
Sacred Space Retreat for Lent 2008

Introduction	1
Helps for the day	1
Suggested timetable	2
First Time of Prayer	4
Matthew 4: 1-11	4
Helps for my prayer	4
Reflection after the prayer	5
Second Time of Prayer	6
John 4: 5-26	6
Helps for my prayer	6
Reflection after the prayer	7
Third Time of Prayer	8
Matthew 17: 1-9	8
Helps for my prayer	8
Reflection on the prayer	9
Review of the Day	9



Introduction

Welcome to the Sacred Space retreat for Lent.

This retreat is a time for us to step back from our more usual routine of living. What is suggested to us is to choose a suitable day where, leaving aside our normal concerns, we can instead go apart in some way and into real quiet. And there, in that space—as will be outlined here—we hope to enter more deeply into our own hearts, and in those depths within find God.

Lent comes very early this time round, because the ancient method of calculating Easter (on the first Sunday succeeding the first full moon after the Spring solstice) sets the Easter Sunday before us on 23 March. And what is Lent itself for? It is the period of forty days, starting on Ash Wednesday, during which we are encouraged to prepare for Easter, the greatest of Christian feasts. Easter is centred on the dying and rising of Christ. Over the weeks of Lent we somehow try, as best we can, to orientate ourselves towards the events of Holy Week and Easter. We do this by some renewal of mind and heart, by the endeavour to redirect the course of our lives towards the grace and goodness of God.

All of that is perhaps a tall order, and may seem quite beyond our reach! But our retreat day hopefully makes things more manageable. We will just take *this* day, by taking time out, with the help of the material proposed. On this day we will get the opportunity to refocus ourselves, reflect and pray, and so let the presence of God touch us more deeply. If we do this, then something is set going in us, helping us along the way towards Easter.

Helps for the day

Above all, a spirit of **openness** and **trust** will help. If I am going to leave aside other things for this day, change my routine, make space, then God will be there for me. How will that be? Well, there is the ancient monastic dictum, “**Enter into your own heart**”. If I enter into my heart, into my innermost self, in quiet, then I will find God there.

“Enter into your own heart”. This is what the monks knew, down through the centuries. This is the truth you will encounter if you have seen that recent movie on Carthusian monastic life, *Into Great Silence*, as

lived out in the Grande Chartreuse on the slopes of the French Alps. It is the immense truth of my life: helping me realise that the Living God, who has brought me into being, who calls me by my own name, who is before me always, actually resides within me. What an extraordinary mystery! Therefore within me there is already prayer, already communion in God. Oh yes, it can be utterly unconscious, unrecognised, forgotten. But by taking space, entering into some quiet, then let me trust that God is there, intimately within, and speaking with me. I don't have to be a monk to know that—I simply need to let myself become still, and allow myself to be open to the depths within my own heart and being.

“**Here I am, O Lord**”, therefore, could be the prayer or thought as I face the day. Just that spirit of openness! It is the prayer of various people throughout the Bible, and characterises the stance of faith. “Here I am”. Here I am, as I am this day, perhaps with some spirit of expectation, or feeling empty and needy. I come just as I am, not dressed up or feeling I must have some special religious

thoughts. No, I come just as I am. For God comes to me, where I am now, and as I am. In effect, when I'm like that, with humble and simple openness of heart, there is Someone else looking at me, lovingly and truthfully, and saying to me: “And here *I* am for you...”

What about the practical preparation for my day of retreat? Well, **space and solitude** are important requirements. What I need to do is to make a space, a clearing for myself amid the forest of things that might otherwise engage me. So let me think out where I can go to be alone and without distracting interruptions. Perhaps there is a room or a place where I can feel free and become quiet. Maybe too I can create an atmosphere, with a candle burning, with a picture or icon of Christ, or of the Trinity (such as portrayed in the beautiful Rublev icon), or of Mary and her child. It could be too that some suitable music might help set the atmosphere—or such might just be a bit distracting or unhelpful, and I would prefer the “music” of the silence and solitude...

Suggested timetable

The timetable below is meant as a guide. So I ought to adapt it to what suits my own requirements, my energy level, and what I feel able for.

9.30am **Preparation**

I take a while to prepare myself, by settling down, and becoming quiet... Perhaps it could be helpful to think about what I would hope for or expect from this day, and write down whatever hope has come to light... Then I might pray for a moment in some such way as this: “Lord, here I am this day. Be with me! Help me to be open to your coming and your grace. Let my body and mind become stilled and aware of your presence already in my heart”.

