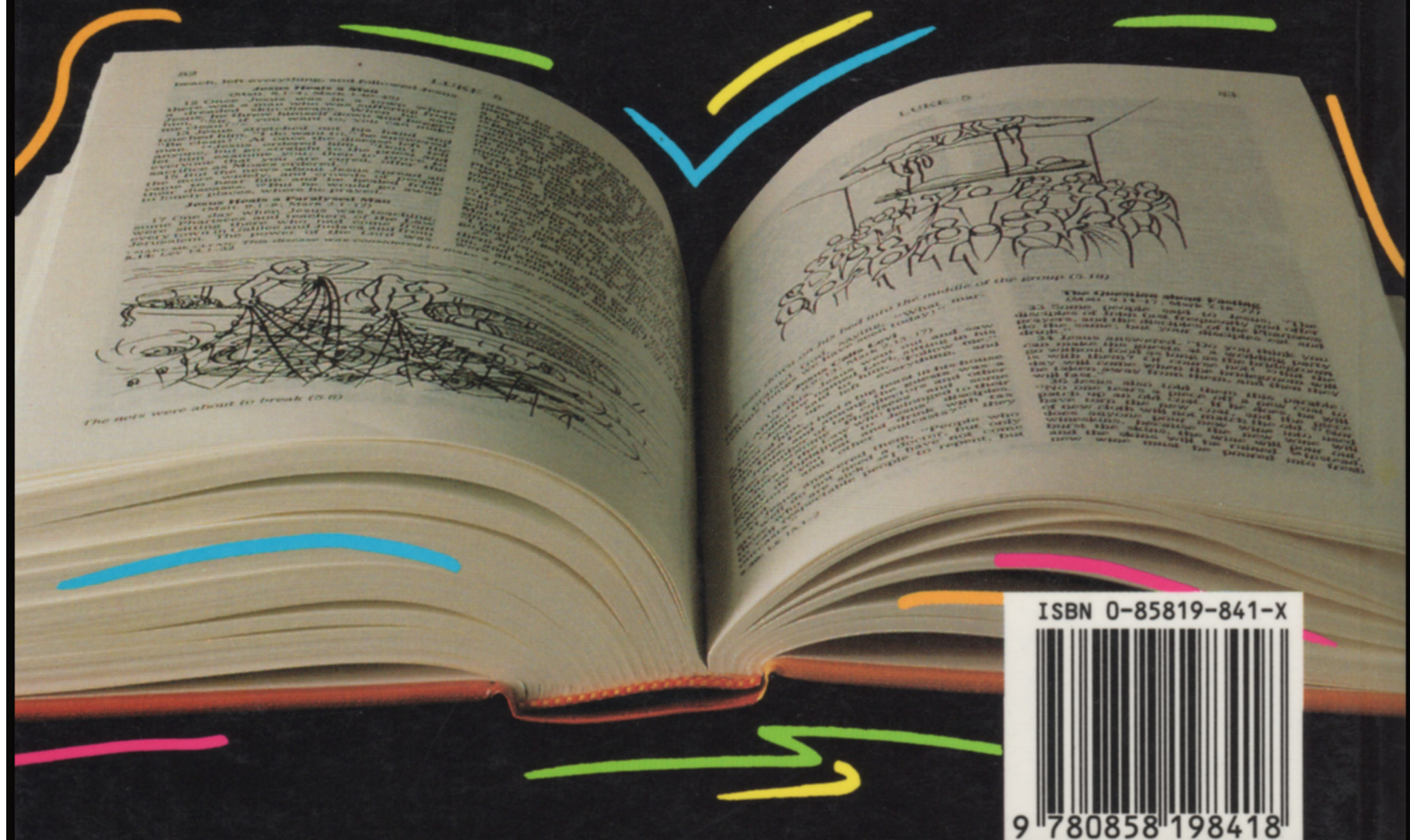
Meet Jesus through the eyes of Peter, Mary and other New Testament characters in these meditations on well-known Bible stories.

Each meditation helps leaders to guide a group of young people or adults in reflection, group discussion and prayer.

The meditations will enrich study and prayer groups and add a fresh dimension to camps, spiritual retreats and worship services.

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