



the empty bell

Christian Prayer, Meditation and Contemplation

© Robert A. Jonas, 2006
(reprint by written permission only)

Christian Prayer, Meditation and Contemplation

All four Gospels tell us that Jesus prayed. He prayed alone on mountains and in the wilderness. He prayed on roads, in people's homes and in temples. He prayed alone with God and he prayed with and for others. He prayed out loud and he prayed silently, in his own heart. Those prayers that we hear in the words of the Gospel often reflect or even repeat the prayers we find in Jewish scriptures. Jesus prayed as a Jew and his prayers taste like the Psalms. We can guess from his ministry that Jesus placed a higher priority on prayer than on religious duties and laws.

Unfortunately, Jesus did not provide us with a detailed developmental program of prayer. In fact, the only explicit direction he gave is recorded in the Gospel of Matthew where he emphasizes solitude and a specific focus on God as Creator and Father. The prayer that begins, "Our Father in heaven" is probably the one prayer that Christians of all denominations have in common. By tradition it is called The Lord's Prayer:

Whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard because of their many words.

Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

Pray then in this way:

Our Father in heaven,

hallowed be your name.

Your kingdom come.

Your will be done,

on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread.

And forgive us our debts,

as we also have forgiven our debtors.

And do not bring us to the time of trial,

but rescue us from the evil one. (Matthew 6: 6-13)

The various practices of Christian prayer began to be articulated more clearly in the third to the sixth centuries when desert monks and mystical theologians such as Cassian, Evagrius, Origen, St. Antony, St. Augustine and St. Benedict, and many others--such as St. Isaac of Syria, Maximus the Confessor and St. Athanasius--who are claimed as sacred teachers in the Orthodox tradition. These early Christian writers, whose writings are fortunately collected and translated anew in the Paulist Press' series, The Classics of Western Spirituality, wove many wonderful stories, practical suggestions and theological frameworks for meditation and prayer.

Most of these early Christian monk/writers were familiar with silence--their own silence, and the silence of God. Quite often, they emphasized "purity of heart" and a letting go of all thoughts that were not directed to God. They suggested that in order to enter into the light (or the darkness) of God's presence, one should first focus the mind with a simple prayer. Single lines or phrases from the Psalms were often used for this purpose: "Oh God, come to my assistance, Make Haste to help me", or "Lord

Jesus Christ, Son of the Living God, have mercy on me”. Sometimes, the pray-er is counseled to recite the short prayer in a rhythm with each breath. When the mind had become still, St. Athanasius suggested that one simply “breathe Christ”. In silence, these mystical theologians sensed a unity with God that cannot be experienced if one is caught up in one’s own thinking about God.

Gradually, an implicit architecture of prayer was developing among the Desert Fathers. The first stage of prayer, reading Scripture or reciting a repetitive prayer from Scripture, was called, in Latin, *Lectio* or prayerful reading. The second stage, *Meditatio*, was characterized as a kind of spiritual digestion whereby the reader or listener let go of the Scripture phrase or sacred phrase, letting the words, images and meanings sink deeply into the soul. The third stage, *Oratio*, was understood as an inward, silent or vocal response to God’s message or presence, perhaps in a heart resonating with gratitude. *Oratio* was understood to be a response, usually in the I-thou dimension, to God’s loving presence. The fourth and final stage, *Contemplatio*, was seen as a complete letting go whereby one was not doing anything any longer. One simply let oneself be in God’s presence without words, images or meanings, without wanting anything. In contemplative silence, only God was understood to be acting, upon one’s soul. Thus, contemplation was meant to honor the apophatic side of God who is beyond all words, understandings, stories and images.

Over the centuries, monasteries and convents evolved their own favorite methods of prayer and meditation, drawing from Scripture, tradition and experience. Some emphasized silent meditation or contemplation, while others emphasized sacred liturgies and the Eucharist, a prayerful reading of Scripture, repetitive prayer, or prayers of intercession, gratitude and praise.

After the Reformation in the 16th century, Protestant denominations drew parishioners’ attention almost entirely to the Bible, to sermons and vocal prayer, and to the singing of hymns. If the kataphatic (Greek: with images) dimension of prayer lifts up the ways that our senses and our minds can mediate God’s presence, and if the apophatic (Greek: without images) lifts up the ways in which God’s real presence is beyond all concepts, meanings and sensual experiences, then we can say that the Protestant Reformation emphasized the kataphatic dimension of prayer and almost obliterated the apophatic, contemplative and mystical dimensions. Almost all post-Reformation denominations (except, e.g., the Quakers) focused on reading the truth in scripture, understanding the sacred story with their minds and passing on the story in words. They were--and are--not so interested in contemplative silence or the ways in which the Mystery of God can show up between, beneath and beyond their religious words and stories.

