



Journey into Imagination

Week 2: 8 March 2009

Theme of the Week

The spiritual journey is directed by visions of the future from God.



STARTING OUT

Use your imagination!

The ability to think and reflect on all our experiences and ideas is a remarkable gift and gives us the possibility of making sense of our past and looking forward to our future. The ability to reason and explore options with our minds is important to our spiritual journey and to our spiritual growth. It helps us to understand the words of Jesus and to offer ourselves to God in prayer. So when we think of imagination as a spiritual gift or facility, it has to do with using our inward focus to pay more attention to God. By this means we can learn more about how God is calling us and we can test this by sharing our thoughts and ideas with others.

St Paul says that there is no point being inspired if your inspiration makes no sense to other people. Saints of the Church, especially those from religious communities, such as Julian of Norwich and St John of the Cross, have often shared with us visions, ideas and reflections from their focussed, prayer-filled spiritual life, in which they found out more about what God was saying to them, and have written them down for us so that we can find out more about God too.

The ability to dream, hope, wonder and imagine is subject to all kinds of distractions though. If we are well off, we can be distracted by all the things money can buy; products and commodities for entertainment and pleasure. We can also be distracted by dreams of power, success and reward. If we are poor, we can be so busy just keeping body and soul together that there is no time to reflect or dream or to hope for something better.

**Each door from the room says,
this is not all. Your hands will find
in the dark**

Archbishop Rowan Williams

Poem by kind permission of the Archbishop of Canterbury; © Rowan Williams 2009





Distraction was something that Jesus knew all about and he could see it going on in the world around him with its political struggles, religious power games, abject poverty and disease and pursuit of self over community. Again and again, he tells us to focus our minds back on God, help the poor and suffering, and lift our minds away from limited, worldly concerns. So to stimulate the gift of human imagination, he gave the people around him visions of the future, and told stories about God's kingdom that people needed to imagine in their mind's eye as he told them. He would then ask questions to get his listeners to reflect on the story and thereby understand more of what God is like and what God wants for his people.

This is as true today as it was in Jesus' day - and as urgent. Using the gift of human imagination we must think about tomorrow's world. What will it look like and how far will that vision be anything like what God wants for this world and its people? Christian faith gives us the ability to imagine the kind of world God wants and work towards that vision, one founded on hope in God's promises. But will we do this, or will we get distracted?

Martin Luther King imagined a new future. See the extra material on www.sensemakingfaith.org.uk

Activity



Look at this picture. Imagine pushing the door open a bit more and going through it into the flowery meadow. What do you see? What else is through the door, animals, birds, people, buildings, an ocean, a great city? What is the weather like? What is going on? Is what is beyond the door a good place where you might have good times and happy memories, or a strange place where anything might happen? What can you hear in your imagination, country sounds, children calling, animals, machinery? Take a deep breath, what can you smell on the air through the doorway? Can you smell the countryside, the





ocean, traffic? Imagine a bit more, - where will you go? Is there a path? Will you meet people? What conversations will you have? How will you find your way back again?

Dante's Divine Comedy begins just like this, as Dante sets out through a wood and finds himself travelling on a spiritual journey down through all the levels of hell and back up again, meeting people he knows along the way. Through his imaginative journey he tells us a great deal about the spiritual understanding of his time. How might we share faith by helping people imagine a new life with God on their spiritual journey?

Talk with a group or with a friend about a book you have read or something you have heard on the radio which you have enjoyed. How did using your imagination help you enjoy the book or the programme?

GOING DEEPER

Thinking about mental disorder



Good mental health is just as important as good physical health, but we often take our mental health entirely for granted - until it breaks down. The ability to think clearly, to use our imagination, to use insight, and to hope and to shape a vision of the future, is often such an innate part of our mental life that we forget to realise how precious it is. Yet mental illness is extremely common. Many people will be affected by a mental illness such as depression at some time in their life.

Stress, worry, trauma, life crises such as divorce or bereavement, and physical illness can all affect our mental wellbeing. When that happens the facility of imagination is darkened and distorted. The gift of imagination and the ability to hope can become twisted until the mental images it offers are painful or frightening instead of liberating. Diseases or drugs can also affect the mind, damaging memory or making it difficult to think clearly and freely. The spiritual journey too can be affected by doubt, anxiety and





crisis, so that even the most faithful Christian can have times when imagination fails and all seems uncertain. Yet even when our imagination fails, and everything seems hopeless, God is still there; there is no state so desperate that God will abandon us. We need to realise that we need the support of others when we cannot see clearly into the future and that we need to be a source of hope and inspiration for others when life seems dark for them.

My God, My God, why have you forsaken me? (Psalm 22; Mark 15.34)

Activity



Look at the picture again but this time try to imagine what it might be like for someone who is agoraphobic (having an intense, overwhelming fear of going outdoors). How might you feel about the open door and the scene beyond it? What emotions might you experience at the thought of walking in the meadow? What frightening things might you imagine were beyond the door? Who would you trust to help you get through it?



Find out more about mental health.
Explore the extra material on:
www.sensemakingfaith.org.uk





MOVING ON

Seeing scripture differently

This section is based on the Radio 4 programme's main reading for this Sunday. The reading is unchanged, but the questions invite you to think about it as if Jesus were speaking to you as one of his disciples today. You can also divide the reading up as a role play between a narrator, Jesus and his disciples.

Matthew 24:1-14, 30-35 (Jesus gives a vision of the future)

The Destruction of the Temple Foretold

24 As Jesus came out of the temple and was going away, his disciples came to point out to him the buildings of the temple. **2** Then he asked them, 'You see all these, do you not? Truly I tell you, not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.'

3 When he was sitting on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to him privately, saying, 'Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?'

