

Lent Meditations 2012



THE JOURNEY OF LENT WITH SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES

TRINITY ANNUAL CONFERENCE (TRAC)
The Methodist Church in Malaysia

A WORD FROM THE EDITOR

Dear Reader,

Welcome to a Quiet Path this Lenten Season.

Join us in a Reflective Journey into our Soul, as we ponder over the Deep Love of God, His Desire to Commune with us, His sometimes hard Methods used to hone us for high tasks, and His Example in spurring us to a Life of Abundant Joy in being glad stewards and servants of His Eternal Will.

We are privileged to have in our Team of Devotional Writers this Season, the following:

Aileen Khoo, Devout Musician and Christian Educationist, writes on the Implications of the much-loved Lord's Prayer in our daily walk with God. This Ancient Prayer is expanded in a touching way, causing us to consider seriously our Words and our Hearts when we pray.

Daniel Ong, Creative Worship Leader, elucidates for us the various aspects of knowing the Word of God. We are challenged to read, meditate upon, study, and apply the efficacy of the Holy Scriptures to our daily lives.

Lim Ai Leng, Exemplary Teacher and Intercessor, takes us on a journey of Fellowshiping in the Spirit, which at times includes Correction and Discipline in order that the Church of Christ might be presented to Him Pure and Holy.

And, Yong Wai Yin, a youthful Pastor, whose Heart burns with zeal for the Glory of God, writes to urge us towards being Faithful Stewards and Keen Servants of our Loving Saviour and Divine Master.

A WORD FROM THE EDITOR

Be Inspired, Be Challenged, but most of all, Be Renewed within your spirit throughout this period of Meditative Devotions called Lent.

May the Lord mightily bless you and He has blessed us who have been granted the privilege to help prepare this little Booklet.

DATES OF LENT 2012

Ash Wednesday: 22nd February 2012

Easter Sunday: 8th April 2012

David Loo (Editor) and the Writing Team: Aileen Khoo, Daniel Ong, Lim Ai Leng, and Yong Wai Yin.

Lent 2012

FOREWORD

“If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will save it.”
Luke 9:23-24

Every person who seeks to follow Jesus seriously has wrestled with these words. As we journey with Jesus to the cross this Lent season, the words challenge us again.

This year, the Meditations deal with Spiritual Disciplines – tools to help us prepare our hearts for God’s grace to work, to transform us, to enable us to answer Jesus’ call. Some of them we can easily take up to practice, others will require time and even sacrifice.

This is the 6th Lent Meditations in the series since the TRAC Board of Worship and Music has undertaken to produce them in 2005. I would like to say thank you to all the Board members who have journeyed together in this project with their thoughts, ideas and work.

On behalf of the Board, I want to thank Rev David Loo, who graciously consented to become editor and has done it with flair and gusto. I also want to thank the other writers, Ms Aileen Khoo, Mr Daniel Ong, and Ms Lim Ai Leng who have poured their time, energy and hearts into the writing.

It is the prayer of the Board that these Meditations will draw you closer to the Lord Jesus Christ, who loved us and gave Himself for us.

Grace and peace,
Rev Yong Wai Yin
Chairperson
Board of Worship and Music, TRAC

To Pray is to Say, “Our Father”

*“Have we not all one father? Hath not one God created us?”
(Malachi 2:10)*

When we pray, we say “our Father” because if we pray “my Father”, we develop a possessive attitude towards God. He is mine, my Father. “My Father” implies not your Father. This indicates a special right over God. When in fact “our Father” means we belong to Him. We do not own Him. He owns us.

As a worshipping community we share a corporate need. So we do not pray ‘my Father’ but ‘our Father’.

The Fatherhood of God embraces the whole world, His creation. Fatherhood implies a family; and a family implies obligation. Hence, the Christian hatred of all barriers of race, segregation, of anything which degrades personality. So, we put the safety and well-being of another person above our own.

The South Africans use a word ‘Ubuntu’ which means ‘I am who I am because of you’. We need one another in order to be ourselves.

Over to You

Think about walls which separate us. What is needed to break down these walls?

Think about people you cannot get along with. What are some ways you can consider to include these people in your circle of love?

For Further Reading

Isaiah 58:1-12; 64:8; Acts 10:34-43; 1 John 4:20; Philippians 2:1-11

Prayer

Our Father in Heaven, Holy is Your Name, Your Kingdom come, Your will be done, on Earth as in Heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil. For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are Yours, now and forever. Amen

Devotional Reading – A Great Discovery

“As [Jesus] went along, he saw a man blind from birth”

(John 9:1)

This verse is only the beginning of an incredible story that spans the rest of chapter 9. Among other things, the story begs the question, who is really in need of healing here? It is a good story for learning the art of *lectio divina*.

An ancient Christian tradition with the Latin name *Lectio Divina* is a tool for developing a closer walk with the Lord. *Lectio* means *reading*. *Divina* means *divine*. In other words, it means sacred, holy, or spiritual reading. *Lectio divina* is the slow, contemplative reading and praying of the Scriptures that enables us to experience a life-changing union with God.

Devotional reading is not an exercise in mentally critiquing or exegeting the text. This type of reading is aimed more at growing a relationship with God than gathering information about God. *Lectio divina* involves a progression through the four movements of reading, meditation, prayer, and contemplation. What is needed is to read Scripture in such a way that the story becomes part of you: you put yourself into the story through the eyes of different characters; you see the crowds, you feel the tension and ultimately, you hear a word from God spoken to you personally.

Devotional reading, in a sense, is like a hen sitting on eggs to keep them warm until they are hatched. Whether we like it or not, it takes time to be holy. Learn to let God speak to you through His Word before you speak to Him through yours.

Over to You

Read Mark 10:46-52.

Before reading the passage, open yourself to the presence of God. Say something like “Here I am, Lord” or “Open my eyes to see wonderful things in your Word.” Read slowly.

In your first reading, spend some time thinking about what the scene looked like, how it smelled, what time of day it might have been.

The second time you read, put yourself into it as one of the characters. Imagine how you would react if you were Bartimaeus, or one of Jesus' disciples.

The third time you read, listen for a word or phrase that seems to leap out at you. When you sense a word lighting up for you, attend to this word. Do not read any further. Listen to your feelings and God's nudging around this word. Let this word summon you into prayer. Reflect on this word throughout the day.

Prayer

Father, help me this day forward to come to my Bible prayerfully, quietly and expectantly. May my ears be inclined towards You to catch every whisper that comes from Your sacred Word. In Jesus' name. Amen.



Meaningful Fellowship begins with Solitude

*The next morning, Jesus awoke long before daybreak and went out alone into the wilderness to pray. Later, Simon and the others went out to find him. They said, "Everyone is asking for you."
(Mark 1:35-37)*

Fellowship refers to a coming together of believers engaging in common activities of worship, study, prayer and celebration, amongst others. Where God's presence is, there ought to be a sharing of love, support, growth and healing in the lives of these people. Sadly, some come away from such gathering empty, discouraged and aimless. As a result, they would rather avoid such fellowship.

Ironically, one way to maintain meaningful fellowship is to practise solitude. Richard Foster wrote, "Like Jesus, we must go away from people so that we can be truly present when we are with people." He continued, "The fruit of solitude is increased sensitivity and compassion for others... There is a new attentiveness to their needs and a new responsiveness to their hurts."

Thus, in order to work towards genuine fellowship where needs are shared and met, one needs, first of all, to have enjoyed fellowship with our Father in Heaven. In His presence, we are loved, and so we learn to love others.

Over to You

Nowadays, everybody is busy, either by choice or obligation. We often slot in dutifully meetings we need to attend and engage in fellowship which drains rather than energizes us. In this season of self-examination, could we choose to be in solitude to prepare us for more fruitful fellowship?

Prayer

Help us, Lord, to know when to speak up and reach out to share, and when to be still and stay quietly in Your presence. Amen.

Stewardship Begins in Relationship with God

Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendour. “All this I will give you,” he said, “if you will bow down and worship me.”

Jesus said to him, “Away from me, Satan! For it is written: ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.

(Matthew 4:8-10)

The word “stewardship” generally evokes images of managing resources, especially funds, which the Lord has entrusted to us. However, if stewardship is not rooted in our relationship with God, these resources will be seen as something simply to be exploited for self rather than to be cared for and used according to God’s Purposes.

This was at the heart of the third temptation the Devil threw at Jesus: to be handed vast resources to be used but used apart from God’s Direction and Will. The kingdoms of the world and their splendour i.e. their resources, wealth, fertile lands, great population, would be at Jesus’ disposal. How much good Jesus could have done, and He could have begun the work immediately! The catch to all of that was that Jesus would have to bow down and worship the devil. Doing that would have separated Jesus from the Father and bring to nothing God’s purposes to save the world.

“Worship the Lord your God, and serve Him only,” puts things in proper perspective. We need God at the centre of our lives so that everything else falls into place around Him and Him alone. This ensures that right relationship with God becomes the basis of our stewardship. Only then can all that God has entrusted to us be cared for and used in ways that bring glory to God and draw others to Him.

Over to You

Make some time during the day to spend in worship. Review areas of your life where God has not been at the centre. Take time to invite Him into these areas.

