

ST NINIAN'S POLLOKSHIELDS

TIME TO PRAY

WK 5: PRAYING WITH SCRIPTURE – IMAGINATIVE PRAYER

One of my fondest memories of childhood is the ritual of the bedtime story. Every night, my father would come into my room, and sit on the edge of the bed, and let me choose the night's story. There were several family favourites – Alfred, the Little Bear; The Dr Seuss Sleep Book, Uncle Rhemus. But better than all the rest were what we called 'Lobo and Schnikelfritz' stories – stories from my father's own childhood, the things that he and his dog Lobo got up to, things that his chicken Schnikelfritz watched from the safe distance of her roost in the dark warmth behind the refrigerator.

Those stories opened up a whole different world for me. The world of the American South. The Depression. Farming, and prejudice, and deep sacrifices to let children get on in the world. I know now that those stories helped forge my understanding of my father – who he was and what he cared about. Where he had come from, and what he hoped for in the world. And through that, the stories also shaped my understanding of myself – my father's daughter, as I tried on his values and ideals, to see which of them I would keep for myself.

Stories have the power to shape our world view. To change the way we look at things, and to shift our understanding of ourselves. And they can do that because they get past our defences – we get caught up in what's going on, and start feeling what the characters feel – exploring wonder, and excitement and joy, fear, sorrow and loss – all at the safe distance of imagination, all under the shelter of the temporary suspension of our day-to-day lives.

But if stories were only about pretence – about imagining at a distance – they wouldn't be nearly so powerful. Good stories actually go further than this. They become a part of us. The emotions we feel become our emotions, our response. And they help us to engage more fully with reality, because they open up our experience of the world.

This is never more true than in the stories of the Gospel. In gospel stories, we enter imaginatively into the life of Christ. We get caught up in it – and we learn what it's like to follow Christ on the Way. To feel confused at what he's doing, to waver between certainty and doubt. And as we let ourselves get involved with the story, we also enter into its emotional reality – the anguish of Gethsemane, the confused joy of seeing the risen Christ. All that happens to the disciples, all that happens in the crowds and among the Pharisees... even in Jesus himself – all of it becomes a part of our experience. Broadening our perception of the world. Helping us to see from God's perspective, so that we can live and act out of God's vision for creation.

When we turn to pray with scripture, we could do worse than to imagine it as God's bed-time story to us. The story God tells to help us understand who he is & what he values, where we have come from, and what he hopes for in the world. And as we hear that story, we learn something about ourselves – we learn who we are and what God wants for us. We learn to let Christ's story be our own.

But this doesn't just happen without effort. Or at least, not usually. Not for most of us. Because as powerful as stories are – and as All Powerful as God's story is – stories can only reach us if we let them. If we join in. If we let ourselves get carried away. Stories only work if we begin to let go of control.

And that is where this week's form of prayer comes in. This week, we will try to give ourselves up to the stories of the gospels in prayer. We will try to enter in, let our imaginations run free, so

that we see and feel and hear and taste and touch the stories of the gospel, as if they were our own.

And we do this so that they become our own. So that we can hear God's word for us now. So that we can sense his presence, and experience God's love and forgiveness for ourselves.

God's story becomes our story, so that our lives are changed. Paul talks about it as Christ being formed in us – reshaping our vision, reshaping our perceptions and responses to the world, so that they conform ever more closely to Christ, and so that we are drawn ever more closely into the life God longs for us to have.

So, with all that in mind, let's turn to the prayer cards, and I'll talk you through a method of prayer that gets you inside the story. A way of praying that sometimes gets past our defences, and leaves us more open to the presence of God dwelling among us.

if you would turn to the card...

TIME TO PRAY
WEEK 5: PRAYING WITH SCRIPTURE –
IMAGINATIVE PRAYER

As Christians, we are called to let Christ be ‘formed’ in us (Gal 2.4) – to be changed in such a way that Christ’s life shines through ours. One of the ways that happens is through the intersection of our story with the gospel story. We hear and read the stories of scripture and find ourselves there: following Jesus, struggling to understand, experiencing God’s love and forgiveness and healing.

The more fully we enter into the gospel stories, the more ‘real’ they become for us – and the more likely it is that we will be changed by the One we encounter there.

This week we will explore a method of prayer that engages us deeply in the Christ story. We will use our imagination to put ourselves in the midst of things – hearing, seeing and feeling the story unfold. And as the scene comes to life, we are free to explore our own emotions and responses towards God.

PRAYING WITH SCRIPTURE – USING IMAGINATION

Before hand:

Choose a passage to pray with – one suggested here, or some other story from the gospel. The night before you plan to pray in this way, read through the passage slowly, just to get a sense of it. Let it sit at the back of your mind until it’s time to pray.

Read through the method below so that you know what is coming.

Time to pray:

1. Open your bible to the passage you have chosen and put it within reach. Spend a few minutes settling down & focusing your attention. Ask God to touch you through this story, and to help you to be open to whatever emotions, thoughts or responses God stirs in you.

2. Read the passage through several times very slowly, pausing after each reading. Try to notice the details & get a sense of the shape of the scene.

3. Put your bible down, and let yourself enter the passage imaginatively: bring the scene to life picturing the people and surroundings. Hear the sounds– voices, animals, a busy road, the wind – whatever is around. What does it smell like? Taste?

As the scene begins to take shape, ask yourself where you are in the story. Let yourself become one of the characters– a disciple, one of the crowd, the person being healed, a Pharisee, Jesus...

Let the story unfold however it will. Don't worry if it shifts from the passage. Enter into conversations, be aware of relationships & emotions.

4. Pay particular attention to any strong emotion you may feel – either as the character you've chosen, or in yourself if you get pulled out of the scene. Tell God how you're feeling, or simply sit with it, aware of God's presence, comfort, challenge, etc.

5. When your response dies down, bring the meditation to a close by saying a prayer or reading a psalm or hymn.

After Prayer:

This type of prayer can often be quite intense. Once you have finished it is worth looking back over the experience. What moved you? Was there anything you found difficult? surprising? What was God like for you? On reflection, what might God want for you to do in response? You may find it helpful to keep a journal or make short notes about your experience of prayer.

Sometimes it helps to go back to the same story time and again – becoming different characters, or letting new insights arise. Alternately, you might find a new starting point for prayer when you reflect on your experience. Trust that God is in this process, and go where God leads.

Suggested Passages:

John 5.1-24 – healing of paralysed man by the pool

Mark 10.46-52 – Bartimaeus calls to God for healing

Mark 11.15-19 – Jesus ‘cleanses’ the temple

Luke 19.1-10 – Jesus calls to Zaccheus, goes to stay with him.

Matt 14.23-33 -- Jesus walks on water. Peter tries too.

Mark 4.35-41 – Jesus calms the storm

Luke 1.26-38 – The Annunciation

Luke 7.36-50 – a woman anoints Jesus

Mark 6.30-56 – crossing the lake, feeding the crowds.

Really any gospel story will do. It can be very powerful to pray through the crucifixion & resurrection stories this way, but start with easier passages first.