

## Introductory Session: A feast of rainbows

### Before the Session:

1. **For this course, you will need a prayer journal.** In other words, a notebook in which you can make some record of your prayer experiences over the coming weeks and months. If you already keep a journal, that's great. If you don't then get yourself something you can use for the purpose. It doesn't have to be fancy, but you might like to treat yourself to something nice that you will actually enjoy writing in. For all of us, there are things that help us to focus when we pray. Having a nice journal and a decent pen is one of the things that helps me. That and a cup of tea. It's entirely up to you what you use. If you think you're likely to record some of your thoughts in drawings, you might prefer plain pages. If journaling is new to you, or even if it's not, you might like to take a look at chapter 24 which has some helpful thoughts about it.
2. **Reading:**
  1. The introduction to the book, entitled *A feast of rainbows*.
  2. Chapter 1: The Broad Bean and the Blotting Paper: pages 3-6 inclusive
  3. Chapter 2: Pages 8-12 up to *Be still and know...*

### Introduction

Prayer is the centre of the Christian life. It's the core of our relationship with God. It can also be a challenge. It can be difficult to find time or motivation to fit it into the busyness of life. And when it comes to building a relationship with God, praying for God to do things for us and for others (which is what we usually mean when we say 'let's pray') is important but can sometimes get in the way of connecting with God at a deeper level. Over the coming weeks, we will be discovering a number of different ways of spending time in God's presence. Or, as Margaret Silf puts it, we will '*bring ourselves and our experience into the light of prayer and let the Lifemaker do the rest*'.

Some things, probably, you will have tried before. Others will be new to you. We're all different, so it's unlikely that everything will work for you. But hopefully, some things will and you will find yourself drawing close to God in new ways.

The book is quite long, so I've taken some main themes to create a course that is a manageable number of sessions. Each week, there will be some

reading to do before we meet and some suggestions for prayer to try out during the week.

You can use your journal to record your experiences and there will be chance to share with one another our experiences, both the joys and the frustrations, as we take this journey together.

There is not a lot of point just talking about prayer, so almost every week, we will take some time to actually do some praying. We will also take time each session to share our experiences of praying during the week.

## Discussion

What are you hoping to get from going through this book together?

We could (this is slightly artificial) divide prayer into **petition** (asking God to act in the world) and **presence** (simply spending time with God). What do you do most of? Do you find one easier than the other? Do you feel you have the balance about right, or would you like to change it?

## Finding Stillness

### Read psalm 131

Much of what we've read so far is about what Margaret Silf describes as *coming to rest in the direction of God* (pg 9). In other words, finding a place of inner stillness and resting there, conscious that God is with us. That's not always easy and it takes a bit of practice, but with a bit of experimenting, you will find things that help you to 'still and quiet' your soul.

## Places and things

What helps you to focus on prayer, or simply to relax and unwind?

- Do you have a particular place, such as a favourite chair, where you feel relaxed and prayerful?
- Are there things you like to have with you when you pray? Teresa of Avila said she found it easier to pray if she had a book with her. Some people like to light a candle, or make a cup of tea.
- Do you prefer to be indoors or outdoors?
- If you haven't thought about this before, what do you think might be helpful to you?

## Finding a sacred space within: Prayer exercise

At the bottom half of page 12, there is a suggestion for finding your own sacred space within. Margaret Silf suggests bringing to mind a time and place where you have been deeply happy and contented and at peace.

- Where would that place be for you? If you can't think of a real place, you can create an imaginary one. Allow time for everyone in the group to say a bit about their peaceful place and why it's special, if they would like to share that.

Once everyone has a place in mind, read the second paragraph under the 'Finding a sacred space' heading and then have five minutes of silence together. Spend the time visiting your place in your imagination and inviting Jesus to be there with you. Or noticing that he is already there, welcoming you.

At the end of the five minutes, give everyone a couple of minutes to record in their journal something about what that experience was like, or anything that seems significant.

Allow space for anyone who wishes, to share something about their experience. This is not a time for lots of discussion. Simply listen to one another.

### **Finding time and space**

Throughout the course, there will be an invitation to take some time out for prayer during the week. Ideally, if you can find a bit of time each day for prayer, that will be great. But don't feel under pressure. You need to do what's practical for you.

Take a bit of time now, in pairs, to think about how you're going to do this. Write down your answers to the following questions. The more specific you can be, the easier it will be to actually do it:

What is the best time of day to pray, for you?

How much time, realistically, can you set aside?

If every day is not realistic for you, how many days in the week are you aiming to take time to pray? Do you know which days?

Where do you plan to pray?

Are there particular rituals (like making a nice coffee, or lighting a candle) that will help you to settle to prayer?

What might stop you?

How can you stop yourself from being stopped?

Take a moment to commit your plans to God and to pray for one another, if you'd like to.

### **Final thoughts**

Come back together and share any final thoughts and reflections.

### **Between now and the next session:**

#### ***Prayer***

Experiment with revisiting, in your imagination, your peaceful place, and simply being there with God. Settle yourself in (see the suggestions below for this). Then spend time with God in your imaginary place. You don't need a plan or an agenda. Just be there, in your imagination, experience what it's like and notice that God is with you.

- Experiment. If the place you've chosen to visit in your imagination doesn't suit you, try somewhere else.
- To help you to settle before you pray, bear in mind where you might like to pray and whether there are particular objects that will be helpful to you.
- Have a look at the ideas on pages 18 and 19 (your body, your ally). If you would like, try some of them out as ways of helping you to slow down before you pray.
- It can help to decide how long you're going to pray for and to structure your time. For example, if you had 20 minutes you might:
  - Take a bit of time (5 minutes, say) to get settled. For me, that involves making a drink, finding my journal, lighting a candle,

getting comfortable and taking a few long, slow breaths to help me relax and settle.