Unfortunately, the Catholic and Orthodox love for silent meditation and contemplative prayer was almost entirely rejected by Protestant churches during and after the Reformation. Perhaps there were good reasons for this spiritual re-focusing at that time in history, but the loss of the apophatic and the contemplative dimension in prayer was a major loss for Protestant Christianity. When the Protestant emphasis on the words of Scripture and on vocal prayer is not balanced with a contemplative letting go of all words and meanings for God’s sake, it is too easy to miss God’s presence between our words and theories, and to become attached to one’s own verbal propositions about God. Without the contemplative dimension, it is too easy to slide into a fanatical fundamentalism, to believe that one’s current verbal understanding of God is the best and universally true--and that those who disagree are wrong or evil.

The Empty Bell approach to Christian prayer seeks to honor both the apophatic and the kataphatic dimensions. To borrow from the sacred language of the Great 4th century Councils, we believe that the fullest expression of Christian prayer dances (Greek: *perichoresis*, a dance-around) between that

which we can know, sense and vocalize, and that which is a Mystery in God. In this dual emphasis we perceive more space for interfaith dialogue--especially with Asian spiritual paths such as Hinduism, Taoism and Buddhism--than one finds in a purely kataphatic Christian spirituality. After all, if we focus only on the words and stories of Christian Scripture and theology, we automatically set ourselves apart from people who follow different religious traditions and reference different scriptures and theologies. We believe that the official Christian canon describes, in inspired language, a sacred story that can be salvific for anyone, but we also believe that the Holy Spirit of Jesus is free of human (and Christian) understanding, that it “blows where She will” and initiates love, compassion and mercy among people who live in different cultures and religions.

The Empty Bell’s contemplative style of prayer roots itself in what we can know about the Trinity from the Bible, from the tradition, from our own experience and from the experience of Christians throughout the ages. And we also root ourselves in what one medieval Christian writer called “The Cloud of Unknowing” (William Johnston, ed. *The Cloud of Unknowing* [14th c.] New York: Doubleday, 1973, 1996.) There are things about God that we can feel confident to know, and there are things about God that we do not know and will never know. We feel that Christians must learn to feel “on track” in their spiritual lives when they dance between this sort of knowing and unknowing. In this dual emphasis, the Empty Bell is more aligned with the Roman Catholic and Orthodox denominations than with the Protestant ones, but we see no essential contradiction between ourselves and the spiritual vision of all major Christian churches and denominations. We like to think of ourselves as part of the Body of Christ, even if our Body includes members with whom we disagree. And we believe that this Body of Christ has relatively open boundaries, allowing us to learn spiritual insights and wisdom from non-Christians.

The Empty Bell in Dialogue with other Contemplative Communities

Two internationally known Roman Catholic organizations currently sponsor retreats, organize local prayer groups and offer website education: Contemplative Outreach, led by Trappist Fr. Thomas Keating, and the World Community for Christian Meditation (WCCM), led by Benedictine Fr. Laurence Freeman. Their websites are bountiful resources for educating oneself in the history and practice of the Roman Catholic contemplative path. Please see www.contemplativeoutreach.org and www.wccm.org

Both of these organizations are keenly aware of the importance of the apophatic tradition and both teach meditative practices that are consistent with this emphasis. Practically speaking, both Fr. Thomas Keating and Fr. Laurence Freeman are more interested in silent meditation than in traditional Christian vocal prayer and the communal singing of hymns. Both men invite contemplative Christians to the meditation cushion to focus on their individual minds, emotions and bodies. There, in the silence, followers are instructed to repeat a sacred word or mantra in order to quiet the mind and the passions, and to seek God in the gaps between thoughts and momentary feelings. The goal of these contemplative practices is to simply be, to simply dwell in the unknowing of God’s Mystery.

