

Introducing prayer 5: Ignatian methods

Saint Ignatius Loyola is best known as the founder of the Jesuits. But, in many ways, his greatest gift to the Church is his method of prayerful meditation.

Íñigo Oñaz López de Loyola was born in what we today call the Basque region of Northern Spain, in 1491. His name was subsequently Latinised as 'Ignatius.' He was a soldier, but was injured in 1521 at the Battle of Pamplona, and forced to recuperate. He was a nobleman by birth so, during his time of enforced sick-rest, he took to reading from the vast library he'd inherited. He read voraciously, but mainly about knightly exploits and spirituality. He was a romantic at heart, and sought to imagine himself acting a part in the stories he read. He noticed a pattern: reading about knightly chivalry caused in him a sense of lethargy—even depression; but reading about Jesus and the saints inspired him deeply, which led to a sense of elation and peace.

Ignatius explored these findings, and devised a series of exercises. We now call them 'the Spiritual Exercises.' At root, in each exercise readers take a straightforward scene, e.g. from the Gospels, and imagines themselves in it. They may take the role of one of the disciples or a bystander at the crucifixion. They will then analyse their response to being in the presence of Jesus.

After imagining ourselves 'into' a Bible story in this way, Ignatius teaches us to analyse carefully our response(s) to the story. We must ask at each stage, 'How do I *feel*?' This use of the imagination is more a form of meditation followed by reflection than other, more traditional, forms of prayer. But it represents an enormously powerful way of understanding our spirituality.

There will always be an emotional response to meditations of this sort. Ignatius taught that emotional responses usually follow on of two opposite extremes. Some aspects of a story or meditation will make us feel uplifted and inspired, making us want more. He called these aspects **consolations**. By contrast, other aspects of the same meditation may lead to boredom or even depression, and inspire some sort of revulsion at our present ways of living. Ignatius called this latter sort **desolations**.

And here lies the secret of Ignatian spirituality: the sense of consolation is God given. In a sense, so are the spiritual desolations. So if we follow a consolation, we are in reality following God. And if we follow up

those aspects of a meditation that results in a sense of consolation, we are also following the promptings of the Holy Spirit. In effect, by following a consolation, we are seeking to grow in our Christian faith.

And in the same way, desolations point to those aspects of our spiritual lives that are not of God, and are therefore to be avoided if spiritual growth is wanted.

The methods of Ignatian spirituality are easily learnt—absolutely everyone has at least *some* ability to imagine themselves into a story with Jesus. It's best to start with simple narrative stories from the Gospels. A simple example is reproduced on the next two pages.

Later and with greater experience and confidence, it is possible to imagine ourselves in scenes with Jesus but in a contemporary situation.

But a word of warning: it is wise to explore these exercises with an experienced Christian or, better, with a spiritual director.

Exercises :

Read the meditation on the following two pages, which recounts the story from Mark 14:3–9 of a woman anointing Jesus' feet with costly perfume. You can read reverently as an act of devotion, but it is better to try and imagine yourself in the scene, either a disciple or an onlooker.

After reading it through a couple of times, read it through again but this time with an eye on how you feel. At each stage ask yourself, 'what do I feel?' and 'why?'

Read the call of the first disciples in John 1:29–31. Try to imagine yourself as one of these disciples. If you can, make the story as realistic as you can, so involve the senses of sight and sounds, smell and touch, as much as you can. And at each stage take note of how you feel in the presence of Jesus.

Other passages that readily lend themselves to this form of meditation include: The Transfiguration e.g. Mark 9:2–13

Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem e.g. Matthew 21:1–17

Just about any aspect of Jesus' Passion from any of the Gospels.

Any passage with a strong narrative.

Jesus' parables are not generally useful, because their meaning is metaphoric or allegorical; and they don't involve Jesus personally.

Meditation: The costly ointment

Below is a slightly fictionalised rendering of the story of a woman anointing Jesus' feet. The original occurs in Mark 14:3–9. It can be used as the basis of an Ignatian exercise (see previous page). Each time a blob • occurs in the text, pause for 20 seconds or so to allow the imagination to 'catch up' with the story. The purpose of the exercise is not to *read* a story, but to *inhabit* the story.

It's almost dark outside. • The sun is going down, and a few oil lamps have been lit. • Their smell permeates everything in the small, enclosed room, and gentle smoke catches in the throat sometimes, but you're used to it. • Perhaps you don't really notice it anymore. • All houses in Palestine are like this.

You look around the room in the far-from-perfect light. • Over in the dimly-lit corner is Simon, the host. • His hands have filthy bandages on them, as do his feet. • But, you remember, he is a leper. • The smell of his flesh adds to the fug in the room. • He is preparing something. You can't see what. • The light is simply too poor.

In the centre of the claustrophobic room, at the table, is Jesus with a few of his disciples. • He looks relaxed and is talking with John. • The door opens ... opens slowly. • You're not even aware at first that it has because you're looking at Jesus. • A slight breeze from the door catches the flames of the lamps and the shadows flicker suddenly.

A woman comes in. • She looks around, furtively. • She is looking for someone, and is worried that she might be recognised. • She sees Jesus, sitting in the corner, and some of the fear leaves her pinched face. • She comes forward, slinking away from the brighter candle light. • She comes and stands before Jesus. • It is not clear whether he recognises her or not. • While remaining seated, Jesus looks up at her.

As she stands before him, she opens her cloak a little. • Suddenly her face is free, and she lets her long hair fall free. • It is coloured red, the dye applied quiet crudely. • You recognise her: she is the woman who sometimes stands near the market gate at dusk. • You look sharply toward Jesus out of the corner of your eye. • You wonder if he recognises her?

From the folds of her dress, she brings out a jar. • It's white. • Sometimes, when the meagre light strikes it, the jar seems almost translucent. • It's shape is lovely, with a glass stopper held in place with dried clay. •

With a deft movement of her wrist, the seal was broken, and the glass stopper falls to the floor. • It shatters on the compacted earth of the floor. • Everyone else in the room is tense and still—almost afraid to breathe. • Feel the uncertainty, feel the tension.

The woman takes the flask into both hands, and moves toward Jesus. • Slowly, she kneels before him, the flask on her lap. • Delicately, but with precision, she lifts Jesus' left foot onto her lap, smooths the folds of her dress and pours some of the flask's content onto it. • The liquid is viscous. • It snakes its way over Jesus' foot, washing away the dust. • So! That's what Simon was doing in the corner: he was preparing some water to wash Jesus' feet. • Suddenly the smell of the liquid strikes you with immense power. • It is beautiful, and almost overpowering.

The woman bends her head low over Jesus' feet. • She uncoils some hair from the nape of her neck. • Slowly, rhythmically, she rubs his feet with it with her hair, drying off the excess perfume. •

Judas breaks the tension. • He stands up, gripping the woman by the shoulder. • Jesus sits up straight. • Whatever Judas was going to do, he stops also. • 'Think of the money' Judas splutters. • Jesus looks toward him—a single look is sufficient. • Finally he speaks. • 'What she did was beautiful' he says.