The substance of the day then revolves around three times or hours of prayer, with each of these centring on one of the gospel passages which are chosen by the Christian churches for our attention during Lent. If the idea of an hour of prayer seems too much for me, then let me decide on what I think I can cope with, say thirty-five or forty-five minutes. The time does need to be fairly substantial, so that I give myself the opportunity to enter into the experience. Let me have patience! Worthwhile things in life take time, and this applies to prayer too. Then, as well as the scripture passage itself, some helps for my actual time of prayer are offered, sketching out something for my imagination to use, and some possible lines of thought. But not too much is given, so I may allow freedom to my mind's own creativity *and above all* to God's inspirations in my heart.

10.00am **First Hour of Prayer**

Scripture: Jesus in the Desert**Matthew chapter 4: verses 1-11**

11.00am Midmorning break. I get some refreshment, and get a breather

11.30am Second Hour of Prayer

Scripture: Jesus and the Woman at the Well of Samaria

(John chapter 4: verses 5-26)

12.30pm Lunch break. I take some lunch, and perhaps go for a walk, letting my thoughts and reflections revolve around the day thus far

2.30pm Third Hour of Prayer

Scripture: Jesus is Transfigured on the Mountain

(Matthew chapter 17: verses 1-9)

3.30pm Afternoon break. Again I might take a little refreshment, and air

4.00pm Review of the Day

I take a little time, not very long, to look back over the day, and especially at my times of prayer. Often it is in retrospect that what was really happening can be seen. I note what moved me during those periods. Were there moments of darkness, and moments of light? Moments when I was encouraged? Perhaps something comes to light, of how the Lord was with me, what he was saying to me, how he is calling me forward. Or maybe there were just the tiniest of intimations and glimpses... In any case, let me end my retreat with thankfulness. For in faith I can believe that the time given was not empty, but full. The Lord has been there, and I am grateful and give praise.

And now, keeping these helps in mind, and the suggested pattern for the day, each of the hours or times of prayer are sketched out as follows.

First Time of Prayer

Let me settle down, and take some posture for prayer. Sitting in a relaxed yet attentive way may be best. If I can, let me become conscious of God's presence to me at this moment. "Lord, you are present to me here. Help me to have some sense of this. Lord, you are in my heart and in this place".

Now I read the passage of scripture, which in this instance is from the gospel of Matthew. I read it slowly through. Then I read it again, more imaginatively, picturing the scene, sensing the atmosphere, above all looking at Jesus...

Matthew 4: 1-11

Jesus in the desert

Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished.

The tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." But he answered, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God'."

Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down: for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you', and 'On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone'." Jesus said to him, "Again it is written, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test'."

Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendour; and he said to him, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me." Jesus said to him, "Away with you, Satan! For it is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him'."

Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.

Helps for my prayer

This dramatic scene is set at the beginning of Jesus' public ministry. Far back, but burnt into their consciousness and still vividly remembered, Moses led the Chosen People as they wandered in the wilderness for forty years. Throughout, they were unceasingly led forward by God. Yet, their desert experience became also a place of temptation, where they often wished they could return to the imaginary comfort of Egypt, which in fact had been a place of enslavement for them.

And now Jesus seems to be recapitulating that experience of his people. He too goes out into that bare terrain, where, by day, the sun in the overarching sky beats mercilessly down, to be replaced by the cold of the night sky and its stars. The protection and illusions of normal 'civilised' life are stripped away. Choices now become very basic, literally revolving around life and death: how to keep alive, and stave off the approach of death. And, as with his people before him, Jesus is subjected to trial and temptation. In essence, what were the temptations to which he was subjected? Really, the choice for him is between a life that would centre on power and personal aggrandisement, and a very different way of life which is one of service and humble dependency on his dear Father—by whose love he has come into the world, as servant, for the world's healing and salvation.

For myself, then, let me experience something of what Jesus is undergoing in the desert. I wish to be with him, alongside him. I look at him, as he copes with the days and nights of the desert. Perhaps I feel something

creeping down my spine as I hear the plausible and smooth words of the Tempter. And yet, in the end I gain strength and consolation from the uprightness of Jesus, and the truth of his words.

Yes, the Chosen People were in the desert, and Jesus is too—and really there is something of that experience surrounding me in my own life! For there is the desert all around me, what can be the wasteland of contemporary life, at least when the distractions and illusions are stripped away and I find myself in something of an empty, bare space. The English poet T.S. Eliot, for instance, in *Four Quartets* experiences the dark emptiness of modern city life, when the hollow sounds and lights are all taken away. Yet right there, in what seems to be utterly empty darkness, he begins to experience the darkness which is of God—a different and fruitful darkness, in which he senses the incoming of the light of God...

