

A way of praying imaginatively with scripture

Before you begin, it is good to acknowledge that prayer is not a neutral, ineffective business which doesn't affect the rest of life much. No, prayer is a matter of the spirit and when we pray, particularly when we pray experimentally, with open hearts (which we must) it matters which spirit is influencing us. So ask God to be the chief influence over everything that comes up in the prayer time. If you have asked that, and God is God, then you can know that whatever comes next - whether it be exciting or boring, pleasant or challenging - has God's hand in it.

You might also want to spend some time giving to God the things that are uppermost in your mind, as if to say 'This is me, this is how I come today'. Some people find it helpful to centre themselves by mentally concentrating on each part of the body and giving it to God. Sometimes you may come across an ache or a worry that you didn't know was there. It is not self-indulgent to spend time noticing these things if the ultimate motive is make yourself more available to God and others.

As you bring your immediate needs and wants into the open, their clamour often begins to quieten. You could imagine placing them on a table before God and yourself. As you look at them, do you see any pattern, any underlying desire (or fear)? As you bring yourself in all honesty to God, hear him say 'What can I do for you?' Will you tell him what you really want? Take time over this if you need to.

Read or hear the passage once or twice normally, to get to know it. Then do whatever is necessary to bridge the gap between yourself and the scripture, to get you and the story into the same space. This is not 'study' (important though that is at other times) because that keeps you and the scripture separate, can be done with your head only. These are some ways of bringing your whole self to the story:

- As you reread the passage, notice the things that stand out, not just intellectually but at the level of feeling (e.g. warm glow, want to avoid, quickening pulse, 'leaves me cold', wish I was there...). Now take one of these things and turn it over, as it were like an interesting stone in your hand. Remember you asked God for his influence – ask now for his light on this thing. Let him show you what he wants to and then talk to him about it.
- Imagine yourself in the story. The smells, sights and sounds. Again this is not an exercise in accurate research of Bible lands; you may end up in a Birmingham car park! Don't be afraid of using your God-given imagination (remember you asked for God's influence). Can you picture yourself as a character (recorded or not) in the story? What would you do and say? Take as long as you need over this. Let the conversation become prayer as you talk naturally with Jesus or the Father or the Holy Spirit.
- You could take this a stage further, either alone or with others, and try acting out the story. Try to remain a participant though, not a director (because that could increase the gap). And let the thing lead to conversation with God.

Some people find it helpful to write (or draw) during or after this process. But the important thing is that everything should lead to that conversation. Be as honest as you can in it; it is well past the stage for politeness. Notice what is important in the conversation (write it down if needs be) and stay with it as long as necessary (it may move beyond words to silent presence).

Try not to restrict your praying with your own expectations (for example for drama, or for sweet calm). Let the wind of the Spirit blow where it will.

When you next come to pray, it is often helpful to pray again with the same passage, beginning with the things you noted from the previous time. Don't rush onto the next thing if God is doing something important with *this* thing. Another thing that can be helpful is to share what is going on with a prayer companion.