- Set a timer for 10 minutes for the prayer.
- Spend the last five minutes reflecting on the prayer experience and noting anything you want to in your journal. Be honest. It might be that you felt amazingly close to God. Or it might have been completely underwhelming.

If you feel so inclined, read anything else in chapters 1 - 3 that you feel drawn towards and try out any prayer suggestions that you find there and fancy having a go at.

**Note:** The reason for having an imaginary place to meet with God, is to help you to develop a sense of inner stillness and an awareness of being with God. If it really doesn't work for you and is driving you nuts, then try something else. You could focus instead on simply relaxing, using the ideas on pages 18 and 19. One of the suggestions there is going for a walk. You could try that.

### ***Reading for next time***

Chapter 4: Reflecting, Connecting (up to the 'taking it further' subheading)

## **Session Two: Reflecting and Connecting**

### **Share your experiences of prayer since you last met**

At the start of each session, we will give some time to sharing our experiences of prayer during the previous week. To make sure there is time for everyone to share, we will do that in groups of three. It would be good, where possible, to stick with the same groups of three each week. I suggest allowing 20 - 30 minutes for this.

In your threesomes, take time to listen to one another's experiences of prayer this week. Make sure you allow time for all three of you to talk, if you want to. Everyone's experience of prayer is individual and precious, so let's listen to one another well.

You might want to share:

- Where did you experience life, light or energy in your prayer this week? When did God seem close? What was that like?
- What insights did you have, that you want to hold onto?
- Things that worked particularly well for you, that you are going to continue to do.
- Do you have any sense of 'unfinished business' from your prayer this week, that you want to come back to in the week to come?

If praying was difficult this week, and it's hard to identify moments of connection with God, then share about that.

### **The practice of reflection and revisiting**

The first part of this chapter is about the practice of reflecting on our prayer. We have begun to do this by using prayer journals and sharing our experiences with one another. This practice of reflection can deepen our experience of prayer.

- It can help us to notice moments of grace that might otherwise have gone unnoticed. There have been times when I have got to the end of a time of prayer, thinking it was nothing but frustration and distraction. But then, when I take a moment to think back over it, I realise that there were moments when I felt particularly close to God.
- It gives us the option of returning to prayer that has been particularly fruitful or where we have the sense that there is 'unfinished business'.
- It can help us to notice themes or patterns.

On pages 26 and 27, Margaret Silf outlines quite an in depth reflection process. I rarely have the patience for anything quite so detailed, but do find it helpful to think back over my prayer time and notice anything that stands out or seems significant. I also really like the questions in her last two bullet points on page 27.

Let me give you an example of returning to a prayer that seems significant. I was doing spiritual direction with someone who, while praying, sometimes has 'pictures' from God. In one of our conversations, we were reflecting on her experience of prayer during the previous week. She told me about a picture God had given her of a beautiful tent, where she met Jesus. As we reflected together, I asked her whether, when she had pictures from God, she ever went back to them. She said that was something she'd never thought of doing. She hadn't thought she could. I suggested she give it a go. Over the coming months, she went back to her tent in prayer many times. It became a really special place, a place of safety and solace that she could return to when things were difficult, or when she simply wanted to be close to God. Its meaning deepened over time.

### **Prayer: The bridge between prayer and daily life**



*Pilgrims Way: the causeway and the beach at Lindisfarne*

Allow 15 minutes for everyone, by themselves, to read the 'Connecting and reconnecting' section starting on page 28 and to do the imaginative prayer exercise that it describes. (Alternatively, someone in the group might like to lead a meditation based on the exercise, that talks people through it).

Use your journal to note down anything significant.

## Sharing

Take some time to share your thoughts and experiences from this prayer time and from the session generally.

### **Between now and the next session:**

#### ***Prayer this week:***

In your prayer times this week, you might like to continue to visit your 'place' where you meet with God. Unless you prefer the island, that we visited today, in which case you might like to go there.

This week, as you settle into your place with God, notice your inner journey, 'across the causeway' as it were, into your prayer place. What, from your daily life, are you taking into your place of prayer? It might be that you have something you want and decide to take with you. You might simply get there and realise that you've brought it. Or it might be sticking to you like velcro and just refusing to be left behind.

Sit with the thing, you have brought, with God. See what you want to do with it together. You might just want to look at it lovingly together. You might want to talk about it honestly. You might want to hand it over to God. God might give it back to you transformed, or take it away so that you can leave it behind. There are all sorts of possibilities. It might simply be something for which you are grateful or that you want to celebrate.

As your prayer time comes to an end, ask yourself what you're going to take with you back into your every day life.

When you've finished your prayer, take a bit of time to review it in your journal. Use the reflection practice ideas on page 27 if you would like to.

**Note:** The idea of imagining going across a causeway is designed to help you to step away from daily life and move your focus towards God. And to help you to notice the journey into prayer and the journey out of prayer. If it's not helpful for you, then I suggest you regard your preparation for prayer as your journey. So as you settle to pray, (making a cup of tea, taking your shoes off, settling into your favourite armchair - or whatever it is that you do) imagine that as your causeway journey.



