

Exercise 3

Sit comfortably with your feet on the floor and your back supported by the chair. Close your eyes.... I invite you now to choose a word or short phrase which you can use whenever you become distracted .. such as God.. Jesus.. love.. Lord... Lord, have mercy... whatever you choose stay, with this word ... use it to recall your attention when you become distracted, when thoughts crowd in.. when you start planning tonight's supper... Take a few moments to become still again, breathing gently.... Be aware of each breath... gaze on God... without words... be attentive... when distractions come, return to your chosen word for as long as necessary, then let it go again...I will bring the exercise to an end after about twenty minutes....

Closing Readings

As an apple tree among the trees of the wood,
so is my beloved among young men.
With great delight I sat in his shadow,
and his fruit was sweet to my taste.
He brought me to the banqueting house,
and his intention toward me was love.
Sustain me with raisins, refresh me with apples;
for I am faint with love.

Song of Solomon 2.3-5

As a deer longs for flowing streams,
so my soul longs for you, O God.

Psalms 42.1

Seek the Lord and ... his presence continually.

Psalms 105.4

The Lord is in his holy temple;
let all the earth keep silence before him!

Habakkuk 2.20

Closing Prayer

I desire to be all silence,
all adoration,
to penetrate ever deeper and deeper into God,
and to be so filled with God
that I may by my prayer
give him to those who do not know him.

Elizabeth of the Trinity

Learning to be Still

Leader's Notes - Session 5:

Gazing on God

Opening Prayer

I desire to be all silence,
all adoration,
to penetrate ever deeper and deeper into God,
and to be so filled with God
that I may by my prayer
give him to those who do not know him.

Elizabeth of the Trinity

Introduction

Remind people once again that these sessions are intended to help us pray with the heart rather than the head. In this final session we shall focus on simply being in God's presence.

In each of these sessions we have explored ways of communicating with God with few words or without words. The exercises we have practised have simply been tools to help us do this. Any longing for God that we are experiencing is initiated by God. It is the Holy Spirit who brought us here in the first place.

We are all made up of body, mind and spirit and we all have the capacity to communicate intuitively. In the hurly-burly of our lives this is usually the least developed of our faculties. This is what many mystics describe as the mystical heart (a phrase, which the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* uses and which has nothing to do with the physical heart). This Heart lies dormant, buried among all our words and thoughts and needs awakening. In order to do this we need to still our thought processes.

Silence is often the most powerful means of communication between intimate friends, as one gazes lovingly into the eyes of the other. Words become superfluous. We cannot, however, "see" God in

this way. It is like gazing at a blank or gazing into darkness. We may question whether this is prayer at all, we may feel we are wasting our time, yet we know our need to be in communion with God in this way. It is worth persevering. This is seeing with the eye of the heart (*Ephesians 1.18*), rather than the physical eye or the mind's eye. St Benedict spent a number of years, in his cave in Subiaco, holding himself still before the gaze of God. You may like to use the quotation from *Song of Solomon* printed on page 4.

We begin by breathing exercise we are familiar with and then we will move on to something different.
[You may like to place some (unlit) incense in the centre of the group and allow the fragrance to fill the room.]

Exercise 1

Sit comfortably with your feet on the floor and your back supported by the chair. If you are wearing glasses, you will need to remove them! I invite you to rub your hands together quickly so that they become really warm then smooth them across your face, starting in the middle and moving outwards. Now become aware of your mouth, let go any tension there, then be aware of your tongue and let it relax at the bottom of your mouth, relax your jaw. Lean your head back and look at the ceiling, now feel the back of your head growing until your chin is slightly tucked into your chest. Check that your shoulders are relaxed.

Now become aware of your breathing. Become aware of the air as it passes through your nostrils, nothing else... don't attempt to alter your breathing, if it is shallow leave it that way, just observe it. If you become distracted return to the task of observing each breath...

[Allow five minutes for this.]

Now gently begin to breathe more deeply... be aware of the breath passing through your nostrils and over the back of your throat... as you breathe in, breathe in your longing for God... as you breathe out, breathe more deeply into the silence... imagine each time you breathe out you take a step down into deeper silence.... my soul longs for you, O God.... [Repeat as needed, allow the words to fade away gradually.]

This breathing exercise should take about twenty minutes. Take some time at the end to check how everyone found it. Invite brief comments and emphasise again that what is shared is confidential to the group, there should be no discussion and that all are free to say nothing. Before moving on, invite everyone to stand up and stretch.

St Teresa of Avila used to say that when praying the important thing is not to think much but to love much. This next exercise is a fundamental one, which she recommended to everybody. It is very simple! [An icon of Christ may help people with this next exercise. If you decide to offer one, hand it out before you begin the exercise.]

Exercise 2

Sit comfortably with your feet on the floor and your back supported by the chair. Close your eyes.... Take a few moments to become still again, breathing gently.... Be aware of each breath... now imagine that you see Jesus standing in front of you... he is gazing at you... notice him looking at you.... Notice that he is gazing at you lovingly... and humbly.... Jesus who washes his friends' feet... who died on a cross because he loves you... my beloved brought me to the banqueting house, and his intention toward me was love....

Allow about twenty minutes for this.

Coffee

In silence: encourage people not to get distracted but to stay in the present moment, taking a walk outside if possible. Before introducing the final exercise invite comments on the previous one.

This final exercise uses a short word or phrase to help people refocus when they become distracted, otherwise the prayer is wordless. It should be the same one throughout the exercise. Focusing on a candle through half open eyes can also help counteract any distractions. [The method is known as centering prayer and is described in detail by Thomas Keating in his book *Open Mind Open Heart*]

If time allows at the end you may like to invite comments on these exercises. For the closing prayers read some or all of the passages slowly and meditatively, ending with the prayer of Elizabeth of the Trinity.