Prayer

God our Father, Your ways are not mine but they are perfect. It is only when You are at the centre of my life that everything else comes together. Please give me grace to open my heart to You today and let You be at the centre of my life. Amen.



To Pray is to say “Father in heaven, holy is your name”

*“But you are our Father, though Abraham does not know us or
Israel acknowledge us;
You, O Lord, are our Father, our Redeemer from of old is Your
Name.”*

(Isaiah 63:16)

The phrase reminds us that when we gather to worship God we come as sinners in the presence of the all-holy seeking His forgiveness; weak as we are in the presence of the all-powerful for His strength; ignorant in the presence of the all-knowing for His wisdom. We come in awe before the God of majesty.

Jesus hallowed the Name of the Father by declaring (John 17:26) and manifesting it (John 17:6). He spent His life showing people what God is like. When people saw Jesus, they saw the Father. A Christ-like character is the best way of hallowing the Name of God.

On the other hand, to ‘take the Name of the Lord thy God in vain’ is to fail in the ethical duty of fulfilling an obligation solemnly made to our neighbours. The Name of God is desecrated when the poor are crushed, when unjust scales are used in commerce, when sexual immorality occurs.

Over to You

Think of ways to honour God’s Name. Make a list, and during these forty days consciously practise them. Meditate on Psalm 103 and think of all the ways God has shown God’s parental love for you.

Prayer

Everything you do, O God, is holy.

No god is as great as You.

You are the God who works miracles;

You showed Your might among the nations.

(Psalm 77:13-14)

Read Less, Meditate More

“Do not let this Book of the Law depart from your mouth; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful.”

(Joshua 1:8)

Meditation is not simply a discipline of Eastern religions and New Age gurus. Meditation rests at the core of Judeo-Christian spirituality. The Hebrew tradition that centred on the Law encouraged meditation. In Deuteronomy, the “book of the Law,” Moses instructed the people to “keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart” (Deut. 6:6). The Book of Psalms opens, “Happy are those...[whose] delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law they meditate day and night” (Ps.1:1-2).

Jesus, doubtlessly, spent many hours meditating on the Hebrew Scriptures, just as the rabbis did. His use of Scripture in engaging His critics would seem to make this clear. And Paul urged his converts to meditate: “Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things” (Phil. 4:8). He uses the word *think* in the sense of reflection or pondering.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German theologian who opposed Nazi ideology required the seminarians at Finkenwalde to meditate thirty minutes every morning for a week on the same passage of scripture. In *Life Together* he explained what should take place:

In our meditation we ponder the chosen text on the strength of the promise that it has something utterly personal to say to us for this day and for our Christian life, that it is not only God’s Word for the church, but also God’s Word for us individually. We expose ourselves to the specific word until it addresses us personally. And when we do this, we are doing no more than the simplest, untutored Christian does every day; we read God’s Word as God’s Word for us

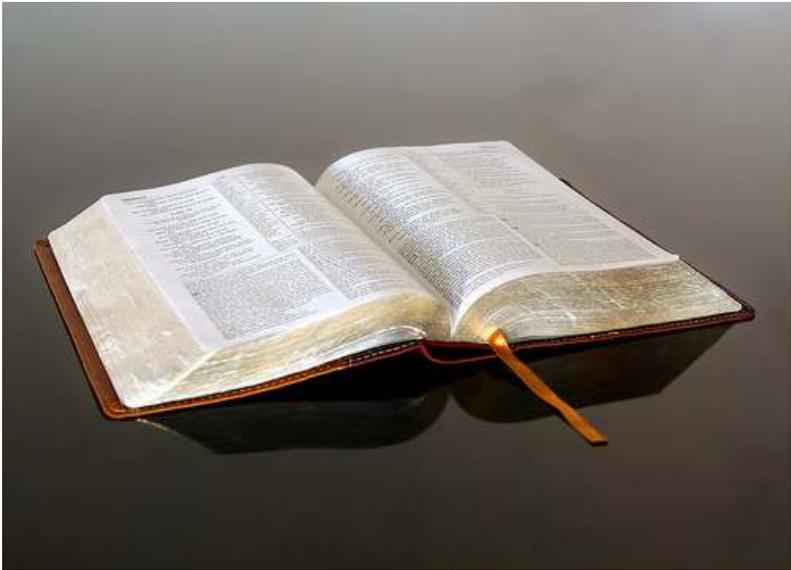
Over to You

Read Romans 8:31-39.

Return to a verse that best captures for you the meaning of the passage. Reflect on what it means to live such faith in God's love and care. Respond in prayer. Rest in God's presence as you offer each circumstance to God.

Prayer

Father, help me come to Your Word relaxed and willing to let it speak to me. May my prayer always be "Speak, Lord, your servant is listening." Help me to get from it what You have put into it. Amen.



Interdependence Characterizes Christian Fellowship

A spiritual gift is given to each of us as a means of helping the entire church. To one person, the Spirit gives the ability to give wise advice, to another, he gives the gift of special knowledge ... The human body has many parts, but the many parts make up only one body.

(1 Corinthians 12:7-12)

The Bible likens the church to a body with many parts and each part has a different function (or gifting). The different gifts are meant to be used together in order that the body may function as it was created to be.

Dallas Willard reminds us that “Christian redemption is not devised to be a solitary thing, though each individual has a unique and direct relationship with God... the (Christian) life is one that requires some regular and profound conjunction with others who share it.”

Some of us enjoy the company of people while others may not. Whatever our preferences, we need to know that God’s plan for His children is to live lives that are interdependent upon one another as we are called “not to neglect our meeting together, as some people do, but to encourage and warn each other, especially now that the day of his coming back again is drawing near.” (Hebrews 10:25 NLT)

Over to You

Have we neglected to meet together for CG, prayer meeting or other church activities lately? Though we may not be able to participate in every activity, we need to realize that fellowship is not merely for personal gratification, but also to encourage others as well. Do we need to purposefully make time for fellowship this week?

Prayer

Lord, help me to break away from my self-centred busyness to make time for others. Open my eyes to see their need for a listening ear or some words of encouragement and move me to respond. Amen.

Stewardship is Shaped by Knowing God's Purpose for Us

God created us to praise, reverence and serve God and in this way to save our souls.¹

(St Ignatius of Loyola)

This quote is called the First Principle and Foundation in the Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius. These exercises were formed to help persons seek and find the Will of God for their lives. The Principle and Foundation describes God's Purpose for our lives. God's Glory and the working out of our salvation that glorifies God is the goal for which God created us.

There are three aspects to salvation: the finished aspect, which Jesus accomplished on the cross with His death, the ongoing aspect which is the expression and working out of God's saving grace in our lives, and the final aspect of completion in that Day when Christ shall return in triumph. This ongoing aspect of salvation in our lives is called "sanctification" or being made holy. It is God's Grace working in our lives, shaping us to become more and more like Jesus.

When we understand this, we shall then be able to order our lives to bring glory to God. When we understand this, we shall be able to make the choices that will draw us closer to God and shape us to be more like Christ. Good stewardship, the care and use of everything we have been given, according to God's purposes, is included in this process. Good stewardship is shaped by knowing God's Purpose for our lives.

Over to You

Review the week that has passed. In what ways have you praised, revered and served God? In what ways have your choices in the past week drawn you nearer to God or pushed you away from God? How will you live out the purpose for which God created you this week?

Prayer

Father, You have created us and saved us for Your Glory. Please guide me as I make choices each day so that I am drawn closer to You and shaped to become more like Jesus. I ask for the grace to be able to praise, reverence and serve You with my life. Amen.

¹ Quoted in *Retreat in the Real World: Finding Intimacy with God Wherever You Are* (Chicago: Loyola Press, 2009) p.17.

To Pray is to say “Your Kingdom Come, Your Will be done on Earth as in Heaven.”

*“For God must reign, till He hath put all enemies under His feet.”
(I Corinthians 15:25)*

To pray this prayer is to ask for the suppression of forces that oppose the fulfilment of God’s will and purpose. It is to ask for something wider than the extension of the Church. It is a mistake to think of Church and Kingdom as synonymous. For the Church is the agent of the Kingdom.

The Kingdom may ‘come’, sometimes through those who are its unconscious agents. The politician who works for peace is advancing the Kingdom. Wherever the forces of darkness, disease and hate are driven back, there the Kingdom comes.

We are deeply involved in the world for which Christ died. We roll up our sleeves and go to it!

It is not so much the death of Jesus but His willingness to let God’s will be done which pleased the Father. His Will and the Father’s were one.

“Let it be according to Your Will” is to acknowledge that God’s Will supersedes ours. Such affirmation is costly. It was for Mary and Jesus.

So, everyday, the Church prays ‘Your kingdom come’. ‘Even so, come, Lord Jesus.’ ‘For Yours is the kingdom...’

Over to You

I am valuable to God. Knowing me as God does, God would not plan anything that I cannot accomplish. How can I patiently follow God’s direction?

For Further Reading

Jeremiah 18:1-12; Matthew 26:36-46; Acts 17:23-31

Prayer:

May the peoples praise You, O God;
May all the peoples praise You!
May the nations be glad and sing for joy,
because You judge the peoples with justice
and guide every nation on earth.