The Empty Bell community believes that the contemplative approach of Frs. Keating and Freeman is a huge contribution to the Christian community at this time. The poor languish in unfulfilled lives dominated by the economic demands of daily survival while the vast middle classes--many of whom are Christian--are torn apart by frantic, fossil-fuel driven multi-tasking from morning until late at night. There is little inner peace among most Americans who have no time to simply be, no time to even notice what they are thinking or feeling. For many young people, traditional Christian language seems

odd, a hold-over from pre-modern culture, and irrelevant to their fast-paced, technologically saturated lives.

Unfortunately, most Christian churches do not draw their parishioners' attention to the truth of their actual inner experience, and thus, much of what is said about God cannot be directly experienced and deeply integrated into their lives. Thus, we welcome the work of Frs. Keating and Freeman who bring to us a theological vision and spiritual practices that connect us to the earliest Christian communities and alert us to how Christ's presence is immediately available to each person, just beneath the surface of our anxious and frenetic post-modern lives. Their work reminds us that God is as close to us as our own breath and lives within the interstices of our thoughts and memories, whether we are thinking about God or not.

The Empty Bell community shares the goals of Contemplative Outreach and the World Community for Christian Meditation. However, we also notice some distinctions between our approach to the contemplative Christian life and theirs. Jesus did not teach wordless, contemplative prayer explicitly and he did not direct people to the meditation cushion, as Buddha did centuries before Jesus was born. Yes, Jesus did pray alone, often going into the desert for solitude, and we can infer from his life and teaching that he learned about himself, his mission and God in silence. But contemplatives should not ignore the fact that Jesus' spirituality was thoroughly relational.

Jesus learned from reading Hebrew scripture, and he preached. He performed several miracles, including raising people from the dead. He healed people with a simple, prayerful touch, and some were healed when they touched him. He spoke of a spiritual power going out of him, and he declared that after his death he would send a dynamic spiritual presence and power--the Holy Spirit--to his disciples and friends and to the world. For Jesus, salvation did not come only through years of patient sitting on a meditation cushion focused on this present moment, but very often through the power of connection with God and others over time.

Many readers have been inspired by the work of the early 20th c. writer, E.M. Forster, and some of us have quoted his phrase from the novel *Howard's End*, "Only connect." Of course, Forster was referring to a prevalent disconnect between prose and passion in the English literature of his time. But this phrase points to a larger truth, a truth that Jesus embodied. One has only to read Jesus's great farewell discourse in the Gospel of John, chapters 13-17: From beginning to end it is a discourse of connection. Jesus sensed God's presence like a loving father and he knew that he had come from God and was going to God. He washed his disciples' feet and blessed them. And most strikingly, he espoused a rich theology and spirituality of connection. For example, Jesus tells his friends,

Whoever receives one whom I send receives me; and whoever receives me receives him who sent me. (John 13:20)

I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.

By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another. (13:34-35)

In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. (14:2-3).

Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works. (14-10)

I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you.

I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you.

In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them. (14:16-21)

Clearly, Jesus espoused relationality and connection as essential elements of the spiritual life. His was the language of intimacy and love. He was comfortable with the phrase, “I love you” and even asked his friends, “Do you love me?” (John 21:15-17). Jesus’s spirituality spotlighted “the between” where we meet others as friends or enemies. For him, this is where much of our spiritual work takes place. And this is the very place that can get lost on contemplative paths that overemphasize the individual work of meditation. Too often in contemplative circles, the interpersonal, social and political dimensions of our lives are seen as a distraction from “my practice,” when one’s spiritual practice is seen to be essentially the cultivation of a certain purity in one’s own awareness or consciousness.

It is certainly beneficial, as Fr. Laurence emphasizes, to see the Eucharist as an opportunity to cultivate awareness and to give God and others our full attention in silence, but loving someone requires something more. As Jesus said, there is no greater love than to give our lives for our friends, but this declaration places loving action at the center of our spiritual lives, whether or not we have attained to purity of awareness. Yes, we can work on our “monkey minds” and rid our awareness of all impurities, but sometimes the deeper and more challenging practice is to speak words of loving commitment such as “I love you” and then to follow through on the implications of that commitment over time.

For both Fr. Keating and Fr. Freeman, there seems to be a de-emphasis on the interpersonal analogy--the I-Thou language of the second Person of the Trinity--in relation to God, Jesus or the Holy Spirit and an over-emphasis on individual meditation practices that are directed to the apophatic, wordless Mystery of God. There seems to be an over-emphasis on simple presence in the field of one’s own awareness and a de-emphasis on connecting to others in love, on healing touch and on the power of words. Given our limited human resource of time, we sense in the WCCM and Contemplative Outreach a preference for cultivating a purity of individual awareness rather than simply helping others, even if our minds are a mess. Of course, it would be nice to have enough time to both make time for silent meditation--to get a handle on our “monkey minds”, and to also reach out each day in love to others. And this is precisely the goal of the Empty Bell community.

