

INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDIES

During the 1918-1919 Flu Pandemic people all over the world became used to living with the sorts of restrictions that have in more recent times become familiar to us. Between 20 and 50 million people died as a result of that pandemic. Schools, theatres, restaurants and churches were shut and people were confined to home except for the most necessary trips out. In Brisbane, the telephone exchange shut down because there were not enough telephone operators untouched by the flu to keep things going – people experienced isolation as never before.

During the COVID-19 pandemic most of us have not experienced the same isolation as our forebears. We have learned new skills and have become adept at Skype and Zoom and have re-discovered the telephone as a way to keep in touch with family and friends. Unable to gather for worship many of us have discovered online church or Zoom church but many of us have also discovered (or rediscovered) the joy of daily prayer and bible reading and the discipline of setting aside time and space each day for these things.

In 1918 as worship was suspended in the US in response to the influenza pandemic, the Rev. S.O. Coxe, pastor of Handley Memorial Presbyterian Church, in Birmingham, Alabama, reflected on the need for a ban of public gatherings for worship. He wrote, “But, while this providence is a severe one, affecting as it does all our plans and programs... may we not yet turn this season to best account by accepting it as an opportunity for the exercise of a fuller devotion to God and to the things of His Kingdom? Necessarily we shall be kept in our homes many hours that would otherwise be spent in recreation and amusement... And certainly if we should improve these hours by prayer and meditation, the seeming curse of this scourge would not be unmingled with blessing.”¹

The writer of the book of Revelation asked hearers to look around and see what was happening in their world and listen for the invitation of the Holy Spirit. “Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches.” Rev 3:22

¹ <https://www.al.com/coronavirus/2020/04/what-clergy-said-when-influenza-closed-churches-in-1918.html>



Lake Galilee where Jesus challenged four fishermen to follow him.

Current site, Church of the Primacy of Saint Peter.

What might be the invitation of the spirit in these times.

It seems to me that one invitation could be to explore or re-engage with some of the practices that have always been part of being Christian but which have been neglected over recent years as gathering for Eucharist has been, for many of us, the only regular practice of the faith in which we engage.

Christianity has, from the very beginning been as much about practice as it has been about belief.

The early community that followed Jesus was a community of practice. Jesus's followers did not sit around a fire and listen to lectures on theology. They listened to stories that taught them how to act toward one another, what to do in the world. They healed people, offered hospitality, prayed together, challenged traditional practices and rituals, ministered to the sick, comforted the grieving, fasted and forgave. These actions induced wonder, gave them courage, empowered hope, and opened up a new vision of God. By doing things together, they began to see differently... Jesus did not walk by the Sea of Galilee and shout to fishermen, "Have faith!" Instead, he asked them to do something: "Follow me." When they followed, he gave them more things to do. At first he demonstrated what he wanted them to do. Then he did it with them. Finally, he sent them out to do it themselves, telling them to proclaim God's reign and cure the sick. When they returned from this first mission, they could not believe what had happened. They discovered that proclaiming the kingdom was not a matter of teaching doctrine; rather, the kingdom was a matter of imitating Jesus's actions.

Diana Butler Bass, *Christianity After Religion*

At least one study from the US shows that there is a link between “personal spiritual practices” and congregational vitality, suggesting that the “more emphasis a congregation gives to the value of home and personal religious practices the higher the congregation’s vitality and the more likely it is to be growing in membership.

It is interesting then that Lent begins each year with an invitation to practice.

Sisters and brothers in Christ, from the earliest days of the Church, Christians have observed with great devotion the time of our Lord’s passion and resurrection. It became the custom of the church to prepare for this by a season of penitence and fasting.

At first this season was observed by those who were preparing for baptism at Easter and by those who, having been excommunicated, were to be restored to the communion of the church.

By keeping these days with care and attention Christians might take to heart the call to repentance and the assurance of forgiveness proclaimed in the gospel, and grow in faith and devotion to our Lord.

So, by self-examination and repentance, by prayer and fasting, by self-denial and acts of generosity and by reading and meditating on the word of God, let us keep a holy Lent.