(Psalm 67:3-4)



Settling Down in God

*“Within your temple, O God, we meditate on your unfailing love.”
(Psalm 48:9)*

Slowing down and giving one’s undivided attention to God lies at the core of Christian meditation. The discipline of meditation teaches us to read God’s Word slowly, phrase by phrase, letting it sink deeply into our minds and hearts. About the importance of meditation, Puritan preacher Thomas Watson says, “The reason we come away so cold from reading the Word is because we do not warm ourselves at the fire of meditation”.

There are many kinds of Christian meditation, but above all it is listening to God through the Scriptures, ruminating on the Word, a deep conversation of hearing and responding. Meditation is a long, ardent gaze at God, His work and His Word. It involves taking a text, putting it like a sweet on your tongue and holding it there until you have sucked every precious drop of spiritual liquid from it.

Meditation is not about emptying the mind so there is nothing there. Christians do not meditate the same way that practitioners of Eastern religions do. In Christianity, we empty our minds of hurried to-do lists, worry about today’s appointments, and obsession with what others think of us to focus on the words and images of Scripture. Christian meditation opens us to the mind of God and to His world and presence in the world. As we enter times of meditation, it is important to let go of our preoccupations so we can focus our minds and become present to God.

Meditation requires concentration. Teresa of Avila, the sixteenth century Carmelite reformer and mystic, warned that meditation may tire the mind. It is like lifting water out of a cistern with a bucket. Sometimes we may find the cistern dry, and always we will have distractions. We may experience our minds flitting around “like a hummingbird on holiday.” The advice of Teresa, who struggled for twenty years to learn how to pray, was that you not give up. Just wait for the Spirit to lift you. If distractions come, be aware of them and then let them go in order to resume your listening.

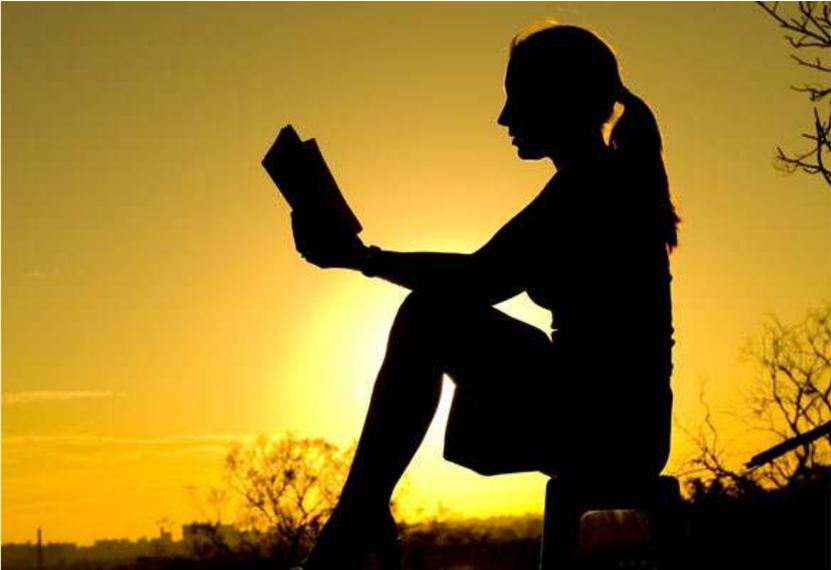
Over to You

Read Psalm 27 through once, then again – one line at a time slowly.

Reflect on meanings for you in each phrase. Respond to the question, “Of whom shall I be afraid?” Tell the Lord the fears that control you. Personalize each verse as a way to talk with God; then listen. Rest in God’s light with an affirmation such as verse 14. Record your experience.

Prayer

O Father, give me the insights I require to be able to hush all the clamorous voices in my soul that compete with Your Voice. I see the need; now help me acquire the art. In Jesus’ Name. Amen.



Confession Heals and Strengthens Fellowship

Make this your common practice: Confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you can live together whole and healed.

(James 5:16, The Message)

Dallas Willard observes that “confession alone makes deep fellowship possible, and the lack of it explains much of the superficial quality so commonly found in our church associations.”

Sins hinder not only our personal communion with God, but also suffocate the growth of genuine fellowship. In order to promote the kind of fellowship that is pleasing to God, we need to learn to be honest and transparent with our sins and temptations. Confessions of our struggles to mature Christians often help us to overcome them. Healing follows when we repent.

Yet in reality, such confessions are hard to come by. Often we do not feel secure enough to unveil our struggles to people whom we are unsure of their trustworthiness. Another obstacle is our pride. We would rather keep up appearances of being fine than to be vulnerable. Working out these personal obstacles would pave the way for a stronger and healthier fellowship.

Over to You

Someone commented that our Christian fellowship should be safe places in which character-building confessions can take place. Is this true of the fellowship we belong to? Do we need to learn to confess to one another in order to heal and strengthen our fellowship?

Prayer

Father God, please make this a reality in our fellowship in church so that Your healing and restoration can flow into our lives. Amen.

Good Stewardship Brings Glory to God

God created us to praise, reverence and serve God and in this way to save our souls. God created all of the rest of creation to help us achieve the purpose for which God created us.²

(St Ignatius of Loyola)

Not only does God have a purpose for our lives, God has also given us all that we need to fulfil that purpose. St Ignatius goes on to say in the First Principle and Foundation that everything else that is created is to help us fulfil the purpose of bringing glory to God in service and in working out our salvation.

This is the heart of stewardship: caring for and using all that God has entrusted to us to fulfil God's purpose for our lives. Everything with which we have been entrusted – finances, health, reputation, friendship, time, talents and abilities, even the gospel – are to be marshalled to this end.

But the attitude of our society and culture towards creation – that it is only for exploitation and self-benefit – is pervasive. When anything is no longer of use or interest, it is discarded without a thought. The focus is on “me and my benefit”. So we end up with landfills that quickly fill up, the poor getting poorer and the rich getting richer.

The stewardship to which we are called is faithful administration of all that God has graciously given into our hands, not simply for our own individual benefit but for the good of humanity in ways that reflect God's own love and care for His creation.

Over to You

Consider all that God has entrusted to you: finances, health, talents and abilities, the Gospel and much more. How can you use these in ways that will praise, reverence and serve God?

² Quoted in *Retreat in the Real World: Finding Intimacy with God Wherever You Are* (Chicago: Loyola Press, 2009) p.17.

Prayer

Almighty God, You have entrusted me with many things. Please teach me to care for them and use them in ways that will reveal Your Love and bring You glory. Amen.



To Pray is to say “Give Us Today our Daily Food”

“And when you pray do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think 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.”

(Matthew 6:7-8)

This prayer of dependence acknowledges God as our Provider and Sustainer. We depend on Him for each breath, each day’s food.

‘Give us...’ Who is “us”? We are in a world where half is undernourished, and a large part of that faces starvation. In this prayer, we align ourselves with our fellow-creatures in such a plight, and with God’s concern for them.

We do not seek provision for the distant future. As we trust God to lead us day by day, we find God adequate.

The One who knows even when a sparrow falls will guide us through the days ahead. Why are we so prone to disregard that tremendous source of strength and guidance and rely on our weak, ineffective efforts?

We should learn to travel light through our lives and not be encumbered unnecessarily by a baggage of worries. Take only what we can carry, for there may not be a porter available.

Over to You

Make three piles of your possessions.

Put the things you would like to take in one, the things you think you will need in another, and those things that are absolutely essential in another.

Store away the first two piles. Take only the essentials.

For Further Reading

Matthew 14:13-21, 25:31-46

Prayer: Remind me each morning of Your constant love,
for I put my trust in You.

My prayers go up to You;

Show me the way I should go. (Psalm 143:8)

Different Perspectives

“Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.”

(Romans 15:7)

Christian spirituality is often described as a journey rather than a destination. The spiritual life is characterized by movement and discovery, challenge and change, adversity and joy, uncertainty and fulfillment. It is also marked in a special way by companionship, first with the One we seek to follow and second with those who also seek to follow Jesus Christ.

When I travel in countries that are predominantly Roman Catholic, I am fascinated by the images of Christ I see in the churches. Often there is a large cross with a depiction of Jesus in death, blood running down His face and body. As a Protestant, this is not something I see very often. It is an image of the Christian faith that many of us skip over or think about for only an hour on Good Friday.

Another way to approach Christian meditation is to go into other churches in your area or when you are travelling and look at the way they portray aspects of God in their architecture, stained-glass windows, crosses, banners, baptismal fonts, altars or tables. Think about (meditate on) what each of these things (or lack of them) says about God and His loving work of salvation in the world. Consider taking a picture of something that really speaks to you so you can use it in your devotional time at home.

In a very deep sense, life is pilgrimage. Your journey and mine cannot be the same. But in the company of others we make our journey and learn to tell the truth about ourselves. Interacting with others we learn the vulnerability of giving and receiving love.

Over to you

Read Luke 22:21-34.

This passage offers evidence both of joy and conflict in the community of disciples that Jesus called together. How have you experienced both joy and struggle as part of the community of faith? Have you experienced disillusionment? If so, listen to what God may be saying to you through it. Write your thoughts.