With regard to the Buddhist-Christian dialogue, we note that in their apophatic emphasis one might mistake the actual practices of contemplation in Contemplative Outreach (also called Centering Prayer) and the WCCM, for some types of Buddhist meditation: Words fall away, and one simply dwells in the Wordless Presence of God. Except for using the word “God”, this could be Zen. In fact, both Fr. Keat-

ing and Fr. Freeman are comfortable with the Christian-Buddhist dialogue and give little attention to differences--and apparent contradictions--between the two traditions. Fr. Laurence Freeman in particular, is a close friend of the Dalai Lama, and the two have co-led many retreats. (For those who are interested in these dialogues, see the WCCM website or see the articles that I have written about a few of these Buddhist-Christian encounters elsewhere on the Empty Bell website). In our experience, the Christian and Buddhist communities have a tremendous amount to learn from one another. But even as we dialogue, we do not need to gloss over the differences. For the Empty Bell community, the most glaring distinction between the Buddhist and Christian paths is the Christian emphasis on the fundamental and ultimate reality of our "I-Thou" relationship with each Person of the Trinity.

The Empty Bell community admires and values the work of Fr. Keating and Fr. Freeman, and their communities. They are almost single-handedly (without the help of the Roman Catholic hierarchy or any other Christian denomination) rescuing the contemplative Christian tradition from the juggernaut of post-modernity and the excessive media attention that is given to the more fundamentalist (excessively word!) Christian denominations. On the other hand, we have some reservations about their approaches, and hope that our friendship with the Contemplative Outreach (CC) and WCCM communities is capable of holding some nuances of distinction in theology, vision and practice.

In the Empty Bell we value the CC and WCCM emphasis on silent meditation and the use of a mantra to help the mind settle down. But once the mind and body have settled down, the Empty Bell community calls attention to the inner flow of images, memories, meanings, visions and imaginary conversations. Any of these inward experiences may be iconic--a gateway to God's presence or to God's message for me or the community. Yes, one can become easily distracted by the incessant, often chaotic flow of personal and idiosyncratic inner experience. With CC and WCCM we ask, "How can one dwell in God's presence if our minds are so hopping with thoughts, worries, problem-solving and analyzing that we feel we're living in a 'tree full of monkeys!'" But memories and images, for example, are not always a distraction. Sometimes, God may speak to us or call our communities to a new action or identity through a memory or image. CC and WCCM tend to emphasize letting go of all conceptual thinking, inward story-telling and the flow of feelings and images, whereas the Empty Bell community advises that we sometimes pay close attention to what messages these inner experiences might bring from God. All thoughts are not classifiable as mere "thoughts", and so we must continuously discern which ones are irrelevant flotsam and jetsam, useful, creative or iconic and inspired.

In this, we disagree with Fr. Keating who argues in his book, *Open Mind, Open Heart: The Contemplative Dimension of the Gospel* (Amity, New York: Amity House, 1986), that one should let all thoughts and feelings pass through the mind while meditating and that one should not focus on any particular memory or emotion. According to Fr. Keating, we should treat the flow of inner experience as so much garbage that arises chaotically from the individual's unconscious and should be "unloaded" (pp. 93ff). He writes, for example,

During the unloading process [of the unconscious] you may want to figure out where a particular smile, itch, pain, or strong feeling is coming from in your psyche and to identify it with some earlier period in your life. That's useless. The nature of the unloading process is that it does not focus on any particular event. It loosens up all the rubbish, so to speak, and the psychological refuse comes up as a kind of compost. It's like throwing out the garbage. . . . Do not resist any thought, do not hang on to any thought, do not react emotionally to any thought. . . . during prayer if you notice tears falling, lips smiling,

eyes twitching, itches, and pains--treat them like any other thought and let them all go by. Gently return to the sacred word. . . Thoughts, moods, or feelings of depression that might last for several days are ways the psyche has of evacuating the undigested emotional material of a lifetime. When these pass, you psychological insides will feel much better. (pp. 97-100).