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The call to observe a holy Lent does not ask us to believe anything, it calls us to practice. The journey of Lent is to be one of “self-examination and repentance, [of] prayer and fasting, [of] self-denial and acts of generosity and [of] reading and meditating on the word of God.”

The American writer, Ann Lammott says that the longest journey most Christians have to make is the “twelve inches from the head to the heart.” Practice invites us to continue that journey – from the head to the hands. This is a journey from thinking to feeling to doing.

This Lent, I am pleased that you have decided to join me in exploring what it might look like to practice faith.

² http://hirr.hartsem.edu/bookshelf/roozen_article5.html

The Structure of Each Session

1. **“Check in”** (15 minutes) – Before anything, even before you pray, it is important to check in with everyone in the group. This is the only time when everyone is required to offer something and the time spent checking in will inform not just the prayers of the group but the tone of the whole session. Each person shares with the group something about how they are going. It might be something of great joy. It might be something that has caused them difficulty. Perhaps it is a feeling.

As each person checks in the group listens without judgment and without commentary or advice. Perhaps the host will note anything that might usefully be added to the opening or closing prayers.

2. **Opening Prayers** (5 minutes) – Each week there is short liturgy provided that includes the collect for the week as well as the Sunday gospel. You might like to gather up some of the things from the “check in” during the opening or closing prayers. You could play some music and light a candle.
3. **The Reading - Wondering Time & Discussion** (40 minutes) I was first introduced to this sort of wondering through Godly Play. Since there are no right or wrong responses to wonderings, participants are unlikely to feel put on the spot. With many questions, there is an implied correct answer that everyone is to aim for. When participants do not feel they can give the “correct” answer with integrity, they might remain silent or even shut down.
4. **The Practice** – Wondering Time & Discussion (20 minutes) Each week a particular practice will be introduced. This is an opportunity to wonder about how the practice could be incorporated into the coming week and how a particular practice might inform or deepen your faith.
5. **Reflection Time** (10 minutes) Similar to the “check in” at the beginning, participants are invited to reflect on where the group has “travelled” during the session.
6. **Closing Prayers** (5 minutes)



“The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.”

1. **“Check in”** (15 minutes)
2. **Opening Prayers** (5 minutes)

A candle is lit and the group spends a moment in silence, reflecting on what has been shared during the “check in” and becoming still in the presence of God.

Let us pray for those who need to be remembered today:

We pray for those who have been in the news this week because of what they have done or what has been done to them. We pray for those with particular needs who have been brought to our attention through a meeting or conversation this week ...

Lord in your mercy

Hear our prayer

We pray for the church especially in those places where it faces persecution or apathy or where it needs to re-discover its mission and ministry...

Lord in your mercy

Hear our prayer

We pray for those who are in hospital, or in some other place away from family or loved ones ... and for those dealing with stress or conflict or break-down in their or other close relationship ...

Lord in your mercy

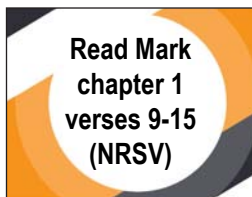
Hear our prayer

We pray for those who are navigating their way through a liminal space, where an old thing or way of being has passed away but the new thing has not yet emerged ...

Lord in your mercy

Hear our prayer

After the prayers the Gospel reading is read aloud by one member of the group.



⁹ In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. ¹⁰ And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. ¹¹ And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

¹² And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. ¹³ He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.

¹⁴ Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, ¹⁵ and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.”

During a short time of silence, consider a phrase or word or image that particularly struck you as you listened to the reading – there will be a chance to share this with the group later.

A collect for Lent 1

God of trackless desert,
whose Son walked untamed
in league with beasts and spirits,
whose kingdom is not distant
but breaking in among us:
give us time and space to find a
new identity
to let go of control and walk the
pilgrim way;
through Jesus Christ, the good news of salvation. Amen³



3. The Reading – Wondering Time & Discussion (40 minutes)

The Gospel according to Mark is often recommended to new Christians as a good place to start reading the scriptures: it is the shortest of the Gospels and can be read in its entirety in a very short time. Mark races from story to story leaving the reader little time to draw breath. There is no birth narrative and the

³ *Prayers for an Inclusive Church, Steven Shakespeare, Canterbury Press, UK, 2008*

Gospel ends so abruptly that early readers felt the need to write a new ending (or two). Yet, just as with the other Gospels, Mark is layered with meaning and the reader will be rewarded by taking time and digging around in the text for the meanings that often sit just below the surface of a cracking tale.