Prayer

Once again, Dear Lord, I want to express my gratitude for the fact that I belong to a Church that has not only a history but also a future. Church buildings can easily be knocked down, but not your Church. It will stand throughout all eternity. All honour and glory be to your Name. Amen.



Spiritual Growth Enhances Fellowship

Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth.

(John 17:17)

Fellowship is dynamic at its best, and is always growing – not so much in size but in spiritual stature. For a young Christian to mature, he needs to be “rooted and built up” in Christ. The apostle Paul tells us that we are to be transformed through the renewal of the mind (Romans 12:2). To be transformed, we need to study and apply the Word of God in our lives. In a community of believers where knowledge of God remains superficial, faith becomes dry and meaningless. Without spiritual growth, fellowship becomes stunted and stagnant.

At any one time, we will find brethren at different stages of Christian maturity, and as a body of Christ, we need to look out for one another’s spiritual well-being in the Lord. We are often unconsciously influenced by worldly values in that we only look after our own spiritual needs and those of our loved ones. We fail to see that we are our “brother’s keeper”, not just for physical needs but spiritual needs as well. Just as we desire to grow in the Lord, we also need to help the others in God’s family to be built up in God’s Word as well. If we neglect to do so, our fellowship will remain weak and ignorant about loving and serving God, and worse, it may give rise to a group of knowledgeable but self-righteous believers.

Over to You

In this season of self-examination and reflection, have we unconsciously succumbed to the temptation of watching out merely for ourselves, even in the area of spiritual growth? Have we neglected, or overlooked, the need to encourage people to participate in study groups in order that we may be built up in Christ together as God intended?

Prayer

Forgive us, Lord, when we are only concerned about our own spiritual growth and well-being.

Help us to encourage one another to grow deeper in the Lord and stronger in love for one another in our fellowship. Amen.

Stewardship: an Expression of God's Love

God demonstrates His own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us ... And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love Him, who have been called according to His purpose.

(Romans 5:8, 8:28)

God, in His love for us, works out everything in our lives for good (Romans 8:28). Nothing, not even what we think are disastrous experiences, is wasted when God gets to work on our lives. The outcome is our restoration and wholeness, bringing glory to the Lord our God.

The setting for our stewardship is love. Stewardship, the discipline of our service to God, is part of our response to God's love first poured into our lives. Dallas Willard writes that we "love something or someone when we promote their good for their own sake".³ Our practice of stewardship is an act of love for God's creation as well as the people God created.

We consider the good of those who will be touched by the stewardship we practice. For example, we need to ask if simply giving funds or food directly to poor families is helpful. It could be that the family is poor because of bad economic situation and the adults are able to but cannot get work. In such circumstances, finding avenues for them to earn an income and honouring their dignity would be better stewardship. It is a slower way of giving help to be certain, but it works to the good of the family.

Over to You

Look back at your life and see where God, in His love for you, has taken your experiences, positive and negative, and worked it all out for good. Give thanks to the Lord for that.

Consider the resources the Lord has given into your care. In what ways are they being cared for and used at the moment? Are there changes you need to make to your stewardship so as to reflect God's Love in its practice?

³ Dallas Willard, *Renovation of the Heart: Putting on the Character of Christ* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 2002), p.9&7

Prayer

Dear Lord, thank You for all that You have done in working out the circumstances of my life for good. Help me to examine my stewardship and seek You for the best ways to use all that You have entrusted into my care. Amen.



To Pray is to say “Forgive Us Our Sins”

*“Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my
anxious thoughts.*

*See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way
everlasting.”*

(Psalm 139:23-24)

During World War II the Cathedral in Coventry, England was badly damaged. Today visitors can see beneath the Cross made of two charred beams in the ruins the inscription of just two words: ‘Father, forgive’. Not three words, ‘Father, forgive them’. For we, all of us, have a share in the sin of the world and in its shame.

We need to put an end to fooling ourselves that we have no sin and put an end to covering up and blaming others. We have to own up. We acknowledge our human rebellion and accept our personal responsibility for sin, and repent. We, all of us, need the forgiveness of God. ‘Forgive us our sins.’

Jesus said of a prostitute that “her sins, which are many, are forgiven, because she loved much.”

Over to You:

Recall a time when something or someone caused you to realize your own sin.

Make a list of things you have failed to do and a list of wrongs you have done.

Pray for forgiveness.

For Further Reading:

Luke 7:36-50; Romans 8:31-39

Prayer:

You are my God, so be merciful to me;

I pray to You all day long.

Make Your servant glad, O Lord, because my prayers go up to You

You are good to us and forgiving,

full of constant love for all who pray to You.

(Psalm 86:3-5)

Growing Receptivity

“I have hidden Your Word in my heart that I might not sin against You.”

(Psalm 119:11)

Scripture memorization is extremely important to the Christian. It should be an integral part of every Christian's spiritual walk with God. Something good happens when we commit the words of Scripture to memory. We may more readily share with a seeker if we know God's word well. Our prayer life will be greatly enriched by having the Scriptures embedded in our hearts and ready on our lips.

Memorization is the process of continually remembering the words, truths and images God uses to shape us. Memorization provides us with a store of learning, which can be accessed anywhere and anytime.

Many times after a conversation I find myself thinking about what I should have or could have said to that person. If I had put more time into memorizing Scripture, the Holy Spirit could have easily pulled a thought or phrase from that treasure chest in my heart and put it in my mouth. By memorizing Scripture, we can learn what God might say in a situation where we are called to be Christ's ambassador.

When we have a wealth of Scripture verses committed to memory, the Holy Spirit helps us recall the verses we have memorized; Jesus reminds us of this in the Gospel of John. “The Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My Name, will teach you everything, and remind you all that I have said to you.” (John 14:26)

Over to you

Begin by memorizing some of the choruses, songs or hymns that you enjoy. Sing the bits you remember. Review again the bits you forget. Write them out if it helps you. When you have committed the song to memory, notice when the song simply pops into your mind. Let the song be a way God enters into your life and speaks to you.

Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ, I am thankful that You save me from all sin, and also from those things that can quickly become sin. You have given me light. Now give me power – power to become. For Your own dear Name's sake. Amen.

Accountability Builds Godly Fellowship

He will keep you strong to the end, so that you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God, who has called you into fellowship with his son Jesus Christ our Lord, is faithful.

(1 Corinthians 1:8-9)

To be accountable is to be responsible for the effects of one's actions and to be willing to explain or be criticized for them. If we expect such accountability in public governance, we cannot expect less from a Christian community. This is because God has called us to live holy lives and in a community, our actions or inaction will invariably bring about consequences.

When we hear testimonies of faithful men and women, our hearts rejoice. Yet, we have also experienced discouragement when we read of irresponsible conduct within the church. It is painful to see young Christians stumble as a result. We realize that our actions matter. Thus, it is crucial to remind ourselves that our lives are no longer our own but God's and one day, we will have to give Him an account of our action or inaction.

In any trial or temptation, God Himself has promised that He will keep us strong and He is a faithful God. He has also given us brethren to encourage us in our walk with Him and to help us to be accountable to Him in all we do. A God-fearing sense of accountability will eventually produce godly fellowship.

Over to You

Have we made decisions recently, thinking that our lives are our own and nobody else would be affected? Ask God to help us to examine our action and inaction.

Prayer

Thank you Father God for Your promise that You will keep me strong until You come again. Thank you also for people in the fellowship who help to keep me accountable to You. Amen.

Service to God Leads to Service to Others

“The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight to the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour.”
(Luke 4:18-19)

Among all that God entrusts us with is also stewardship of the Gospel, sharing the good news of Jesus Christ with others. The easy way of doing that would be to pass out tracts and hold rallies and evangelistic meetings. These activities have their place but stewardship of the Gospel where God has placed us also includes the process of making friends with those with whom we share the Gospel. It includes being engaged with these people and allowing our lives to interact with theirs. Stewardship of the Gospel means that our lives must reflect the good news too.

Jesus’ life is our example for doing this. His mission was not just to die on the cross to free us from the bondage of sin. His mission included interacting with people and bringing healing and God’s shalom, wholeness, into their lives. Stewardship, service to God, necessarily leads us into service to fellow human beings.

When John Wesley began to preach to the crowds in the open air and the people responded to the good news and became Christians, he also saw their needs. They were mostly the poor who had very little education, who were on the margins of society. John Wesley and the Methodists reached out to these people. Among the work they did was to set up orphanages, hold classes to teach them reading, writing and arithmetic, visit prisons, set up small cottage industries for women who needed work. To John Wesley, this was as much a vital part of holy living as worship and prayer and the other spiritual disciplines. “The Gospel of Christ knows no religion but social; no holiness, but social holiness” was the view John Wesley held very strongly. We can do no less in our practice of stewardship and service.

Over to You

How does the use of the resources God has given to you affect those around you? Consider the ways in which your stewardship leads to service to others. How can you do it together with others in your faith community?

Prayer

Dear Lord, You have blessed me with much. Open my eyes to see how I can use the resources You have given me can be used to touch the lives of those who are in need. Amen.



To Pray is to say “As we Forgive those who sin against us.”

“Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift.”