**Reading this week:**

Chapter 5: What are you looking for? (up to the 'taking it further' subheading)

**Session 3: Focusing on what we really desire****Share your experiences of prayer since you last met**

In your threesomes, take time to listen to one another's experiences of prayer this week. Make sure you allow time for all three of you to talk, if you want to. Everyone's experience of prayer is individual and precious, so let's listen to one another well.

You might want to share:

- Where did you experience life, light or energy in your prayer this week? When did God seem close? What was that like?
- What insights did you have, that you want to hold onto?
- Things that worked particularly well for you, that you are going to continue to do.
- Do you have any sense of 'unfinished business' from your prayer this week, that you want to come back to in the week to come?

If praying was difficult this week, and it's hard to identify moments of connection with God, then share about that.

**Reflection on the chapter**

What are your thoughts and reflections, having read the chapter?

How easy do you find it, in your every day life, to know and to ask for what you want?

Women, in particular, are often giving a lot of themselves and their time to meeting the needs and desires of other people. It can end up being quite difficult to even know what we want.

What does it feel like to consider paying attention to your desires? Exciting? Uncomfortable?

What occasions can you think of in the life of Jesus, when he asked people what they wanted or what they were looking for?

Taste and See: Adventuring into Prayer by Margaret Silf - Study notes: Catherine Cowell autumn 2021

## **Prayer exercise**

Margaret Silf talks about desires as being a source of energy. She uses the picture of a hydro-electric power station harnessing the energy of mountain streams in the Pyrenees and suggests that we, too, can harness the energy of our desires.

Read the 'Taking it further' section from page 39 to the top of page 40. Then allow everyone 10 minutes of quiet to use the imagery and questions as prompts for a time of reflection of personal reflection and prayer.

Allow a couple of minutes for people to note anything significant in their prayer journals.

Divide into pairs or threes and share anything you want to from your prayer time. What desires did you become aware of? Take some time to pray for one another if you would like to.

## **Final reflections:**

Come back together to share any final thoughts and reflections.

## **Between now and next time:**

### **Prayer:**

Continue to use whatever you're finding useful to help you to settle into a 'sacred space' with Jesus.

Once there, spend a few minutes reflecting on what you are hoping for in the coming 24 hours. Be specific. Imagine Jesus sitting with you in your 'sacred space' asking you, very gently and lovingly "What are you looking for *today*? What would you like me to do for you?" When you answer those questions, see if you can delve into the real roots of those desires. Bring those insights to Jesus as well.

## **Reading before next time:**

Chapter 6: Exploring our inner space and Chapter 7: Your history, your mystery (In each case, up to the 'taking it further' subheading)

## Session 4: Exploring our inner space and our story

### Share your experiences of prayer since you last met

In your threesomes, take time to listen to one another's experiences of prayer this week. Make sure you allow time for all three of you to talk, if you want to. Everyone's experience of prayer is individual and precious, so let's listen to one another well.

You might want to share:

- Where did you experience life, light or energy in your prayer this week? When did God seem close? What was that like?
- What insights did you have, that you want to hold onto?
- Things that worked particularly well for you, that you are going to continue to do.
- Do you have any sense of 'unfinished business' from your prayer this week, that you want to come back to in the week to come?

If praying was difficult this week, and it's hard to identify moments of connection with God, then share about that.

### Reflection: Chapter 6

Share your thoughts about the chapter. What struck you as you read it?

Do any of the metaphors for our inner life work well for you? If so, which one? If not, would you have a different way of imagining it?

There is an assumption in this chapter that our deepest, inner self, where we meet with God, is somewhere that we want to be and find easy to visit. I'm not sure that's always true. It can often be a scary place to think about going, especially if we think we might find things there that we don't want to face. Or sometimes our image of God is such that we don't really want to spend that kind of intimate time in God's presence. What are your thoughts about this?

### Prayer (15 minutes)

Use the image of the island, with a walled garden in the middle (page 48). In your prayer, imagine yourself on your island, with Jesus, walking towards the walled garden that represents your innermost self.

If you feel comfortable to, open the door and go and explore the garden with Jesus. See what you discover.

If you don't feel comfortable to do that, imagine sitting on a bench, outside the garden, with Jesus. Simply tell him honestly why you're not going inside today.

Note anything significant in your journal.

## **Sharing**

Allow time for everyone to share something of their prayer experience, if they would like to.

## **Reflection: Chapter 7**

Share your thoughts about the chapter. What struck you as you read it?

If you imagine your life as a patchwork quilt, what are the patches that, as you think about them today, stand out as being ones that have significantly shaped you?

How do you sense that the 'patch' of life you're in now, is shaping you?

## **Between now and next time:**

### **Prayer:**

Take a look at the 'taking it further' suggestions on pages 50-51 and 56-58. Use the prayer suggestions that appeal to you.

### **Reading:**

Chapter 8: Action replay (up to the 'taking it further' subheading)

## Session 5: Action replay

### Share your experiences of prayer since you last met

In your threesomes, take time to listen to one another's experiences of prayer this week. Make sure you allow time for all three of you to talk, if you want to. Everyone's experience of prayer is individual and precious, so let's listen to one another well.

You might want to share:

- Where did you experience life, light or energy in your prayer this week? When did God seem close? What was that like?
- What insights did you have, that you want to hold onto?
- Things that worked particularly well for you, that you are going to continue to do.
- Do you have any sense of 'unfinished business' from your prayer this week, that you want to come back to in the week to come?

If praying was difficult this week, and it's hard to identify moments of connection with God, then share about that.

### Reflections

What are your reflections from the chapter?