4 Jesus answered them, 'Beware that no one leads you astray. **5** For many will come in my name, saying, "I am the Messiah!" and they will lead many astray. **6** And you will hear of wars and rumours of wars; see that you are not alarmed; for this must take place, but the end is not yet. **7** For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom, and there will be famines and earthquakes in various places: **8** all this is but the beginning of the birth pangs.

9 'Then they will hand you over to be tortured and will put you to death, and you will be hated by all nations because of my name. **10** Then many will fall away, and they will betray one another and hate one another. **11** And many false prophets will arise and lead many astray. **12** And because of the increase of lawlessness, the love of many will grow cold. **13** But anyone who endures to the end will be saved. **14** And this good news of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the world, as a testimony to all the nations; and then the end will come.

30 Then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in heaven, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see "the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven" with power and great glory. **31** And he will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other.

32 'From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. **33** So also, when you see all these things, you know that he is near, at the very gates. **34** Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. **35** Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.





Activity

Imagine Jesus told you that your church or the place you meet for worship was to be destroyed until it was just a pile of rubble. How would you feel about that? What would your reactions be? What would you want to ask Jesus and what do you think he might be telling you by giving you this vision of the future?

Suppose Jesus told you that your personal future was likely to be persecution, torture and death just because you were a Christian. How would you feel about that? How would you react? What would you want to ask Jesus and why do you think he might be telling you this?

Jesus suggests that we should pay careful attention to the things that are happening around us in our world. Why?

What sort of distractions does Jesus mention? What sort of distractions from faithful Christian life might he want to talk about today?

Find and watch a film or TV programme that gives us a vision of the future. How does this vision compare with the vision Jesus gives us in this passage

(You can find examples on www.spiritualjourneys.org.uk in the Dream/film section.)

MOVING INTO LENT

Visions in the desert

When Jesus went into the desert by himself, he had to struggle with both his body and his mind. The spiritual discipline he was engaged in was prayer and fasting, practices which focussed his attention on his physical body, his spiritual preparation and his mental strength.

This struggle is brought across to us by the descriptions in Matthew and Luke of the temptations Jesus faced. Jesus' body was severely tested by the fast and the demands of his body would have been a distraction to his mind which he had to get past. Without discipline, denying his body what it wanted, he could not hope to carry out God's will which would include pain, suffering and death. More than that, however, Jesus could not hope to carry out his ministry effectively or die for the people without testing his complete faith in God, his spiritual oneness with the Father and the strength of his mental determination and obedience to his Father.

This mental and physical struggle is brilliantly brought across to us by the dialogues with the devil in which visions and possibilities play themselves out. The devil presents him with visions of power: Jesus can give in to his body's demands for food by commanding stones to become bread; he can test his own divinity by demanding God save him if he recklessly



endangers his life; he can turn aside from God's will and give in to temptation. Each time a vision is played before his eyes as the devil shows his various scenarios, we can see Jesus' attention and mental strength as he resists the temptation, dispelling the vision of easy help by focussing on God.



Temptation of Christ by Duccio di Buoninsegna
(part of a collection of reproductions compiled by The Yorck Project)

Activity

Some questions to think about:

- What is the artist Duccio telling us about Jesus in this picture?
- How does the artist use his own imagination to help us think about Jesus in the desert?
- The Lord's Prayer says 'lead us not into temptation' (do not bring us to the time of trial) and 'deliver us from evil'. What do you think these phrases mean in terms of Jesus' experiences in the desert?

RESTING ON THE WAY

Prayer and reflection

Let us not then make our prayer by the gesture of our body, nor by the loudness of our voice, but by the earnestness of our mind: neither with noise and clamour and for display, so as even to disturb those that are near us, but with all modesty, and with contrition in the mind, and with inward tears.

St John Chrysostom 19th homily on the Lord's Prayer

It is well for those who find themselves in this condition to take comfort, to persevere in patience and to be in no wise afflicted. Let them trust in God, Who abandons not those that seek Him with a simple and right heart, and will not fail to give them what is needful for the road, until He bring them into the clear and pure light of love. This last He will give them by means of that other dark night, that of the spirit, if they merit His bringing them thereto.

St John of the Cross





Psalm 111:2-7;10

*Great are the works of the Lord,
studied by all who delight in them.
Full of honour and majesty is his work,
and his righteousness endures forever.
He had gained renown by his wonderful deeds;
the Lord is gracious and merciful.
He provides food for those who fear him;
he is ever mindful of his covenant.
He has shown his people the power of his works
in giving them the heritage of the nations.
The works of his hands are faithful and just;
all his precepts are trustworthy.*

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom

Where else can this journey take me?

There is more material to explore in Sense Making Faith in the 'Journey into Imagination' chapter and you can explore further journeys and ideas in the Explore section of www.spiritualjourneys.org.uk in the section called 'See' and also in the Dream section where there are creative resources for you to explore.

Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*, Penguin Classics, new edition 1999.

Rowan Williams, *Ponder these things, praying with icons of the Virgin Mary*, SCM Canterbury Press 2004 and *The Dwelling of the Light, praying with icons of Christ*, SCM Canterbury Press 2004

Rosalind Ramsay, Anne Page, Tricia Goodman and Deborah Hart (eds), *Changing Minds, our lives and mental illness*, Gaskell Publications 2002

John Bayley, *Iris: A memoir of Iris Murdoch*, Abacus, new edition 1999

The Daily Service on Radio 4 from March 9th to 12th offers more readings and reflections for you to listen to about people whose spiritual journeys were changed by the encounter with Jesus.

Scripture taken from New Revised Standard Version Bible: Anglicized Edition, copyright 1989, 1995, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Publication © Churches Together in Britain and Ireland