(Matthew 5:23-24)

When Peter asked Jesus how many times he had to forgive, Jesus answered seventy times seven and He told the parable of the unmerciful servant (Read Matthew 18:22-35)

One who is at ease with himself is at ease with his neighbour, with the world, and with God. But most of us are not at ease with ourselves. We are tense, irritable, vindictive. But Jesus says to us: “If you are about to offer your gift to God at the altar and there you remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar and go at once to make peace with your brother, then come back and offer your gift to God.” So I, my neighbour, and God, are all bound together like a well-woven garment. Whole, it has value. If, with God’s help, I can eradicate any ill will, then I am on the road to becoming a well-rounded individual.

Over to You

What are some of the things you are harbouring? Is there anyone you should forgive?

Call that person, make peace.

For Further Reading

John 8:3-11

Prayer

My sins, O God, are not hidden from You;

You know how foolish I have been.

Don’t let me bring shame on those
who trust in You.

Sovereign Lord Almighty!

Don’t let me bring disgrace to those who worship You.

O God of Israel!

(Psalm 69:5-6)

Practice Makes Perfect

“I think it is right to refresh your memory...And I will make every effort to see that after my departure you will always be able to remember these things.”

(2 Peter 1:13, 15)

Learning Scripture by heart is critical in the disciple-making process. Granted, this isn't easy, but every disciple-maker should stress this discipline. In my experience I have observed that usually a person committed to memorizing Scripture on a regular basis is a disciplined thinker. Over a period of time he has trained to probe deeply into the truths of Scripture, finding a coherent and unified Biblical worldview.

Our goal isn't memorizing as many Scripture verses as possible. It's conforming to the image of Jesus Christ. It's pursuit of holiness to reach godliness. For this purpose we commit ourselves to be filled with the richness of God's Word. Transformation and maturity are more important than the quantity of Scripture memorized.

I started the discipline of memorizing Scripture soon after I became a Christian at age 13, and the approach I take requires the following:

- Consistent practice – frequent review and practice is most helpful. Repeatedly reviewing the words is like sharpening a dull blade. The more we sharpen our memory, the easier it becomes to memorize.
- Grasping the logic of the verse/passage – this requires meditating on the meaning and seeing the flow of where the verse/passage is going.
- Visualizing mental images of the meaning – pictures and logic often work together. Imagination helps form a picture in our mind, which helps us retain the memory.
- Mutual drill with a family member or friend – making it a discipline that you do it with a friend or accountability partner to enhance accountability and encourage scripture memorization.

We begin memorizing Scripture by taking small steps, then expanding gradually to larger steps. Be patient with yourself! C.S. Lewis once remarked in an essay; “you can get second things only by putting first things first”.

Over to you

Memorise a chapter of the Bible. Take your time with this. Let the words sink into your soul. If singing helps you to remember these things, don't be afraid to sing the words.

Prayer

O Father, thank You for the challenges You so gently and lovingly bring to my life. For where there is no challenge there can be no change. May my life continually be a response to all You are revealing to me. In Jesus' name. Amen.



Accountability Builds Godly Fellowship

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Over to You

Have we made decisions recently, thinking that our lives are our own and nobody else would be affected? Ask God to help us to examine our action and inaction.

Prayer

Thank you Father God for Your promise that You will keep me strong until You come again. Thank you also for people in the fellowship who help to keep me accountable to You. Amen.

To Serve and Not To Be Served

*For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve
and to give his life as a ransom for many.*

(Mark 10:45)

Read Mark 10:35-45

Each time we open the newspapers or read the news online, we have no shortage of examples of how leaders of the world act and lead. James and John and the other disciples had to learn that being buddies with the “top dog” in God’s Kingdom doesn’t bring the kind of privileges and rights that leaders of the world claim for themselves! Instead, being close companions of the Son of God meant the cup of suffering and baptism of death.

The “greatness” of a leader in the Kingdom of God is expressed in service to God and to God’s people, and not in how much wealth and status and power one can get. The identity of a leader in the Kingdom of God is **servant**.

Jesus embodied this in His life and mission. In each place He went, He not only preached the good news that the Kingdom of God had come near, Jesus also healed the people’s illnesses, delivered them from evil spirits, and raised the dead. Mark tells us that once, when Jesus took His disciples to a quiet place to rest, He “saw a large crowd, [and] had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd.” So much so that his own tiredness and need for rest was laid aside, so that the lost sheep could be fed. Service means looking to the good of others, even if there are times when our own needs have to be laid aside first.

Over to You

Consider the people around you, at home or at work or school, your friends. In what ways can you serve them as a servant, just like our Lord Jesus Christ?

Prayer

Father, thank You for Jesus, Who came not to be served but to serve. He has shown us, through His life, what it means to serve You and serve others. Please guide me so that I too may serve like Jesus did. Amen.



To Pray is to say “Save us from the time of trial”

‘When He hath tried me, I shall come forth as gold.’

(Job 23:10)

To pray this is to admit our frailty, acknowledging our liability to sin. When we are off-guard, over-strained or tired, temptation easily strikes us down.

Jesus told His disciples to ‘watch and pray’. Paul likewise reminds us ‘Continue in prayer, and watch in the same.’

I love the outdoors. One of my favourite memories is when the Pastors and Diaconal Ministers climbed Mount Kinabalu years ago. For me Christianity has been a climb. Many times I have paused for breath. Sometimes I slipped, but always the trail beckoned me upward. Along the way there have been companions. When the going was rough they have held out a helping hand. And, I have been able to hold out a helping hand to another as I found firm foot-holds. There have been moments of breathtaking excitement. There have been bumps and bruises. In the Christian faith I have found my trail. It leads to Him, and He has reached down to me. I am grateful for those who have been ahead of me on the trail, and for their help over the rough spots. However, Jesus is a constant Companion, who came and lived with us and now lives forever more.

Over to You

Think about people who are trapped in bondage. How is God trying to release them?

Do you have a deliverance story to share?

For Further Reading

James 1:2-3

Prayer

No one can see his own errors;
deliver me, Lord, from hidden faults!

Keep me safe, also, from wilful sins;
don't let them rule over me.

Then I shall be perfect
and free from the evil of sin.

(Psalm 19:12-13)



A Biblical Mind-Set

“Every part of Scripture is God-breathed and useful one way or another – showing us truth, exposing our rebellion, correcting our mistakes, training us to live God’s way.”

(2 Timothy 3:16)

The Bible is divine revelation. God’s own word to us. It reveals who God is, who we are and why we are here. In the spiritual discipline of study, we engage ourselves, above all, with the written and spoken Word of God. It is about the pursuit of truth through God’s Word.

In Rom. 12:2 Paul tells us that we are transformed through the renewal of the mind, and that we cannot just simply copy the behaviour of those around us. The discipline of study is an important vehicle by which our minds are renewed by those things that are important to God. Through the lens of Scripture we are better equipped to understand ourselves, human nature, and even other people and cultures.

Bible study involves engaging the mind and focusing attention on Scripture in an attempt to understand and apply truth to every part of my life. Jesus exemplified the love of God’s Word in every area of His life. He used Scripture to answer those who tested Him, resist temptation, find guidance, encourage His heart, comfort others, explain His actions and ultimately face His own death.

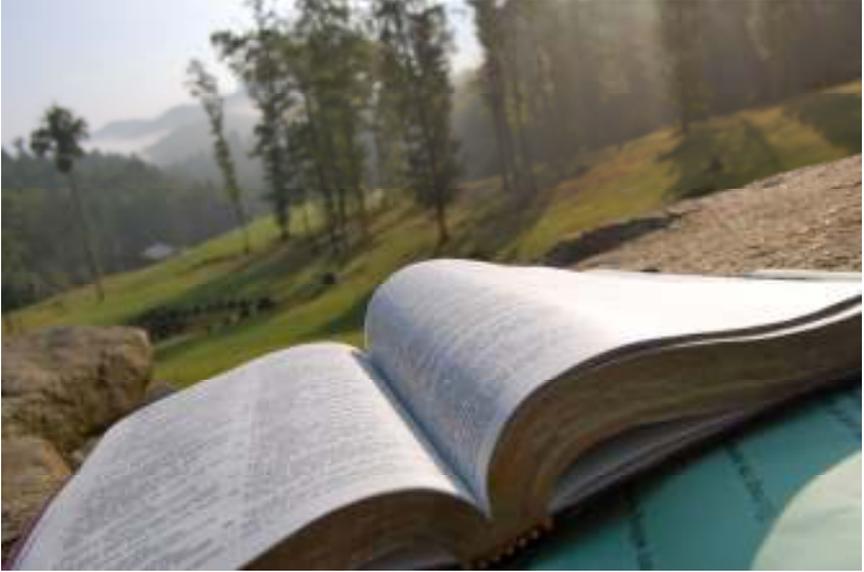
The key to the discipline of study is not trying to consume as much as possible, but to truly digest what we do read. Richard Foster encourages reading each passage of Scripture at least three times in order to come to an understanding of what you have read.

Over to you

Read John 10:1-10. This passage is about Jesus as the Good Shepherd. On first reading, read aloud the passage. On the second reading, note the differences Jesus describes between the shepherd and the thief. On the third reading, explore your own awareness of the Good Shepherd’s voice. What are its qualities? What other voices imitate God, appeal for your attention, and take your life? How do you tell the difference between them and the Voice of God in you?