Where then do I find life, and light? “Lord, you are there for me, at the heart of my life, at the heart of everything. Let me seek you out, let me find you. Or rather, let me allow myself be found by *you*. In those desert places, in the places too of temptation, let me not centre my life just on myself, but instead find my true self in finding you, in the joy of service and in regard for others, in the love of what is true, and good, and beautiful. Lord of my life, lift me up, guide me always.”

Reflection after the prayer

It is good, when my time of prayer is ended, to look back over the experience in a reflective way. Often, it is in retrospect only that we see what was really happening for us. So let me glance back over the prayer, and possibly with pen and paper jot down what occurs to me:

- . What was the experience like for me? Was it dry and long, or perhaps easy and fulfilling at some stage?
- . How was I myself during the time? Was I lifted, inspired, at least at a particular moment? Or was I restless and maybe down during much of the time?
- . In retrospect, can I see what was significant for me? A moment of encouragement, an insight, a light? A sense of Jesus actually with me, and guiding me in some way?
- . Maybe, although it was dry and rather a struggle, I still now come to believe that nevertheless the time *was* worthwhile—even if as yet I’m not sure in what way.
- . And is there some connection I can make with my ordinary life? Some adjustment, some change of course I could be called to make?

Second Time of Prayer

Once again, I settle myself in quiet. I become still within, and, in being present to my own heart in this way, allow myself to sense the presence of God with me. "Lord, here I am once more before you and with you. You are with me always. Help me to continue to be with you through this time of prayer. Lord, I offer you this time, and wish to be open to your word and your inspiration."

John 4: 5-26

Jesus and the Woman at the Well of Samaria

So Jesus came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon.

A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink." (His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) The Samaritan woman said to him, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.) Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink', you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water."

The woman said to him, "Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?" Jesus said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life." The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water."

Jesus said to her, "Go, call your husband, and come back." The woman answered him, "I have no husband." Jesus said to her, "You are right in saying, 'I have no husband'; for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!"

The woman said to him, "Sir, I see that you are a prophet. Our ancestors worshipped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem." Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and is now here, when true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth."

The woman said to him, "I know that Messiah is coming" (who is called Christ). "When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us." Jesus said to her, "I am he, the one who is speaking to you."

Helps for my prayer

I allow the setting to take shape before me: the ancient well by the road, a few trees whose roots have gone deep to reach the water beneath, and the small town some distance away. Peter and the others have gone into the town to buy some food, leaving Jesus alone and tired by the well, when a local woman approaches to get some water. She is

bold, daring to speak to this foreign Jewish man, while Jesus himself does not shrink from engaging with her: a woman, and a Samaritan 'outsider' in Jewish eyes, with whom one should not have contact alone.

I am there too by the well, quietly and unobtrusively, watching both of them, listening to what they are saying. Let me take time with this... Indeed it will take time, as I both continue to look, and go back over what is being said. What is all this about the 'living water,' which if I drink will quench my thirst forever, and become a spring inside me 'gushing up into eternal life'? What is all this about? And what is Jesus talking about when during their further conversation he speaks of 'worship in spirit and in truth'?

In reality, what I notice here is that *I* have been drawn into the conversation. *I myself* find I have come face to face with Jesus. He is looking at me, and I at him... Really, *I* am that person, that woman, coming to the well, seeking water, somehow dissatisfied with life, thirsting for something more... Jesus looks at me, and converses with me. He knows the secrets of my life, but only looks at me with kindness and love, with truthful love. Let me look at him, and enter into the conversation with all my heart's desire...

Then, returning to the passage, I notice that there too it leads up to a wonderful moment of recognition, where the woman is now able to receive the deepest gift of all, beyond the words of their conversation. She comes to realise that the person she is with is the One whom in some sense she has been searching for all her life. She is now *with him*, for whom her heart has yearned: the Chosen One, the Messiah, who has sought her out, to bring her healing and true love.

But it is *I myself who am present to Jesus*. I look at him again, or lower my eyes to the ground before him in humility. And in gratitude I draw my time of prayer to a close, uttering whatever words of prayer come to me, or simply being quiet in the reality of this present moment.

Reflection after the prayer

Keeping in mind the points made on reflection after the first time of prayer, I again take a little while to reflect on this period just ended.

- . How has the notion of 'the living water' touched me? Has some deep desire within me been tapped into? An insatiable longing?
- . Have I noticed, along with such longing or desire, an encouragement which will enable me to continue to look to Jesus, to want to be with him? An encouragement that will endure despite times of discouragement and negativity?
- . Perhaps at some stage I will read further on in chapter 4 in John. Beyond the moment of meeting and recognition (verse 26), we see that the woman has indeed become a Christian disciple, and in relation to others also becoming disciples (verses 27-42). What of my discipleship, and my relation to others whose lives are becoming centred on the gospels? Are there steps I find myself led to take?