Chapter 7 introduced us to the practice of seeing where God has been in our lives in the past and seeing how experiences have shaped us. In this chapter, we are being invited to notice what God is doing now, in our everyday lives. It introduces us to an ancient Ignatian prayer practice, sometimes called *The Examen*.

It basically consists of reviewing the day with God. It includes looking for the things that brought you life and noticing and bringing into God's loving presence, the things that brought darkness.

St Ignatius used the terms **consolation** and **desolation** to describe that sense of life or of darkness. Consolation is defined as an inner movement that stirs up feelings of peace, hope, and love, and orients us toward God and toward helping others, while desolation is defined as the exact opposite. The practice of examen can help us to pay attention to those movements within us and the things that God might be saying to us through them.

It's a slightly deeper idea than simply noticing what felt good or bad in the moment. It's about the more lasting impacts of those things. To give you an analogy, eating half a tub of Haagen Dazs while bingeing Netflix might feel better while you're doing it, than going for a run or a brisk walk. But if you pay attention to the after effects, it's the exercise that will be moving you in a better direction.

This is a prayer practice that helps us to listen to the witness of the Holy Spirit within us. If you do it repeatedly, it can help you to notice patterns in your life.

Some people use the examen as a way of finishing their day.

Is this a practice you have heard of? Or used? Have you tried anything similar? What have your experiences been?

## Prayer

Take about twenty minutes to have a go at this version of *The Examen* taken from the Ignatian Spirituality website ([ignatianspirituality.com](http://ignatianspirituality.com)).

1. **Become aware of God's presence.** Look back on the events of the last 24 hours in the company of the Holy Spirit. The day may seem confusing to you—a blur, a jumble, a muddle. Ask God to bring clarity and understanding.
2. **Review the day with gratitude.** Gratitude is the foundation of our relationship with God. Walk through your day in the presence of God and note its joys and delights. Focus on the day's gifts. Look at the work you did, the people you interacted with. What did you receive from these people? What did you give them? Pay attention to small things—the food you ate, the sights you saw, and other seemingly small pleasures. God is in the details.
3. **Pay attention to your emotions.** One of St. Ignatius's great insights was that we detect the presence of the Spirit of God in the movements of our emotions. Reflect on the feelings you experienced during the day. Boredom? Elation? Resentment? Compassion? Anger? Confidence? What is God saying through these feelings? God might show you some ways that you fell short. Make note of these sins and faults. But look deeply for other implications. Does a feeling of frustration perhaps mean that God wants you consider a new direction in some area of your work?

Are you concerned about a friend? Perhaps you should reach out to her in some way.

4. **Choose one feature of the day and pray from it.** Ask the Holy Spirit to direct you to something during the day that God thinks is particularly important. It may involve a feeling—positive or negative. It may be a significant encounter with another person or a vivid moment of pleasure or peace. Or it may be something that seems rather insignificant. Look at it. Pray about it. Allow the prayer to arise spontaneously from your heart—whether intercession, praise, repentance, or gratitude.
5. **Look toward tomorrow.** Ask God to give you light for tomorrow's challenges. Pay attention to the feelings that surface as you survey what's coming up. Are you doubtful? Cheerful? Apprehensive? Full of delighted anticipation? Allow these feelings to turn into prayer. Seek God's guidance. Ask him for help and understanding. Pray for hope.

## Sharing

Allow time for everyone to share something of their prayer experience, if they would like to.

## Between now and next time

### Prayer:

Have a go at using the practice of *The Examen*, each day if you can. You could use the format we used today, or Margaret Silf's suggested format in the *Taking it Further* section starting on page 64.

If that's difficult, you could go for the *If all else fails* suggestion on page 62.

### Reading:

Chapters 9 (up to the 'taking it further' subheading) and 10 (up to the 'taking it further' subheading)

If you'd like to, read chapter 11.

## Session 6: Intercession

### Share your experiences of prayer since you last met

In your threesomes, take time to listen to one another's experiences of using the examen prayer this week. Make sure you allow time for all three of you to talk, if you want to. Everyone's experience of prayer is individual and precious, so let's listen to one another well.

You might want to share:

- Where did you experience life, light or energy in your prayer this week? When did God seem close? What was that like?
- What insights did you have, that you want to hold onto?
- Were there patterns that you noticed in your life?
- Do you have any sense of 'unfinished business' from your prayer this week, that you want to come back to in the week to come?

### Reflections

Share your own experiences of praying for others and for the world.

Do you find it easy? Difficult? How does it change you, when you pray for others?

Have you had disappointments in prayer? How have you come to terms with these?

What are your thoughts and reflections from these chapters? You might want to take each chapter and discuss them a section at a time.

### Prayer

*"...when we pray for others we take them with us...into the radiance of God's presence, and we don't need to know why that is a good thing to do, or how it may be affecting their deepest being. We just know that it is." page 68*

Take some time to pray together for people and situations, both local and global, that are on your hearts, taking them with you into the radiance of God's presence.



## **Between now and next time**

### **Prayer:**

Take some time, this week, to pray for others. Have a go at the *taking it further* suggestions at the end of chapters 9 and 10. Take a few moments after each prayer time to reflect on the experience of praying in this way. Make a few notes about it in your journal.

**Reading:** Chapter 12 (up to the 'taking it further' subheading)

## Session 7: Zooming in

### Share your experiences of prayer since you last met

In your threesomes, take time to listen to one another's experiences of prayer this week. Make sure you allow time for all three of you to talk, if you want to. Everyone's experience of prayer is individual and precious, so let's listen to one another well.