Soaked in the Hebrew scriptures (Christians' "Old Testament") Mark's first hearers would have known the rich imagery from Israel's past that fills this story. "Is that Jesus with the wild animals or Adam naming them in the garden before the fall? Is that Jesus in the desert for forty days or Moses in the wilderness for forty years? Is that God's voice coming from heaven or the voice of the prophet Isaiah, beholding the servant in whom God's soul delights?" ⁴

So while the passage looks back to Israel's past, the portion of the Gospel set for the first Sunday in Lent is also a preview of the rest of the Gospel. Jesus is anointed, then tested and then sets about the work of proclaiming the kingdom of God. The whole of the gospel according to Mark is an expansion of this, "Repent (return to God's way); believe the good news (accept the message)."

Perhaps it is also a preview of the life of all the baptized. In our baptism God claims us as beloved children. We are tempted- life is filled with temptation – we resist, or repent from, temptation. We are called to proclaim the good



Renewal of Baptism Vows - River Jordan

news of resisting temptation: the freedom that comes when we claim the identity of "beloved by god." So, this is not just a story about the beginning of Jesus' ministry, but is a story of our calling also.

Baptism marks for us the end of an old way of being and the start of a new one. It sets us on a journey that is both terrifying and filled with hope, just as the rending of the heavens in the gospel passage is both terrifying and filled with hope – God is doing an awesome thing and the boundary

⁴ [Feasting on the Word: Year B, Volume 2](#) Kindle Edition: loc 1718 of 18449

between heaven and earth is suddenly gone and the spirit descends into our chaos to begin the process of re-creation. Just as the Spirit first moved over the waters of chaos in the creation song of Genesis. This is a new beginning, not just for Jesus but for the whole of creation – for all of us.

In the same way, in contrast to Israel's faltering forty years in the wilderness filled with disobedience and distrust and disaster, Jesus "retraces Israel's steps, rewriting her story, and recasting the destiny of all God's people"² and so giving them (and us) a new start.

Just as this story tells of new beginnings, this is true of the whole of the Gospel of Mark. The opening verse tells us that this is "the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." (Mark 1:1) And while Mark ends with the women fleeing from the tomb, "for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid." (Mark 16:8) we know that they must have overcome that fear, the temptation to say nothing because the story has been told to us. Perhaps the whole of Mark is "the beginning of the good news..." and it only finds its ending in us and all those who have come before us who have overcome the temptation to stay silent, trapped by fear and have found the courage to share the story.

Mark 1:9-15 also previews for us the Lenten journey we are invited into on Ash Wednesday. The invitation to observe a holy lent reminds us that the journey of Lent is to be one of "self-examination and repentance, [of] prayer and fasting, [of] self-denial and acts of generosity and [of] reading and meditating on the word of God."

While Mark does not spell out what it mean to be "tempted by Satan" as do the writers of Matthew and Luke, we would all be able to tell our own stories of facing, resisting or giving into temptation. Mark also gives us plenty of examples of how not to respond to temptation, in the scribes and pharisees and in Peter, and again and again holds out the example of Jesus for those of us who would seek a better way. That "better way" modelled by Jesus is one of openness to the Spirit who always brings transformation. When we are likewise open to the invitation of the Spirit we are inevitably set on a path of discipleship that will take us to the cross and beyond.

That path will always involve temptation, will always involve new beginnings

and will always require the sometimes hard work of discernment, but it is a path that ultimately brings us to a place where we can claim for ourselves the name “beloved.” Where, in the words of St Augustine, “What is withered in you will flower again. Your sickness will be healed. What is faded will be fresh again, and what is warped made whole and strong, and sound. And all that is weak in you will not drag you to the grave. But your wholeness will abide, will remain with you before God, who remains strong and abides forever.”