It is worth noting that this approach to meditation is almost exactly the same as Vipassana (or Insight) Buddhist meditation as taught, e.g., at the Insight Meditation Society in Barre, Massachusetts (see www.dharma.org/ims). In Vipassana meditation, and apparently in Fr. Keating's contemplative meditation, there is no significant, spiritually valuable difference between thoughts. Thoughts are mere thoughts, memories mere memories, emotions mere emotions. In this kind of meditation--Buddhist or Christian--there is no essential connection between the flow of my inner thoughts, memories and emotions and others (or God).

It seems that Fr. Keating discounts the possibility that a particular memory may be iconic and a vehicle for God's approach to us. Apparently, he also discounts the possibility that a particular emotion may arise, for example, to show us a meaningful or healing connection between a past event and a current relationship in which I need to act. Apparently, he discounts the possibility that any particular inner experience might be conveying to us an insight that provides us with the meaning and the power we need to change something in a relationship, in our neighborhood or in the world. He could alert us to the possibility that what looks to us like a mere memory might actually be a prayer.

Certainly, it's very often true that we have "monkey minds", whereby the clank and clatter of our multi-tasked lives merely march through the caverns of our minds and hearts, raising havoc. This is why we need to sit down, shut up, and listen in silence for our truth and for God's presence. But watch out! As our minds, hearts and bodies begin to relax in the course of contemplative practice, we should be alert to the possibility that in any memory and in every emotion or twitch of the body, Jesus might be tapping on our shoulder saying, "Let's go, brother!" [see my essay, "Cigarette Smoke and Incense" available on the Empty Bell website, for a concrete example of a healing experience that would have been missed entirely if I had followed Fr. Keating's--and Vipassana Buddhism's--advice.]

We can make ourselves available in silent meditation, but we cannot control how God will reach out to us. At the Empty Bell, we suggest that the Christian meditator stay awake on every level to the imminent arrival of God who may come beneath the radar of thoughts, images or memories, but who may also come expressly within and through memories, images or thoughts. We teach openness to Christ's presence in each moment, even if this means letting go of all conceptual meanings one moment, and following the path of remembered images or the flow of a remembered conversations in the next. It has been said that Christians are a people "of the story". Contemplative Christians should remember that while God's presence can indeed arrive in our actual experience if we spend more time in silence, God may also come in "the between" of our relationships and in sacred stories and memories that bring a fire of awareness, commitment and love.

For those who are interested in Buddhist methods of meditation, please go a Google search for websites in various forms of Buddhism. Frequently, such websites will feature a button that is labeled "Methods" or "Meditation Instruction". To get a good sense of the variety of Buddhist meditation methods, check out varieties of Buddhism. Search phrases such as: Vipassana Buddhism, Hinayana Buddhism, Mahayana Buddhism, Ch'an Buddhism, Korean Buddhism, Zen Buddhism, Soto Zen, Rinzai Zen, Tibetan Buddhism, Shin Buddhism, Nichiren Buddhism or Pure Land Buddhism.

Here are three Christian ways to pray that are rooted in the contemplative or mystical traditions of Christianity--Centering Prayer, Lectio Divina and Ignatian Contemplation. This summary is compiled by Episcopal priest Rev. Dr. Margaret Bullitt-Jonas:

Three Ways to Pray

- Go to your holy place.
- Spend some moments settling down. Use whatever ways you have learned to center yourself. Let the spine be straight, the body relaxed and alert. Let your body be firmly planted on the earth, your hands resting easily, your heart soft, your eyes closed gently. Bring awareness to your body. Consciously soften any obvious tension. Notice your breath. Notice your feelings and thoughts. Let go of any habitual thoughts or plans.
- Remember your desire for God in the form of a prayer or wordless feeling.

Continue with A or B or C:

A. A Form of Centering Prayer

- Let a short word or two rise from deep in the center of your being that expresses your desire or your love for God. Don't try to force the word(s) to come. Just listen for it with a relaxed, inviting mind.
- Silently and gently repeat the word(s) in rhythm with your breathing. Enter the present moment. Stay awake. Let your intent be to fall effortlessly through that word into God's spacious, wordless presence. . . Let the word breathe through you. . . You may begin by actively repeating the word, but eventually you may find yourself simply listening to it, as you would to a bell that is ringing far away. . . As your mind becomes quiet, you may find that the word changes slightly--it may become shorter, or sound more softly--or it may simply fall silent, as you open to the presence of God. Let that happen, if it does. . . Sometimes you may need to use an act of will to repeat the word, just as a bird sometimes needs to flap its wings. Sometimes you may find yourself simply resting in the presence of God without using the word, just as a bird sometimes glides through the air. . .
- Whenever you become aware of anything else--if anything distracts you or pulls you away from your quiet awareness of God, then very gently use the prayer-word to return to the Presence. . . Seek nothing during this time but steady, trusting, attentive rest in God.
- Conclude the time of prayer by slowly praying a verbal prayer (such as the Lord's Prayer--or "Glory to you who creates us, redeems us, and lives in our hearts, now and forever"--or a spontaneous prayer of your own).