You might want to share:

- Where did you experience life, light or energy in your prayer this week? When did God seem close? What was that like?
- What insights did you have, that you want to hold onto?
- Things that worked particularly well for you, that you are going to continue to do.
- Do you have any sense of 'unfinished business' from your prayer this week, that you want to come back to in the week to come?

If praying was difficult this week, and it's hard to identify moments of connection with God, then share about that.

### Reflections

We touched on the idea of repetition in prayer in session two. This time, we're giving this idea a bit more focus.

What are your reflections from the chapter?

As you look back over the last few weeks, how has your experience and practice of prayer changed? Are there moments that have been particularly special or significant?

### Prayer (15 minutes)

Take some time to still yourself. Then, prayerfully look back through your prayer journal. You are looking for the things that seem significant, or where you felt particularly close to God, that you would like to prayerfully re-visit this week. Answering the last question might have given you some pointers. There might also be things that you'd forgotten about.

There might be quite a few prayer moments that you want to go back to, or just one or two.

## **Sharing**

What are you going to focus on in prayer this week?

## **Between now and next time**

### **Prayer:**

In your prayer time, go back to something that you identified during the session as being something you want to revisit.

1. Use the techniques you've found most helpful, as a way of settling into prayer.
2. Then take some time to revisit one of the prayer moments that you identified. It's a good idea to decide how long you're going to spend doing this, and to set a timer.
3. Take a short break after your prayer. Maybe have a bit of stretch, or go and make a cup of tea.
4. Come back again and take a couple of minutes to review your prayer. Make some notes. Notice if there is a particular point of significance. Maybe a moment of deep feeling or of insight. If there is, then use this as your starting point for your next time of prayer. If not, go back to revisiting things that you highlighted during the session.

### **Reading:**

Chapter 14 (up to the 'taking it further' subheading)

You might also like to read chapter 13 at some point over the next two or three weeks.

## Session 8: Finding God in all things

### Share your experiences of prayer since you last met

In your threesomes, take time to listen to one another's experiences of prayer this week. Make sure you allow time for all three of you to talk, if you want to. Everyone's experience of prayer is individual and precious, so let's listen to one another well.

You might want to share:

- Where did you experience life, light or energy in your prayer this week? When did God seem close? What was that like?
- What insights did you have, that you want to hold onto?
- Things that worked particularly well for you, that you are going to continue to do.
- Do you have any sense of 'unfinished business' from your prayer this week, that you want to come back to in the week to come?

If praying was difficult this week, and it's hard to identify moments of connection with God, then share about that.

### Reflections

Share your thoughts and reflections from the chapter.

Looking back over the last couple of weeks, what 'parable moments' can you identify that say something to you about:

- what God is like
- how God's kingdom is
- how he's asking you to be

### Prayer

Take some time to still yourself and become aware that you are in God's presence. Then prayerfully ponder the questions in italics in the 'taking it further' section starting on page 117. Focus on the question or questions that seem most fruitful. Make some notes in your journal as you go.

### Sharing

Take each question in turn, and give everyone time to share, if they would like to.

### **Before next time:**

### **Prayer**

This week, you are looking out for signs of God in your every day life. Carry with you a desire to find God in all things. Ask God for that grace at various points in the day. You might even want to set an alarm on your phone to remind you a couple of times during the day to simply stop for a moment of reflection.

When you pause, you might like to ask yourself:

- What does this moment tell me about God and God's kingdom?
- Where can I see God revealed in the people and things around me?
- If this was a parable, what would it be teaching me?

That last question reminds me of a story a friend of mine told me. He was in Somerset, where he was travelling every morning to a Christian conference. One morning, when he was running slightly late, he found himself stuck behind a tractor. Eventually it turned off, only to be replaced a few minutes later by a second tractor. When tractor number three appeared, he was becoming a bit frustrated, to say the least. And then he remembered the parable question. So he took a moment to ask, 'if this was a parable, what would it be teaching me?' He felt God saying, 'tractors are slow, but very productive.' He was reminded of his own frequent frustration that although he worked hard, he often felt that he was slow. He sensed that God was pointing out that he was like the tractors. Slow but productive and, in fact, working at the right speed to effectively do the things that God had called him to do.

Make a note of the signs of God that you notice during the week in your journal. There may well be things that you want to come back to in prayer.

### **Reading**

Chapter 15: out of the chocolate box (up to the 'taking it further' section).

**Please remember to bring your Bible with you next week.**

## Session 9: Chocolate box prayer

### Share your experiences of prayer since you last met

In your threesomes, take time to listen to one another's experiences of prayer this week. Make sure you allow time for all three of you to talk, if you want to. Everyone's experience of prayer is individual and precious, so let's listen to one another well.

You might want to share:

- Where did you experience life, light or energy in your prayer this week? When did God seem close? What was that like?
- What insights did you have, that you want to hold onto?
- Things that worked particularly well for you, that you are going to continue to do.
- Do you have any sense of 'unfinished business' from your prayer this week, that you want to come back to in the week to come?

If praying was difficult this week, and it's hard to identify moments of connection with God, then share about that.

### Reflections

Share your reflections from the chapter.

Is this a method of praying with scripture that you have used before? Share your experiences.

**Lectio Divina** is an ancient way of reading and praying with scripture. Rather than reading with the mind, with lectio divina you are very deliberately reading with the heart. Noticing your emotional response to what you're reading. Focusing on the parts of the passage that stand out to you or move you in some way and allowing that to become the focus of your prayerful contemplation.