Third Time of Prayer

Finally, I come to this concluding encounter of prayer. Once more, I compose myself in quiet and expectation. “Lord, here I am again! Lord, deepen my faith! Help me to know that in this time, whether I am aware of it or not, whether I am alert or heavy, focussed or unfocussed, *you* are truly here with me. Lord, I believe in this extraordinary mystery. Lord, I believe, but help my poor believing!”

Matthew 17: 1-9

Jesus is Transfigured on the Mountain

Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white.

Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. Then Peter said to Jesus, “Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.”

While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, “This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!”

When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear. But Jesus came and touched them, saying, “Get up and do not be afraid.” And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone.

As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus ordered them, “Tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead.”

Helps for my prayer

Here, as in our earlier passage from Matthew, the setting and atmosphere, and the experience the disciples have on the mountain, recalls that supreme time during the Chosen People’s sojourn in the wilderness, Then it was Moses who toiled up the slopes of Mount Sinai, and, after forty day there alone, in the dark cloud which enveloped him there he encountered God.

I could allow my imagination to range as I picture myself going up the mountain, along with Peter and the two others, and with Jesus... To go up a mountain can be an exciting experience, for as we gain height the landscape beneath begins to stretch out. We see things in a new perspective, and breathe a more refined and purer air. We can be led to wonder afresh at all that is going on in life below, as perhaps we notice the little dots of houses, and the patchwork quilt of lands. But also we must keep looking upwards, to what is ahead and above, straining for the summit...

However, in this particular experience the disciples know there is something unusually mysterious and sacred unfolding. They had seen Jesus before seeking the solitude of the mountains or hills for prayer. But now he has invited them to go with him. And on the summit they see him transfigured—he is radiant, and in his prayer there he is in another realm of existence. He is conversing with Moses, who received the Commandments on Sinai, and with

Elijah, the most popular of the prophets. So much is there for them, overflowing with meaning! And then comes the voice from the cloud: "Here is my Son, the Beloved, in whom I am well pleased; listen to him!"

It is good if I can stay with all of this for a while, just seeing, and listening. These words are for me too, pointing me to Jesus, with whom I have stayed as best I could, in mystery and in faith, through this day. In truth, he is there for me always. His words, which in the gospels are truth and life, are there for me at all times. He always calls me by name, speaks to me and guides me. "Listen to him!"

But illuminated and revelatory moments in life are transitory, they pass. We must come down from the mountain, into the plains and valleys of ordinary living once again. Jesus too, transfigured before the disciples for a brief time, loses that aura and becomes for them once more just 'Jesus alone.' The glory all about can only be sensed and intimated in faith. Jesus continues to be what he was before: the humble and human servant. And our lives too return to their simple ordinariness. But the vision glimpsed can be an encouragement, a help, in dark and difficult times.

So I might look over the passage once more, sensing its mystery, and getting a glimpse of its relevance for my own life. Then let me conclude my prayer. "Lord, thank you for this time with you. Whether I glimpsed and experienced something of the glory all around, or simply remained in struggling dark faith and distractedness, yet you have been truly with me. Thank you for so much. Let me always look to you, listen to you, and be challenged and guided by your words. Thank you for your love, for calling me by name into the mystery and journey of my life. Be with me always. Give me your love and your grace this day, and every day. Amen."

Reflection on the prayer

Again I glance back briefly at the prayer experience just concluded, and with the help of the points made already.

- Where have I been moved or touched in some way?
- Although perhaps dry or tired, yet in retrospect now something significant may come to light, encouraging me therefore, leading me forward.
- Once again, has the experience and presence of Jesus been there for me, in some way I can hardly explain or grasp? And calling me by name, leading me on?

Review of the Day

And finally, to wrap up the day, it will be good to reflect back on the overall experience. Pointers have been given already above, in the initial outline of the day, and it will be worthwhile to refer back to them. But if my energy is not up to it just now, I could leave off this exercise until later, perhaps tonight, or sometime tomorrow.

In any case, let me give thanks. In light or in darkness, the Lord has been with me. He is there, and will be there, deep in my heart, with faithful love. That is the core of my life, the centre that is the deepest mystery of my life's journey. And in the time ahead, journeying towards Easter, let me in little ways cultivate that mystery of intimate and loving presence. In other words, let me continue to pray, in shorter or longer moments set aside now and then. For I am indeed called by my own name, which is whispered to me day and night, at every moment. And so I will be led safely on, and guided in all ways into truth and life.

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