Prayer

O God, help me to grasp the fact that the words the Bible contains have been breathed into by Your Spirit and have become Your Word. You speak to me in my own language. I am so deeply, deeply grateful. Amen.



Why Discipline?

Discipline yourself for the purpose of godliness.

(1 Timothy 4:7 NASB)

To discipline can be defined as to exercise self-control (especially when considering personal discipline) and to punish or correct with love (when considering interpersonal or corporate discipline). When discipline is imposed upon ourselves or upon others, we need to ensure that the only motive for such an action must be **love**- love for God and love for those whom we discipline.

Why is personal discipline important? John MacArthur wrote, “Discipline teaches us to operate by principle rather than desire. Saying ‘no’ to our impulses (even the ones that are not inherently sinful) puts us in control of our appetites rather than vice versa. It deposes our lust and permit truth, virtue and integrity to rule our minds instead.” Personal discipline helps us to cultivate “the rugged strength of Christian character”.

Corporate discipline is just as important. A writer for Asian Reflections (Year Three) noted three occasions that demand discipline in our church:

- where there is a threat to the truth and the gospel (Gal 1:9)
- where there is a threat to the moral beauty of the fellowship through immorality, swindling, corruption, etc (1Corin 5:11)
- where there is a threat to the unity of the fellowship (Rom 16:17-18)

In the family of God, we are not only called to love but also to correct one another in love. The ultimate purpose is that God’s Name be glorified.

Over to You

Do you see the need for personal discipline in your life? Are there specific areas in your life that require a closer examination with follow-up action?

Prayer

Lord, help me to be disciplined for your sake. Should the need to correct arise, grant me humility and deep love. Amen.

Whoever Serves Me Must Follow Me

“Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, my servant also will be. My Father will honour the one who serves me.”
(John 12:26)

Read John 12:23-26

As Jesus neared the time when He would go to the cross for our sakes, He used the image of a wheat kernel being planted to teach His disciples about His death and what it would mean. It is only when the kernel lies buried and the food stored in it is given up to nurture the seedling that sprouts – losing itself, so to speak – that the seed fulfils its purpose.

The life of service is one of surrender and sacrifice. When we surrender our lives in service to Jesus Christ, we are giving up control over our lives to Him. Giving up control of our lives means dying to that “me” inside, the ego, who wants to have her own way and to do as she pleases. In this way, Jesus is able to take our lives and direct us to serve according to His plans and purposes.

When we surrender our lives to Jesus for His purposes, we follow our Lord’s example of giving up His life in obedience to His Father’s plans and purposes. Just as Jesus kept close to the Father in His surrender, we too are drawn closer to Jesus when we let go of our lives into His hands. Just as the Father glorified Jesus and honoured Him in His obedience, so God the Father will honour us when we give our lives to serve Jesus.

Over to You

Reflect on the words of the hymn “Take My Life and Let It Be”:

Take my life, and let it be consecrated, Lord, to Thee.

Take my moments and my days; let them flow in ceaseless praise.

Take my hands, and let them move at the impulse of Thy love.

Take my feet, and let them be swift and beautiful for Thee.

Take my voice, and let me sing always, only, for my King.
Take my lips, and let them be filled with messages from Thee.
Take my silver and my gold; not a mite would I withhold.
Take my intellect, and use every power as Thou shalt choose.

Take my will, and make it Thine; it shall be no longer mine.
Take my heart, it is Thine own; it shall be Thy royal throne.
Take my love, my Lord, I pour at Thy feet its treasure store.
Take myself, and I will be ever, only, all for Thee.

~ Frances R. Havergal, 1874.

Which are areas of your life that need to be surrendered to the Lord? Ask Him for the grace to be able to surrender and say with Frances Havergal, “Ever, only, **all** for Thee.”

Prayer

Lord Jesus, thank You that you willingly gave Your life for our sakes. Just as You surrendered to Father in obedience to His will, so I pray for grace to be able to surrender my life to You. Amen.

To Pray is to say “and deliver us from evil”

“God ‘has delivered us from the dominion of darkness and transferred us to the Kingdom of His beloved Son.”

(Colossians 1:13)

The Kingdom has arrived with His Coming, His Cross, and His Resurrection. We are delivered from the evil one. Pascal wrote: ‘And so I hold out my arms to my Liberator, Who ... came to suffer and to die for me on the earth...And by His grace I await death in peace, the hope of being eternally united to Him, and yet I live with joy, either in the prosperity that it pleases Him to give me, or in the ills that He may send for my good, and which He has taught me to endure after His example.’”

In the Daniel 3:13-20 Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego affirm that they are in the Hands of God. The God they serve is powerful enough to deliver them from the king’s hands. The faith of the three men is the faith of a people who have known their God through many a crisis and disaster.

“But even if He does not...” Yet having declared their faith in Him, they go on to say that they are prepared for God’s non-intervention. A problem for faith is that it is natural to think that faith itself constitutes one’s security. To be saved is to be safe whatever happens.

Over to You

Read Genesis 28:10-19 – recall the times God has delivered you for evil.

Read Psalm 121 - list all that God will do.

Claim the promises of Isaiah 41:13

Prayer:

Even if I go through the deepest darkness,
I will not be afraid, Lord, for You are with me.
Your shepherd’s rod and staff protect me.

(Psalm 23:4)

Loving God with the Mind

“Ezra had devoted himself to the study and observance of the Law of the LORD, and teaching its decrees and laws in Israel”
(Ezra 7:10)

The discipline of studying Scripture is mental attention and careful listening. We listen with a desire to hear God’s Voice and do God’s Will. In this way, reflection on Scripture becomes a means by which God leads us in becoming the persons we are called to be.

In Jesus’ day Jewish religious leaders searched the Scriptures because they believed “that in them you have eternal life” (John 5:39). The first Christians recognized how essential it was to apply their minds to Scripture “to see whether these things were so” (Acts 17:11). Through the centuries the faithful have recognized that spiritual growth requires disciplined and steadfast attention to Scripture.

You may be one of those who have asked why it is necessary to use the intellect in Biblical interpretation. “If the Scriptures are the Word of God, of what use is critical scholarship? Why don’t we just rely on the Spirit?”

First, we study the Scriptures because, as one early Christian discovered about Paul’s writings, “some things in them [are] hard to understand” (2 Pet. 3:16). To wrestle with the deep truths requires disciplined study using the best methods and information available. Second, and more importantly, we study because we want in ourselves the mind of Christ (Phil.2:5), a love-guided, servant-oriented, humble mind. We do not just sit back and wait for the Spirit to bring about this change in us.

Study is what Thomas Merton has called the “front porch” of meditation. “By study we seek the truth in books or in some other source outside our own minds. In meditation we strive to absorb what we have already taken in,” he says. The metaphor is helpful, for it reminds us that we must do more than learn about the Word of God. We want, rather, to know the God of the Word.

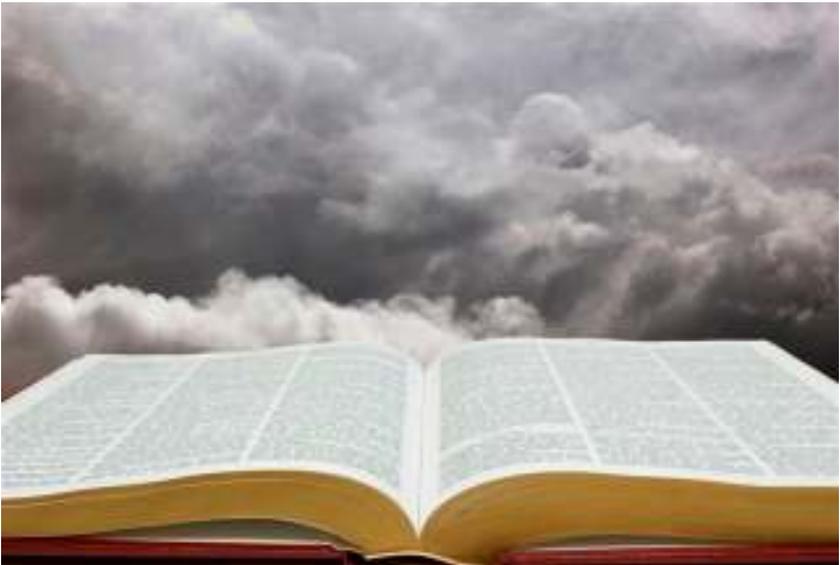
Over to You

Read John 1:1-18.

The prologue to John's Gospel makes the remarkable claim that the Word of God is not limited to words and letters in a book, but that "the Word became flesh and lived among us" in Jesus Christ. When have you seen Christ as living Word? What is the promise of receiving the "Word made flesh"? How could this revelation change the meaning of Bible "study"?

Prayer

Gracious and Loving Father, may I never approach my Bible with a take-it-for-granted attitude. Clothe my mind with the conviction that it is the very Word of God. In Jesus' name. Amen.



Restitution: Making Things Right

“...I strive always to keep my conscience clear before God and Man.”