When praying in this way, you generally take a fairly short passage of scripture and read it slowly and prayerfully maybe two or three times, noticing what touches your heart or stands out for you. It might be a word, a phrase, an image or an idea. Then you simply sit with that thing and allow your mind and your heart to ponder it. See what it stirs in you and see where your contemplation and your prayer takes you. See what feelings, thoughts, memories, images or ideas come to the surface.

You can pray in this way with any passage of scripture. You can also take that sense of 'reading slowly with the heart' to other things that you're reading. Spiritual books or poetry, for example.

## **Praying together**

Have a go at doing divina together. Take a minute or so to invite the Holy Spirit and to come to stillness.

Have two different people read the same passage slowly. I suggest Matthew 6:25-34. Simply listen and see what stands out for you. You might also want to read the passage to yourself, having heard it. Though you might not need to do that.

Allow 10-15 minutes of silence for everyone to contemplate what they have heard and to make any notes that they want to make.

It might be good to take a short break at this point, maybe for a cup of coffee.

Then come back together and share your insights. As others share, listen for what God might be wanting to say to you through the insights of other people.

## **Between now and next time**

### **Prayer**

Experiment with lectio divina.

The 'taking it further' section (page 125) has some good guidelines.

You can do this with any passage from the Bible. There are some suggestions below, which you can use if you like. It may be that it feels right to stick with the same passage for more than one day. You don't necessarily need to read the whole passage again, you can simply jump back into your prayer where you left off.

Suggested passages:

- MATTHEW 14:13-21 LOAVES AND FISHES
- EXODUS 3: 1-6, MOSES AT THE BURNING BUSH
- JOHN 1:1-15, THE WORD BECAME FLESH

- JEREMIAH 1:4-10, BEFORE I FORMED YOU IN THE WOMB
- ROMANS 8:18-27
- EPHESIANS 3:14-21
- ISAIAH 9:1-7
- PSALM 1

### **Reading for next time**

Chapter 16: Just imagine



## Session 10: Just imagine

### Share your experiences of prayer since you last met

In your threesomes, take time to listen to one another's experiences of prayer this week. Make sure you allow time for all three of you to talk, if you want to. Everyone's experience of prayer is individual and precious, so let's listen to one another well.

You might want to share:

- Where did you experience life, light or energy in your prayer this week? When did God seem close? What was that like?
- What insights did you have, that you want to hold onto?
- Things that worked particularly well for you, that you are going to continue to do.
- Do you have any sense of 'unfinished business' from your prayer this week, that you want to come back to in the week to come?

If praying was difficult this week, and it's hard to identify moments of connection with God, then share about that.

### Reflections

Share your thoughts and reflections from the chapter.

If you *have* prayed in this way before, what did you think of it? (we done it a couple of times on a Tuesday morning in the past) What do you feel about trying it again?

### Imaginative contemplation

This can be an incredibly rich form of prayer and of Bible reading. I find that in my own prayer life, it does a number of things:

- Helps me to understand scripture in a new way. I often find that I spot things in the text that I had never noticed before. It can bring things to life in a new way.
- Draws me close to God. I often find that I sense God's presence and hear from God in new ways.
- Draws things out of me that I hadn't noticed were there. Thoughts, feelings, memories, unresolved issues. Once those things surface, I can

bring them into the light of God's transforming, loving presence and we can look at them together.

This is despite the fact that I am really not very good at imagining stuff. I don't picture things easily. My brain is far more at home with ideas, words and logic. Being asked to 'picture a scene' is a bit intimidating for me. So even if you don't find this kind of thing particularly easy, I would say that it's still definitely worth having a go.

The great thing about this kind of prayer is that there is no 'wrong' way to do it. You are free to use your imagination and to play, to bring stories into the modern day, to imagine conversations that aren't recorded but might have happened. It doesn't really matter how you do it. The invitation is to enter the action, to pray with your whole being, mind, heart, imagination and all your senses. And in doing so, to encounter Jesus. Sometimes that encounter can be quite profound.

## **Praying together**

Suggested passage: John 20:1-18

You will need to hear the passage read through twice. You could get two people to do this, possibly using two different versions.

1. Have some silence to allow everyone to settle to prayer.
2. Listen to the first reading of the passage. During the first reading, you are just listening to what happens in the story.
3. As you listen to the second reading of the passage, begin to imagine the scene in your mind. Enter it with all your senses. Think about the time of day, the weather, the sights, the sounds, the smells. Begin to think about who you are in this scene.
4. Step into the action and allow the scene to run in your mind. See what happens. Notice your own thoughts and feelings.
5. Take some time to ponder what you've experienced. Talk to Jesus about it if you wish.
6. Reflect on your prayer experience. Note in your journal the things that seem significant to you.

You might want to take a short break at this point.

## **Sharing**

Come back together and allow time for everyone who wants, to share their experiences.

## **Between now and next time**

### **Prayer**

Try some imaginative contemplation with some passages of your choice from the gospels. There are some good guidelines in the chapter and some suggestions for passages that you might like to use, below.

Remember to start your prayer time with some preparation to help you to settle. Whatever works for you. Take a few minutes to review your prayer at the end.

It is often helpful to pray with the same passage more than once. Sometimes you can be amazed how much more you can get from a passage, coming back to it a second time. Or, if entering into a story has yielded a moment of grace, you might not want to pray with the whole story again, but rather to simply go straight back to the point in the passage that was proving fruitful.

### **Possible passages for imaginative contemplation**

If you have favourite stories of Jesus, then you might want to start with those. You might like to go back to the passage we used in the session. Here are a few suggestions, in case that helps. Go for whatever appeals to you.

