

January—April 2018

Quiet Spaces

A creative response to God's love

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Using nature in prayer • Praying with objects • Imagining prayer

Quiet Spaces

Edited by Sally Smith

January–April 2018

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Sally Smith writes...

Welcome to this issue of *Quiet Spaces*!

This issue will take you through Lent and Easter and into celebrating the resurrection of Christ. Lent is often taken as a time for learning and for exercising discipline, so we are offering a focus on different ways of praying and inviting you to spend time trying them and learning more about praying in these ways. You will find that some come more readily to you than others – that's because we are all different and have different preferences and strengths. It does not mean that any one way is superior to any other way.

Similarly, how we approach these sections will vary. Some of you may want to keep with one section and follow it through, learning through the repeated practice and experience. Others of you may prefer to mix and match as you travel through Lent, taking forms of prayer that may challenge alongside those you know will feed and encourage. Again, either is fine, as long as you use *Quiet Spaces* to help you spend time with God and hear his voice. Some may be tempted to skip sections they anticipate as hard or 'not for me'. I would encourage you to try to avoid this. Growth often comes when there is challenge and it can be refreshing, though hard work, to explore new ways of praying.

Do enjoy lingering over those prayer forms that bring you to God, and refresh your skills in those you may have neglected and where you have become rusty. And remember, the ultimate aim is to encounter God and spend time in his presence, not to get to the end of the book!

So, prepare to be challenged, to experience the new and be comforted by the familiar. God knows you and will honour your commitment and openness, and he remains always the God of surprises.

Writers in this issue

Claire Musters is a freelance writer and editor, mother of two, pastor's wife and school governor. Claire's desire is to help others draw closer to God through her writing, which focuses on marriage, parenting, worship and issues facing women today. To find out more, visit www.clairemusters.com and @CMusters on Twitter.

Sue McCoulough worked for a number of years at the BBC. She was then Prayer Coordinator at the aid agency Tearfund, writing prayer materials and liaising with supporters. A reader at her church since 2000, she enjoys creative writing as well as organising and leading occasional retreats and Quiet Days.

Joy MacCormick, poet and New Zealand Anglican priest, has special concern for those who struggle to reconcile their experience of Holy Mystery with traditional church doctrine and teaching. Now retired from parish ministry, she continues to offer spiritual direction and supervision and to write. She is author of *Moments of Grace* (BRF, 2013).

Jean Sims offers spiritual accompaniment and enjoys leading Quiet Days, providing prayer spaces and guiding retreats. She belongs to the prayer and spirituality group in her diocese and helps to lead courses on prayer and in the training of spiritual directors for the Diocese of Southwell and Nottingham.

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Lisa Cherrett is Production Editor at Bible Society, having worked as an editor at BRF for 19 years. She sings in a choir, writes haiku poetry when the inspiration strikes and enjoys making her own perfume. She blogs at lisannie44.wordpress.com.

Sally Smith enjoys creating spaces that enable encounters with God through leading Quiet Days and creating prayer corners and stations. She has led prayer groups in her local church, works as a spiritual director and writes and produces educational materials.

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Sally Welch is Vicar of Charlbury with Shorthampton and Area Dean of Chipping Norton in the Diocese of Oxford. She is a writer and lecturer on spirituality, and is particularly interested in pilgrimage and labyrinth. She has made many pilgrimages both in England and Europe.

Using nature in prayer

Liz Hoare

The world of nature

Introduction

The Bible is full of nature imagery that describes God and our experience of him. God is like a mother hen gathering her chicks, for example, and his voice is like the sound of many waters. We thirst for God like a deer longing for running streams, and following Jesus requires us to be like a seed planted in the ground, dying in order to live fruitfully.

The world of nature has been seen as second only to the Bible for revealing to us what God is like. Indeed the Bible itself declares that ‘The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork’ (Psalm 19:1). Using nature in prayer means, at one level, simply joining in with the natural world and glorifying God with our hearts and lives as well as our voices. At another level, using nature can also be a springboard for spiritual growth and change. For example, when the letter of James described the doubter as being like a wave of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind, he wanted his readers to learn to pray their requests to God in faith. Or think of the image of the burning bush that caught the attention of Moses and led to a life-changing encounter with God. Rather than thinking that such things only happen to spiritual giants, ponder the words of Elizabeth Barrett Browning (in *Aurora Leigh*, 1856) that ‘Earth’s crammed with heaven, And every common bush afire with God; But only he who sees, takes off his shoes.’

It is not surprising that spiritual writers have frequently turned to nature to help them write about spiritual things. Today many of us who live in cities have to work a bit harder to relate to the natural world, but most of us still feel a kinship with plants, a starry sky, birds and animals. They remind us of our place in the universe and they continue to speak of things that transcend our vision and experience.

Don't worry if you do not live in the countryside surrounded by evidence of creation. Many of the most creative ways of using nature to help us to pray stem from noticing the details. A bird on the window ledge, moss on the roof tiles or a weed pushing its way up through the concrete pavement can all speak to us of the grace of God and what it means to follow him today.

Observation and patience

Creative

Read Matthew 6:25–33.

Jesus was a close observer of nature. He had many years of preparation for his ministry when he must have learned to watch the birds of the air and the flowers of the field. This practice gave him a fund of metaphors and illustrations for speaking about his heavenly Father and his coming kingdom. It also taught him to notice people around him and to pause to meet the needs of individuals that others failed to notice were even there. This included a woman bleeding in the crowd as it pressed on him, children being shooed away by irritated disciples and a tax collector sitting at his booth. Others saw a sinner; Jesus saw a potential disciple. When blind Bartimaeus called to him, he stopped and stood still, awaiting him. Observation and patience go together and both are needed if we are to notice signs of the kingdom in our midst today.