(Acts 24:16)

There are some things that nobody but God and we ourselves know. If our conscience would allow us, we would rather continue to keep the secret in the closet. However, the promptings of the Holy Spirit would not leave us be, and “serious followers of the Master” would want to make thing right and to restore our troubled conscience.

“Restitution is going back and making things right for the things you took or the people you hurt... Restitution is asking for forgiveness for harsh words used... It is admitting past errors in relationships and humbly seeking forgiveness from those you have hurt.”(Keith Drury).

Restitution is a personal discipline. Nobody but the Holy Spirit could convict us to take such humiliating steps to set things right. Only our love for God and our deep longing to please Him would compel us to revisit the old wounds, to expose them in order that divine healing may finally take place.

When we obey God and make restitution, we are disciplining ourselves to do what is right, pleasing and acceptable to God. When we put ourselves through such a humbling experience, we will reap the benefits of such a discipline. First, we would be set free from the clutches of a guilty conscience. It releases us to serve and to encourage others wholeheartedly. Restitution also humbles us when we confess our wrongdoing and choose to be transparent in our Christian walk.

Finally, restitution also reinforces a deep-seated joy of knowing that we are living according to God’s commands.

Over to You

Are there certain things or people whom we are uncomfortable with because of something that happened in the past? Ask God for help to work out the conflict in our soul.

Prayer:

Thank you, Lord, for making me desire to have a clear conscience before You. Grant me wisdom to make restitution at the right time, place and manner. Amen.



Service in the Father's Love

Jesus knew ... that He had come from God and was returning to God.

(John 13:3)

Read John 13:1-5

Total surrender, even if it is to serve God and our fellow human beings, is difficult, to say the least. Humbling oneself to be a servant is not something that comes naturally to us. It is harrowing to make oneself vulnerable as a servant, and we ask, "Won't I be stepped on if I do that? Won't people take advantage of me?"

We can only surrender completely in the way Jesus did when we are secure in ourselves. This security does not come from things external like riches, status or power. This security comes from knowing our identity: who we are and to Whom we belong. Jesus knew this deeply as He stepped out into public ministry and now neared the time of His sacrifice on the cross, the ultimate service for our sakes. His Father's affirmation at baptism, "You are my Son, whom I love; with You I am well pleased." (Mark 1:11), gave Jesus that security of knowing His origin and His destiny.

This security in knowing who and Whose we are comes with being held in Father's love; the love that accepts us as we are and for which we do not have to prove anything to Father. It was this kind of security that allowed Jesus to take up the towel and the basin to **be** a servant, not just play the part of a servant.

When we are secure and willingly surrender to Jesus to be servants, the question about being taken advantage of, or being stepped on no longer arises. We have voluntarily humbled ourselves to serve in whatever task given to us, whether it be a small thing or a big thing. We have been freed to be able to be vulnerable and truly serve in the spirit of Jesus Christ.

Over to You

John 3:16 and Romans 5:8 tell us how much God loves us. Take time today to simply sit with Father and revel in His love for you. Allow this love to hold you secure.

Prayer

Father, thank You that You love me as I am. Thank You for showing me Your love in sending Jesus to die for my sins. Help me to experience Your love in deeper ways than I do now. Amen.



To Pray is to say “For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours now and forever.”

“Worthy is the Lamb, Who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honour and glory and praise!”
(Revelation 5:12)

The Cross and Resurrection of Jesus assure us that we shall see the final triumph of right over wrong. His incarnation ushered in the Kingdom which will reach its full, perfect consummation at His coming again. The power and the glory will be His alone.

To Him belongs creation and the rule over what He has created. The smallest atom is known to Him. He is aware of how the ants creep in the dark. He perceives the movement of specks of dust in the air. He beholds our thoughts and the secrets of our hearts.

Death! Why should I fear it when the invitation comes? “I go to prepare a place for you,” Jesus said. And what a place! A house not made with hands.

By the power of his Word the Lord created us. By His passion He redeemed us. By His presence He renews us. In His triumph over death and evil lies our hope of life, “both now and forever”.

Over to You

Go for a walk daily. List the things that belong to God. Praise God for them!

For Further Reading

Ephesians 1:17-23; Revelation 5:1-12

Prayer

All your creatures, Lord, will praise You
and all Your people will give You thanks.
They will speak of the glory of Your royal power
and tell of Your might,
so that everyone will know Your mighty deeds
and the glorious majesty of Your kingdom.
Your rule is eternal and You are King forever.

(Psalm 145:10-13)



The Occasional Checkup

“Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves. Do you not realize that Christ Jesus is in you – unless, of course, you fail the test?”

(2 Corinthians 13:5)

Values reveal the character of the person. They identify our treasures, our loves. To discover our own values, all we have to do is ask a series of questions. What delighted us last week? What did we think about? What did we do? Who did we spend time with? What did we spend our money on?

The discipline of study invites us to look at ourselves. For those of us who have been Christians for a long time, it is easy to get complacent with our faith commitment. We have our routines of worship, church programmes and service that we continue year after year. And those are not necessarily bad things.

However, it is good to periodically ask ourselves if we still are growing in our relationship with the Lord and gaining a deeper understanding of the faith. One way to assess yourself is by using the basic tenets of the Christian faith as outlined in either the Apostles’ Creed or the Nicene Creed. Go through the creed point by point and ask yourself if you still believe it. Speak with your pastor or an accountability partner and talk about any misgivings you have that maybe you didn’t have before.

Like a houseplant, we sometimes need new soil and a new pot. That doesn’t mean abandoning what we believe, but it might mean reading a new devotional book or trying a new system for reading the Bible or getting into a small group with other Christians to enable us to identify pitfalls, joys and challenges. This discipline, like any other spiritual discipline, cannot produce change; it places us where change can occur.

Over to you

Meditate on the great truths of the faith using the Apostles’ Creed or the Nicene Creed. Spend time deeply entering into the words and their meaning.

Prayer

Gracious Father, let me have Your Word hidden in my heart so deeply that it becomes a spring of action determining my conduct and my character. Help me be steeped in Your Mind, fired by Your Passion, and decisive with Your Purposes. In Jesus' name. Amen.



Guarding Against Pride

Pride goes before destruction, a haughty spirit before a fall.

(Proverbs 16:18)

One area in Christian living which needs to be under constant check is our pride. Keith Drury observes, “Pride is thinking more highly of ourselves than we ought to think. It is an inaccurate overestimation of our accomplishments... Pride may be the most deceitful of all sins, tucked deep within us, masked in a thousand ways.”

Not only can pride be masked, it can also blend with our vices and fuse with our virtues. As a result, most of us would not see ourselves as being proud. Unless we are open to the Holy Spirit’s deep scrutiny of our inner lives, pride may rear its ugly head in unsuspecting moments.

The author above believes that there are some conditions where pride breeds more easily:

- Success - the more successful you are, the greater the temptation to pride. You eventually may come to believe all the praise showered upon you.
- Knowledge – if pride lives in your heart, the more you know, the more stupid everyone else will appear to be.
- Wealth – ‘Many proud people are not wealthy, Few wealthy folk are not proud.’ Reflect.
- Creativity and Talent – the better you are at something, the greater the danger of pride.

This is not to say that the above conditions should be avoided or looked down upon. Indeed they are gifts from God to be accepted and shared with gratitude. However, as with all gifts, they can become curses as well. We need to be on guard against pride which lurks insidiously amidst God’s gifts in our lives.

Over to You

Are you successful? knowledgeable? wealthy? creative? talented? Beware of pride!

Prayer

Help us to remember that all gifts come from You. There should be no place for personal glory. Keep us from the temptation of pride. Amen.



Following Jesus as a Servant

“Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another’s feet.”

(John 13:14)

Read John 13:1-8, 12-17

Jesus came not to be served, but to serve and to give His life as a ransom for many. Jesus took on the identity of a servant. As much as Jesus is Lord, Teacher, Saviour, Jesus is also Servant. A servant does whatever is needed to be done. A servant does not quibble over whether the task is appropriate for his status or if it is beneath him to do it. And Jesus calls us to follow Him in service.

In Jesus’ day, washing feet that had gone through dusty or muddy roads was the job of the lowest servant in the house. So it was that none of the disciples wanted to wash the feet of the others. Doing that would mean making themselves the least of them all. So Jesus, seeing the need for the feet to be washed, took up the towel and the basin without a single qualm.

It was hard for Peter to accept the fact that his feet would now be washed by the One he called Teacher and Lord. Perhaps there was embarrassment, but certainly there was pride that was hurt. Pride that said a leader did not lower oneself to wash another’s feet. Therefore, Peter could not accept also the fact that Jesus, his Master is a servant and was about to serve him.

Peter did not realise that refusing to let Jesus wash his feet meant rejecting Jesus as servant in his life, the very thing Jesus had come to be and do. And when we cannot accept Jesus as a servant in our lives, we shut him out from bringing the transformation in us that will make us whole and enable us to truly follow His example in service.