One practice that can help us on this path is that of Contemplative Prayer where we intentionally place ourselves in the presence of God, open to the leading of the Spirit and where and how we might be called to proclaim the kingdom.

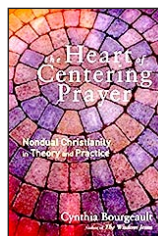
The Group Leader invites members of the group to “wonder” about what they have just heard, and using the following prompts, share with the group this experience.

4. Discussion

- I wonder if there was a particular word, or phrase, or image from the gospel reading or the reflection that stayed with you... Share why you think it struck you in that way...
- I wonder what has stopped us from trying that new thing we have always wanted to try... Comment.
- Share about a time when you felt especially beloved by God...
- I wonder what it feels like to be given the opportunity to begin again... Share
- I wonder what the Good News is in our time...

5. The Practice

– including some Wondering Time & Discussion (20 minutes)



Contemplative Prayer:

“Prayer is not a request for God’s favours...Genuine prayer is based on recognising the Origin of all that exists, and opening ourselves to it.” ~Cynthia Bourgeault

Cynthia Bourgeault is an Episcopal Priest who has written extensively about Contemplative Prayer. Her book, “The Heart of Centering Prayer: Nondual Christianity in theory and practice”⁵ gives a simple introduction to the practice of contemplative prayer as well as more in depth exploration of the tradition’s theological underpinnings.

Bourgeault gives these simple instructions for the practice of contemplative prayer.

- Find a quiet space where you are unlikely to be disturbed.
- Sit in a way that allows you to be relaxed in body and alert in mind. Use a chair, meditation cushion or prayer rug, according to your own physical needs and preferences.
- Gently close your eyes.
- Use a “sacred word”- This is a word or short phrase that helps you to let go of thoughts. It is a reminder of your intention to remain open to the silence. Generally sacred words fall into one of 2 categories: “God” words/phrases such as “Abba”, “Jesu”, “Mary”, “Reality”, “Come Lord” or “state” words/phrases such as “love”, “peace”, “be still”. You may choose to repeat the word or phrase on every in-breath or every out-breath.
- Whenever you become aware of a thought, no matter what its nature, let it go and return to your “sacred word”.
- Continue this practice for 20 minutes. At the end of the time get up and go about your business, leaving the practice behind, in the same way you let go of your thoughts.
- People who are just beginning, and are particularly restless in mind and body, may find it easier to start off with shorter prayer periods, perhaps only 5 minutes per sit to start. Then after a few days extend the time to 10 minutes and so on until you are able to sit for 20

⁵ https://www.amazon.com.au/Heart-Centering-Prayer-Cynthia-Bourgeault/dp/1611803144/ref=tmm_pap_swatch_0?_encoding=UTF8&qid=&sr=

minutes. Give the practice at least 2 weeks before you decide if it is right for you.

- Two 20-30 minute sessions per day are considered ideal.



Read through the instructions on Page 11. As a group try five minutes of Contemplative Prayer. There is a useful “Centering Prayer” app (Andriod and Apple) that includes a timer and short quotes for reflection and simple instructions.

After the Contemplative Prayer Session

The Group Leader invites members of the group to “wonder” about what they have just heard, and using the following prompts, share with the group this experience if they feel comfortable.

- Tell us what that was like for you...
- I wonder what was most difficult...
- I wonder what you liked most about the experience of Contemplative Prayer...
- I wonder if this is something that you will practice this coming week...

6. Reflection Time (10 minutes)

Similar to the “check in” at the beginning, participants are invited to reflect on where the group has “travelled” during the session.

- Share if there has been anything during this session that has challenged you...
- Has there been anything during this session that has reinforced or reaffirmed something for you...
- What did you find most helpful or most interesting...
- Do you think your week will look different because of your experience of this session...Share

7. Closing Prayers (5 minutes) - *Suggestions in Leaders Web Guide*

The leader asks the group for any prayer points they may have. The Lord's prayer is then shared together followed by the grace.