

Scripture: Praying the Gospels

Last week we looked at one practice for praying with scripture: *lectio divina*. This week we'll explore the Jesuit practice of Ignatian Contemplation. This practice is used to read and experience the stories of the Bible, especially of the gospels in new and surprisingly immersive ways. You can perhaps think of Ignatian Contemplation as Method Acting Prayer. Instead of just talking to God, imagine *experiencing* the passage from the Bible yourself. Inhabit the gospel story as one of Jesus's disciples. What do you see? What sounds are happening around you? What's the weather like? Slip so deeply into the story that you can smell Martha cooking for Jesus and the disciples. Spend some time experiencing Jesus for yourself. Don't worry if it feels too imaginative. What matters now is your prayerful intention. What do you notice in the story when you experience it from the inside? What are you learning about God? What are you learning about yourself?

Jesuit priest James Martin describes this practice of prayer in his book *Jesus: A Pilgrimage*:

Twenty-five years ago, I entered the Society of Jesus, the Roman Catholic religious order better known as the Jesuits. Shortly after I entered the Jesuit novitiate (the first stage of training), I was introduced to a marvelous way of praying popularized by St. Ignatius Loyola, the sixteenth-century founder of the Jesuits. This method of prayer goes by many names: Ignatian contemplation, imaginative prayer, and composition of place.

Ignatian contemplation encourages you to place yourself imaginatively in a scene from the Bible. For example, if you're praying about Jesus and his disciples caught in a boat during a storm on the Sea of Galilee, you would try to imagine yourself on board with the disciples, and ask yourself several questions as a way of trying to place yourself in the scene. You might ask: What do you see? How many disciples are in the boat? What is the expression on their faces? How rough is the sea? What do you hear? The howling wind? The fishing tackle shifting about in the boat? What do you smell? You're in a fishing boat, so you might smell residues from the day's catch. What do you feel? Homespun clothes were probably heavy when soaked by storm-driven water. And what do you taste? Maybe the spray on your lips. With such imaginative techniques you let the Gospel passage play out in your mind's eye, and then you notice your reactions.

Ignatian contemplation doesn't require any special spiritual talents. Nor does it require you to believe that every single detail of the narrative is accurate. (As we will see, some Gospel accounts of the same events disagree.) It merely asks you to enter into Bible stories imaginatively and to accept that God can work through your imagination to help you see things in fresh ways. Jesus himself asked people to use their imaginations when he offered them his parables. When someone asked, "Who is my neighbor?" Jesus responded not with a definition, but with the story of the Good Samaritan, in effect saying to his listeners, "Imagine something like this happening."

Martin, James. *Jesus: A Pilgrimage* (pp. 9-10). HarperOne.

Let us try this now with a gospel story, the text from this Sunday's lectionary. Imagine you are in this story. Who do you imagine yourself to be? What are you experiencing? What are you feeling?

John 12:20-33 (NRSV)

Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks. They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus." Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. Jesus answered them, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor.

"Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say—'Father, save me from this hour'? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name." Then a voice came from heaven, "I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again." The crowd standing there heard it and said that it was thunder. Others said, "An angel has spoken to him." Jesus answered, "This voice has come for your sake, not for mine. Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself." He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die.