Over to You

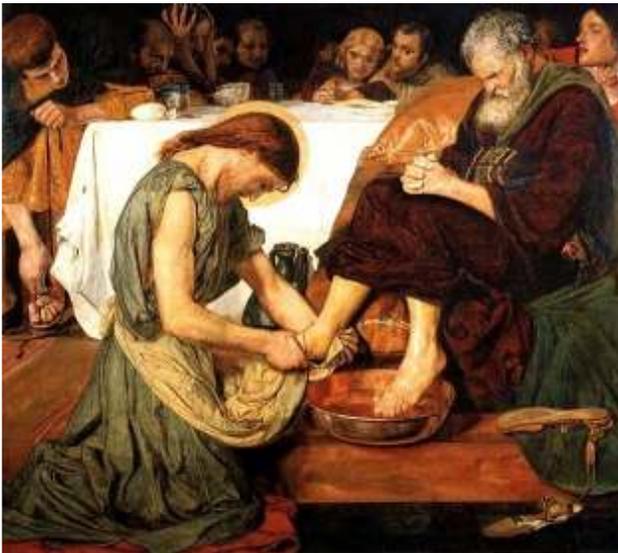
Take time to be still in God's presence. Gently bring the scene in the room into your imagination. Watch as the disciples recline around the table in a huff, refusing to wash each other's feet after arguing about who among them is the greatest. Watch as Jesus rises, takes of His outer clothing and takes the towel and basin and begins washing each disciple's feet.

When he has finished, He turns to you to wash your feet. What are your feelings? Did you welcome Jesus or did you find it hard to allow Him to do so?

Talk to Him about your feelings and thoughts on this.

Prayer

Lord Jesus, in Your love for us, You came as a servant. Please give me grace to be able to accept You as a Servant in my life. Amen.



To Pray is to say “Amen”

*“To Jesus Christ be the glory and power forever and ever! Amen.
Look, He is coming on the clouds! Everyone will see Him,
including those who pierced Him. All peoples on earth will mourn
over Him. So shall it be!”*

(Revelation 1:6b-7)

‘Amen’ is one of the most abused words in our Christian vocabulary. We regard it as little more than a full-stop to a prayer, a mere breathing-space. Ever wondered why the “Amens” have been removed from the hymns in the current Book of Hymns? That is because most congregations sing it so pathetically, half-heartedly, unsure whether to sing or not. Some have left it out because they don’t know what it means and the purpose it serves.

But *Amen* is a great word, strong, powerful. It is a word of asseveration. It puts into two brief syllables the gladness of a great assent – ‘So be it!’

‘It is finished’ was our Lord’s *Amen* to the Father’s will. “This is the message from the Amen, the Faithful and True Witness, who is the origin of all that God has created.” (Revelation 3:14). He who was the *Amen* thus said His *Amen* – ‘Finished! Fulfilled!’ (John 19:30)

Over to You

Pray the Lord’s Prayer, pausing at every petition and ponder.

Our Father in heaven.....

Holy is Your Name.....

Your Kingdom come, Your Will be done on Earth as it is in Heaven.....

Give us today our daily bread.....

And forgive our sins.....

As we forgive those who have done us wrong.....

Lead us not into times of testing.....

But deliver us from evil.....

For the kingdom, the power and the glory are Yours now and always.....

Amen.....

For Further Reading

Revelation 5:13-14, 22:20

Prayer

Pray the Lord's Prayer



Sharpening the Mind

“Solid food is for the mature, for those whose faculties have been trained by practice to distinguish good from evil”

(Hebrews 5:14)

Hearing and reading the Word of God are important and effective spiritual exercises. So also is studying it. Reading the Bible has been likened to a tourist who hops from one tourist attraction to another to catch the high points while studying the Bible is like a pilgrim’s journeys in the same direction but taking in the details – pausing, exploring, focusing, imagining.

I have become convinced over a number of years now that the way we think on a daily basis is the most potentially life-transforming area of any Christian’s life. Sadly, at the same time it is also the area where the most damage seems to occur. The mind appears to be a ‘battlefield’ where we can know defeat and victory all in the same day! The good news is that God’s Word has the power to change your thinking and transform your life. The way you think affects the way you act. The way you act defines the way you live.

The discipline of study is central to the whole process of renewing the mind in such a way that we can respond in appropriate ways to the truths of God’s Word. Study of Scripture involves not only reading, but active involvement in observation, interpretation, and application of its contents. This discipline also includes devotional reflection on the beauties and intricacies of nature as well as exposure to gifted writers and teachers in the past and present.

Although thinking/studying isn’t an easy activity, it is possible to train our minds to think more and better. Rich dividends await the trained mind. The most important aspect to study, therefore, is not what we do, but in what God does with our minds. Robert Mulholland has this to say: “We come to the [Bible] text with an openness to hear, to receive, to respond, to be a servant of the Word rather than a master of the text.”

Over to you

Examine Matthew 23:23-39 and John 5:39 to find out how the Pharisees and the teachers of the Law manage to study the Scripture so well but miss out on what God is saying.

Prayer

O Father, please help me to work up a good appetite and join the Apostles and others in Scripture in 'eating' the Book. May it be as necessary to me as my daily food. Amen.



Sacrificial Service: the Way of the Cross

*Who being in very nature God,
did not consider equality with God something to be grasped
but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant ...
... and became obedient to death –
even death on a cross!
(Philippians 2:6,7,8)*

Read Philippians 2:1-8

Jesus Christ, Son of God, the Second Person of the Trinity. Equal with God. Yet He did not cling on to it. He gave it all up, emptied himself of all the privileges, the status, the power, the omniscience, the omnipresence, the omnipotence, to become a human being. Restricted in a body that felt pain and exhaustion, hunger and thirst, joy and sorrows. Confined to time and space.

In making this willing choice, Jesus became the Servant *par excellence*, the example of what it means to serve God and others. Jesus' servanthood is the way of the cross, service that is sacrificial. He went beyond simply carrying out acts of service to giving up His life on the cross as the sacrifice for our sins, the ultimate act of service for human beings, His creation whom He loves.

With Jesus' example before us, we are called to become a community of sacrificial service. We are called to follow our Lord in emptying ourselves of all that will hinder us from serving Him and others freely as servant: attitudes that bind us to worldly status symbols, our egos whose satisfaction must be given priority, our desires for recognition. In that emptiness we then take up the cross, and allow God to fill it with His compassion, His love, His grace so that we may truly be servants of our Lord Jesus Christ who loved us and gave His life as a ransom for us.

Over to You

As you observe Good Friday today, reflect on Jesus' sacrifice on the cross for you and give thanks for it. Ask the Lord to show you what there is in your life that hinders you from being free to be a servant. Pray for grace to surrender these things to God.

Prayer

Father, thank You for Jesus' sacrifice on the cross for me. Please teach me to serve in ways that are sacrificial and to help my community to be one that serves sacrificially. In Jesus' Name. Amen.



Discipline in the Church

Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you yourself may also be tempted.

(Galatians 6:1)

If we could practice personal discipline perfectly and be accountable to God and to His church, there may not be a need for church discipline. Unfortunately, this is unlikely due to our inherent human weaknesses on this side of heaven. Thus, we need to consider how we may gently restore our fallen brethren.

It is often such a painful process that in many occasions, leadership would rather opt to give the fallen brethren “the benefit of the doubt” or “hate the sin but love the sinner” stance. Thus, sin is often tolerated. John MacArthur warns that the results of ignoring church discipline are catastrophic: “Gross public sin is overlooked, ignored and tolerated. The fellowship of believers deteriorates to the point where it is indistinguishable from the unbelieving world. And self-deceived sinners happily remain in the local church, unaware of their need for true repentance and faith.”

Restoration is delicate work and people involved in the process need to have the right spirit of love and humility. The godly restorer understands that he is not stooping down to raise another up to his level. Rather he is coming alongside as a friend to help a brother back to his feet. Keith Drury wrote, “Restorers are meek people - a blend of strength and tenderness - strong enough to set the broken bone, yet gentle enough to avoid hurting the patient more than necessary as they do it.”

Over to You

Do you have a brother or sister who needs to be corrected in love? To love genuinely love is not to be nice, but to seek the best for the beloved. Do so, but with love and gentleness.

Prayer

Lord, help us to love as You loved and where restoration is necessary, grant us wisdom. Amen.

CONTRIBUTORS

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After working in the Methodist Church in Malaysia for 33 years as Director of Christian Education, Aileen is now retired from active service. She continues to spend her time leading Bible studies, and training Bible study leaders (especially experimenting in participatory Bible study methods) besides doing what she always enjoys, teaching music and playing in ensemble.

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Daniel, a corporate lawyer, worships at Christ Methodist Church, Ampang, and oversees the worship and music ministry. He enjoys reading and plays the guitar. His music taste ranges from J.S. Bach to James Taylor. He is an enthusiastic supporter of Manchester United and the All Blacks.

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Ai Leng teaches English in a secondary school. She loves to read, reflect and share her thoughts in order to encourage and be encouraged. She believes that honesty is always the best way even though it is not the easiest. She appreciates authenticity and humility in her friends. For the days to come, she hopes to laugh more and to take life and herself less seriously.

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Wai Yin serves as Pastor at Kampar Wesley Church. She also chairs the Board of Worship and Music in TRAC Malaysia. She believes deeply that it is God's love alone that holds His children secure in all of life's ups and downs. She seeks to draw others into that precious love, demonstrated so X-tremely at the Cross.