Wedding at Cana: John 2:1-11

The stilling of the storm: Mark 4:35-41

The woman who touched Jesus' cloak: Luke 8:43-48

Jesus and Nicodemus: John 3:1-21

Jesus and the money changers: John 2:12-22

Feeding the five thousand: Matthew 14:13-21

### **Reading for next time**

Chapter 18: Between a rock and a hard place

## Session 11: Prayer in times of difficulty

### Share your experiences of prayer since you last met

In your threesomes, take time to listen to one another's experiences of prayer this week. Make sure you allow time for all three of you to talk, if you want to. Everyone's experience of prayer is individual and precious, so let's listen to one another well.

You might want to share:

- Where did you experience life, light or energy in your prayer this week? When did God seem close? What was that like?
- What insights did you have, that you want to hold onto?
- Things that worked particularly well for you, that you are going to continue to do.
- Do you have any sense of 'unfinished business' from your prayer this week, that you want to come back to in the week to come?

If praying was difficult this week, and it's hard to identify moments of connection with God, then share about that.

### Reflections

Share your thoughts and reflections from the chapter.

### Prayer in times of suffering

When things are difficult, prayer can help and sustain us in a number of ways. Some of which we can find in the story of Elijah.

**Read** the story of Elijah. 1 Kings 19

### Honesty

In this story, Elijah is completely honest about how he's feeling. It is really important to have space somewhere to talk honestly about our pain. To express how we're feeling. Sometimes, it's only when we start to honestly express what's going on for us that we realise just how awful and difficult things are. Honesty is where healing starts.

Nowhere in the Bible do we find people putting on a brave face and pretending that things are OK when they're not. The Bible is full of examples of people telling God exactly how they feel. The book of Lamentations, many of the psalms, the book of Job.

Have a look at Psalm 22. To say that David was having a difficult time when he wrote it, is an understatement. The psalms are a good place to go if you are looking for ways of expressing your anguish to God. Jesus drew on Psalm 22 when he was on the cross. And you can see why.

## **Empathy**

What we discover when we have the courage to face the darkness honestly, is God's empathic presence.

God doesn't argue with Elijah, when he says he's had enough. Instead, God gives him time and space and care. Notice that even after his forty day trek through the desert, Elijah is still feeling naffed off and God asks him questions that give him space to express his feelings twice.

Our honesty and God's gentle empathy bring strength, rest and healing.

1 Peter 5:7, Matthew 11:28-30

## **Streams in the desert**

*"Prayer, if it is honest, does not deny the darkness in our hearts and the anguish in our lives, but it can lead us to the streams in our desert and the morsels of food that we never expected." Page 155*

Like Elijah, we can find signs of God's grace and provision in the midst of difficulties. A helpful prayer practice when things are difficult is to deliberately look for those signs of grace. When we're really low, they can be easy to miss. Elijah thought that he was completely alone. God helps him to see that he isn't. Taking time, in God's presence, to notice the beauty around us and the good that we are still experiencing, can bring solace and even joy. Even when life is hard, the good things are still good.

Philippians 4:4-8 (particularly verse eight)

## **Finding meaning**

I find it really helpful to know that suffering is not pointless. It can have meaning. This is a theme throughout the New Testament. In particular, suffering can produce personal growth.

James 1:2-4

You will know people whose lives have been difficult and who are, consequently, 'mature and complete'. Who have a beauty about them that is a result of the pain they been through and the way it has shaped them. Our prayer, in difficult times, can usefully include listening to our lives and to God to see what we are learning and how we are growing.

### ***Finding refuge***

Simply taking time to be at rest with God, in the midst of difficulty, can bring great solace. It's not that things stop being hard, but that we have a safe harbour, a refuge with God within ourselves, to which we can retreat. Padraig O Tuama quotes an Irish phrase that translates "you are the place I stand when my feet are sore". That's a great description of the prayer of refuge.

Psalms 91

### ***Discernment and resistance***

Not all suffering is meant to be patiently endured without challenge. Sometimes the pain we are experiencing is a call to do something about it.

Emotional pain, like physical pain, has a purpose. It tells us that something is wrong. If you keep stubbing your toe on the same piece of furniture, if you've got any sense, you'll move it. Pain is often a call to action.

Margaret Silf talks about separating the wheat from the chaff, when we are faced with suffering. What pain is creating positive change? And what are we to resist? What is calling us to change? Taking those questions into a place of prayer can be immensely helpful. It can help us to see what we need to do. Pain is often a call to action. To resist. Create change. Sometimes pain is telling us that we are in the wrong place, or that there are emotional issues within us that need to be courageously faced and brought into the light.

### **Discussion**

Which of those ways of praying in the midst of difficulty, resonate with you?

Do you have experiences you would like to share?

Are there other approaches to prayer during difficult times that you have found helpful?

### **Prayer** (10-15 minutes)

Use the second suggestion in the *Taking it further* section (the last paragraph on page 159). Either focussing on a time in the past, or difficulties that you are facing now.

### **Sharing**

Allow time for everyone who would like to, to share from their time of prayer.

### **Between now and next time:**

#### **Prayer**

Pray in whatever way seems right to you this week.

You might like to use the suggestions above or in the *Taking it Further* section of the chapter as a focus for prayer this week.

You might also like to revisit fruitful prayers or ways of praying that you have already encountered during these sessions.

### **Reading**

Chapters 19 and 20

## Session 12: Silence and Stillness

### Share your experiences of prayer since you last met

In your threesomes, take time to listen to one another's experiences of prayer this week. Make sure you allow time for all three of you to talk, if you want to. Everyone's experience of prayer is individual and precious, so let's listen to one another well.

