

Imaginative Contemplation – Prayer, Alms giving, Fasting



Introduction

The most frequent way of praying that Saint Ignatius uses is that of imagining ourselves in a Gospel scene. We imagine ourselves as a character in the story. We take part in the story, seeing Jesus and all the other people, being aware of what's going on and how we are feeling. The purpose of praying with the imagination is to allow Christ in the Scripture to speak to us. To bring the Gospel stories to life for us. We are not trying to recreate history. It doesn't matter if your imagination takes the story off in a different direction to the Scripture. It doesn't matter if the story takes place in 1st century Palestine or where we live now in the 21st century. What is important is what God wants to say to us through this passage.

Let us sit and relax so that together we can contemplate the Gospel using our imagination.

Prayer

We acknowledge we are in the presence of God so let us say together:

Direct O Lord and guide and influence all that is happening in my mind and heart during this time of prayer: all my moods and feelings, my memories and imaginings; my hopes and desires; may all be directed and influenced to your greater glory, praise and service and to my growth in your Spirit.
Amen

Let the Spirit enter our hearts and enlighten our minds as we listen to Jesus calling us to a change of heart as we start this Lenten season.

Reading Matthew 6:1-6, 16-18

Jesus said to his disciples, 'Be careful not to parade your good deeds before men to attract their notice; by doing this you will lose all reward from your Father in heaven.

So when you give alms, do not have it trumpeted before you; this is what the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets to win men's admiration. I tell you solemnly, they have had their reward. But when you give alms, your left hand must not know what your right is doing; your alms-giving must be secret, and your Father who sees all that is done in secret will reward you.

And when you pray, do not imitate the hypocrites: they love to say their prayers standing up in the synagogues and at the street corners for people to see them; I tell you solemnly, they have had their reward. But when you pray, go to your private room and, when you have shut your door, pray to your Father who is in that secret place, and your Father who sees all that is done in secret will reward you.

When you fast do not put on a gloomy look as the hypocrites do: they pull long faces to let men know they are fasting. I tell you solemnly, they have had their reward. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that no one will know you are fasting except your Father who sees all that is done in secret; and your Father who sees all that is done in secret will reward you.'

Contemplation

Today, Ash Wednesday, the Gospel Reading is part of the Sermon on the Mount and Jesus warns us against acting for the sake of appearances. So let us enter the scene as we listen to Jesus tell us how we should

undertake the age old practices of a devout follower of Our Lord – those of prayer, fasting, and alms-giving.

- Who are you in the scene? One of the disciples? One of the crowd? Perhaps a Scribe or a Pharisee? A follower of Jesus? Someone who is not mentioned in the passage?
- Why are you there? Are you with Jesus? Did you perhaps see the crowd and follow it? Are you there to listen to Jesus?
- Where are you in the crowd? In the front? Middle? On the margins?
- As you listen to Jesus how do you feel regarding his teaching regarding good works? Do you find it disconcerting? Does part of you want to go public when you are doing good deeds e.g. giving alms? If you are doing something worthy, do you feel eager to broadcast it? To draw attention to it?
- Do you find Jesus' exaggerated depictions of people drawing attention to themselves when praying, fasting and giving alms funny? Or did it strike a chord because although you don't blow a trumpet when you give alms, put on a gloomy face or when you fast or stand up when you pray, you still enjoy the admiration of others when they see you participating in these practices?
- When we, as disciples of Jesus, give alms, pray or fast, should it not be in such a way that our actions be directed towards God and not ourselves and others? Should it not be that by these practices, our actions help others and lead them to God? Should it not be that through these practices, we bring others in from the margins, give them dignity and help them to feel loved? Should these practices not be done out of love for God and neighbour and not directed towards ourselves?
- As you listen to Jesus, are you asking yourself how better to give alms to those in need? Is there a family or charity you know who would benefit from your alms giving? Perhaps you cant afford the material goods to give away but you know someone who may benefit from your time with them. Do you think that perhaps giving alms is not all about giving money but more about giving of yourself?
- What about prayer? Do you know someone who would benefit from your prayers? Do you know someone who would draw strength from your prayers? Would you, yourself benefit from prayer so that you can develop a deeper relationship with God?
- What about fasting? Do you feel that by fasting, you can come out in solidarity with people who are starving? That by fasting you can

develop a better appreciation for those who do not know where their next meal is coming from? That by fasting you are exercising spiritual control which can help in times of temptation? That by fasting you are following in Jesus' footsteps in the desert? Or do you feel it is more beneficial to do something positive rather than fasting?

As we spend 10 minutes in quiet contemplation, let us talk to Jesus and ask him how better to carry out the practices of alms-giving, praying and fasting.

Sharing

Let us now share what we thought, felt etc. only if you are comfortable to do so.

End Prayer Suscipe of St. Ignatius of Loyola

Take, Lord, and receive all my liberty,
my memory, my understanding,
and my entire will,
All I have and call my own.
You have given all to me.
To you, Lord, I return it.
Everything is yours; do with it what you will.
Give me only your love and your grace,
that is enough for me.

Fasting Pope Francis (Ash Wednesday 2017)

Fast from hurtful words and speak kind words.
Fast from sadness and be filled with gratitude.
Fast from anger and be filled with patience.
Fast from pessimism and be filled with hope.
Fast from worries and have trust in God.
Fast from complaints and contemplate simplicity.
Fast from pressures and be prayerful.
Fast from bitterness and fill your heart with joy.
Fast from selfishness and be compassionate.
Fast from grudges and be reconciled.
Fast from words and be silent so you can listen.