B. Lectio Divina (Sacred Reading)

Lectio

- Take up your Bible. Select a passage. Read aloud (if possible), attentively and reflectively, until

a word, phrase, or scene catches your imagination or heart. At that moment, pause, put your Bible aside, and give yourself to prayer. . .(Note: Each step may last only a moment, or may extend over several minutes. Take the suggested steps as guidelines only. You may find yourself moving back and forth between steps, or praying in a different sequence. That is fine. Pray as the Spirit moves you.)

Meditatio

- Gently repeat the word or phrase over and over. Mull on it. Reflect on its meaning. Let the words sink into your heart and mind. Chew on them, as a cow chews its cud. Savor and relish them.

Oratio

- When you feel saturated, share your feelings with the Holy One in whose presence you are. As you take in the insights you received during the meditatio, what is your spontaneous, emotional response? Share your responses--with words, song, feelings or movements of the body--with God. Return to quiet, and listen for God's response to you.

Contemplatio

- Quietly rest in God's presence. You are lovingly present to one another.
- When attention falters, pick up your Bible and resume reading until the next moment of insight or movement of love.
- Continue this peaceful, unhurried rhythm of reading and pausing.

C. Ignatian Contemplation

(adapted from Martin Smith, The Word is Very Near You)

- Ask God to touch you through the passage of Scripture you have chosen. Tell God that you desire to be open to the word, the healing, the probing, the consolation, whatever God knows you need at this time.
- Pick up your Bible and read the passage slowly and carefully several times. Pause between each reading for half a minute or so, to allow yourselves to notice details. Let questions and insights occur as you notice more with each reading.
- Place the Bible aside. Now give your power of imagination free rein to bring the scene to life with yourself as a participant. Don't look on it as if it were a movie projected onto a screen. It is happening all around you. Feel free to smell the scents of seashore and marketplace. Hear the noises, sense the movements. Allow yourself to become whoever you want in the scene. For example, are you one of the disciples? A bystander able to see everything happen right there on the spot? Are you the sick person? Are you Jesus?
- Let the drama slowly unfold. Let whatever happens, happen. Don't control the story. Let yourself feel what happens. Don't step back out by trying to glean lessons from the story (or to take notes for a sermon!). Don't start thinking about applications to your life. Allow yourself to be affected by the words and actions of the story.
- As your feelings are affected by the event, let yourself respond. Often you need to respond by

articulating these feelings to Jesus. Tell him how you have been touched. Ask him what the feelings mean. What kind of gift are they? What are you thankful for? What do you want to ask for? Who is God for you just now? How is God inviting you? At other times the best response is to stay with the impression the story has had on you, savoring it and soaking yourself in it, aware of the presence of Christ.

- When the awareness dies down of itself, or you feel you have replied and responded to God's way of touching you in this particular prayer, bring the meditation to a simple conclusion, perhaps by reciting a prayer such as the Lord's prayer or by singing the verse of a hymn. (It is better to round off the prayer time positively, so you can resume your activity, rather than just let the prayer peter out into distraction and restlessness.)

At the end of your prayer, after A or B or C:

- Give thanks to God.
- Shift your posture. You may wish to bow, as a gesture of gratitude and respect. Take a few minutes to get in touch with what you were feeling, sensing, or intuiting in the course of your prayer.
- Note in your journal exactly what you were feeling, sensing, or intuiting.

Two good, basic books on prayer:

Nancy Roth, The Breath of God: An Approach to Prayer, Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 1990.

Martin L. Smith, SSJE, The Word is Very Near You: A Guide to Praying with Scripture, Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 1989.

And a book on contemporary theology:

Marcus J. Borg, The God We Never Knew: Beyond Dogmatic Religion to a More Authentic Contemporary Faith, San Francisco: Harper-San Francisco, 1997.