You might want to share:

- Where did you experience life, light or energy in your prayer this week? When did God seem close? What was that like?
- What insights did you have, that you want to hold onto?
- Things that worked particularly well for you, that you are going to continue to do.
- Do you have any sense of 'unfinished business' from your prayer this week, that you want to come back to in the week to come?

If praying was difficult this week, and it's hard to identify moments of connection with God, then share about that.

### Reflections

Share your thoughts and reflections from the chapters.

The focus this week is on finding silence and stillness. Both in the midst of the noise and activity of every day life and in the silence of silent prayer.

What helps you to find stillness?

How do you find stillness in the midst of busyness?

What are your thoughts about silence? Do you get much? Is it a scary idea to you? Do you like it? Do you have times in the day away from noise and distraction? Do you find yourself automatically turning on noise of some kind, if you're at home or in the car?

Have you tried silent, contemplative prayer? Share your experiences.



## **Silent prayer**

There is a long tradition of silent prayer. It has been practised particularly by nuns and monks for centuries. It's also part of other traditions, particularly buddhism. Nobody thinks it's very easy to do. Even people who have been practising every day for years. But it can have huge benefits, even if you do it really badly, which is why mindfulness is so popular.

Silent prayer is not just about being physically quiet, it's about quieting the mind. Coming to God with no words, no agenda, no expectation that God will speak. Not thinking about anything. Not expecting anything particular to happen. Simply being in God's presence.

It can be an intimate silence, just as there might be sitting quietly with someone we love. Or an awed silence, that recognises God is so great and mysterious and unknowable, that aren't words to adequately respond. It might be a silence that acknowledges that we have come to the end of ourselves. Nothing more to give. Nowhere to go but to God. Or it could just be the slightly bemused silence of someone who is giving this silence thing a go because someone said it might be a good idea.

## **How?**

Silent prayer basically consists of being quiet before God and not thinking about anything. The trouble is, our brains aren't very good at thinking about nothing, so silent meditation practices usually involve doing something to keep your brain gently occupied, such as repeating a prayer word or phrase to yourself or focusing on your breathing. When you notice that your mind has wandered, you simply draw it gently back to whatever your focal point is. If you are distracted by things that are bothering you, it can be helpful to imagine handing the thing to God and then going back to your prayer.

You can also do this kind of silent praying while doing other tasks that don't really require much thinking, such as walking or swimming or the more mindless housework tasks.

Twenty minutes is a good amount of time to do this for, though you might want to start with less time. It's a good idea to set a timer, so that you don't have to keep checking what time it is.

## **Prayer**

Make sure everyone is sitting comfortably. Get someone to set a timer for 10 minutes. Focus on your breathing for a few breaths. Then, in your mind, as you breathe out, say the phrase , “be still and know that I am God”. On the next breaths, “be still and know that I am” then, “Be still and know”, “be still” and finally “be”. And then gently focus on your breath and allow yourself to become still. Draw yourself gently back to noticing your breathing when you get distracted.

## **Sharing**

Give everyone chance to share their experiences of the silent prayer.

## **Cultivating quiet**

As well as deliberate times of silent prayer, there are ways of incorporating quiet into your day:

- It can be really helpful to simply having times in the day when you don't have background noise on and when you put your screens out of reach. This can be particularly helpful at the beginning or end of the day.
- Stopping and taking a few quiet, prayerful breaths.
- Setting a timer on your phone and having a two minute mini-prayer-break.
- Sitting quietly with a cup of tea or coffee, focusing on nothing but the cup of tea or coffee that you're drinking. You could add a piece of cake or some chocolate to this practice.

## **Between now and next week**

### **Prayer**

Have a go at the silent prayer technique we tried today, or any of the suggestions in chapters 19 and 20 that appeal to you.

Try incorporating times of quiet into your day. And moments of quiet.

Notice not only what you experience during the prayer, but what effect it has on you during the rest of the day.

### **Reading**

Chapters 25 and 26

## Session 13: Making prayer a way of life

### Share your experiences of prayer since you last met

In your threesomes, take time to listen to one another's experiences of prayer this week. Make sure you allow time for all three of you to talk, if you want to. Everyone's experience of prayer is individual and precious, so let's listen to one another well.

You might want to share:

- Where did you experience life, light or energy in your prayer this week? When did God seem close? What was that like?
- What insights did you have, that you want to hold onto?
- Things that worked particularly well for you, that you are going to continue to do.
- Do you have any sense of 'unfinished business' from your prayer this week, that you want to come back to in the week to come?

If praying was difficult this week, and it's hard to identify moments of connection with God, then share about that.

### Reflection

Share your thoughts about chapter 25, about seeing Jesus in the people around us, particularly where we don't expect it.

Have you had experiences like this?

Share your thoughts about chapter 26.

### Looking back over the course

What has been most helpful to you?

What methods of prayer do you plan to return to and try again?

How has your view of prayer changed?

How have your feelings about prayer changed?

How has your experience of prayer changed or developed?

What are you going to do to help you to continue to grow in prayer?

## **Journeying with others**

It is good to have companions on our journey of prayer. We have been accompanying one another over the last few weeks. It may be that you would like to continue to accompany one another in prayer in the months to come.

Spiritual accompaniment (often called spiritual direction) can be deeply helpful. It involves meeting with a spiritual companion (often called a spiritual director) who will help you to reflect upon your walk with God and your prayer life, and to grow in prayer. This might be something you would like to explore.

## **Final thoughts**

Share any final thoughts.

Finish by praying together.