Find a single flower and see if you can draw it, noticing the details. Concentrate on what you see rather than on producing a perfect likeness. Or you could take a camera outside and photograph some flowers, again focusing on the details of what you see. Using a camera in this way, like drawing, slows us down and helps us to notice the details. Jesus related the lilies of the field to God's loving care and provision, urging us to trust our heavenly Father and not to worry about material things so much. It's not that he does not care about our basic needs, but that when we become obsessed with them, we have no room left to see God's overarching care of us. Observing close up helps us re-order our world view and turn towards our heavenly Father who delights to give us good things.

Soil

Going out

First read Mark 4:1–9.

This parable came alive for me in a new way when I was staying in the Holy Land for a period of study and our teacher took us outside one morning. As he walked around the grounds of the study centre with us he pointed out the different soils one by one: the path where it was hard and dry and the birds were there looking for food; the rocky ground where slim, weedy seedlings had begun to grow, only to be shrivelled in the hot sun; the thorns with their prickles and nothing else; and finally some good fertile soil where plants were thriving.

In Mark's Gospel, this was the first of the parables that Jesus told. Jesus frequently drew on the natural world for his parables: fishing, grain, fields and seeds. These images would have been familiar to everyone since most people worked the land and all depended on the annual harvest to eat. The familiarity with the basic ingredients

of the parables made the twist in the tale all the more startling when it came and that was the point. Jesus taught in parables so that people would wake up and see spiritual truths about God in a new way. It was a way of teaching people that involved them because it demanded a personal response.

If you can, go for a walk where there are fields and see if you can find the different types of soil mentioned in the parable. If you can put your hand in the earth and let it run through your fingers, imagine the fertile soil that enables a rich crop yield to reach harvest. Talk to the Lord about your heart as if it is the soil. Invite him into the hard places, bring to him the temptations that quickly stifle new growth and the obstacles that prevent seeds taking root at depth and offer him your heart as a fertile field for new seeds of faith.

Joining with creation

Creative/going out

Many of the psalms praise God in unison with creation, for example Psalm 104. To use an aspect of nature as a springboard for praise and thanksgiving, walk outside, look at nature pictures (perhaps on a calendar or illustrated book), or look out of your window at the clouds. Then slowly, simply, read the psalm and take time to look at and praise God for all the wonder of the natural world. You might like to write your own psalm using the images that have inspired your praise and thanks and offer this to God.

Season of the soul

Reflective

If someone asked you what season it is in your spirit, what would you reply? 'Seasons of the spirit' is one way of reflecting on how it is with your relationship with God. Some people are able to proclaim boldly, 'It is well with my soul.' In this season, it is high summer when the garden (that is, our spiritual life) is lush and colourful with everything growing abundantly and looking its best. All we want to do is praise God and rejoice.

But it is not always like this. There are times of watching once precious things die and learning to let go. It may be that a way of praying that served us well for a season no longer draws us to God. Perhaps a task that brought great joy and a sense of service to the kingdom is no longer available. This is autumn and it can feel dark and joyless, but in the natural world, unless the leaves fall and the flowers fade, there will not be spring and new growth next year. A fallow time is needed for new life to come forth.

If you are feeling that everything is dormant and bleak, with nothing happening at all, think of a winter scene in a forest. Everything is still, snow may cover all signs of life and it is cold. Winter is a time of resting and waiting, learning to trust and hope. Unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, said Jesus, it remains just a single grain, 'but if it dies, it bears much fruit' (John 12:24). Psalm 30:5 says: 'Weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes with the morning.'

'Morning' is like the springtime of the year when things wake up and fresh beginnings emerge. Perhaps you have been spiritually in a barren place but there are new signs of life at work in you, new possibilities for service, a new liveliness in prayer and worship. The springtime of the soul when the joy promised in Psalm 30

comes to us is possible at any age. The ebb and flow of life are sometimes, but not always, linked to age and each brings with it new opportunities as well as new challenges to test us. Both will help us to know God more fully if we reach out in trust.

You may like to ponder which season you are in at present and reflect on the characteristics that stand out for you in your relationship with God. Is there anything that you want to thank God for in this season? Anything you need help with to navigate? Any qualities of the season you have not noticed before that yield new insight into God's work in your life?

Trees

Bible reading/creative

Read Psalm 1. This psalm has two striking images taken from nature. The first is that of a tree planted by streams of water and yielding fruit in season. The second is of chaff that the wind blows away. The contrast visually is vivid: picture a sturdy tree beside a handful of chaff blown in the wind. Those delighting in God's word develop the qualities of a healthy tree: deep roots, a strong, straight trunk, with branches growing at intervals and sap flowing through them to nourish the leaves. Then comes fruit in due season. How helpful is this image of spiritual growth to you? What nourishes your faith and helps it to keep growing and be fruitful? The idea of meditating on the word of God day and night (v. 2) implies that what shapes our thinking will also shape our life. What kind of roots have you put down as the foundation of your faith? How do you care for your roots?

If you can observe a mature tree, take some time to do so, noting its features, whatever the season. You might like to take a piece of paper and draw a tree. The artwork doesn't matter; what you

need is a tree that represents your own life. What would it look like? Roots – how deep are they? Trunk – is it straight and firm or bent over? Branches – are there lots reaching out to embrace the world? Fruit and leaves – what are the signs of fruitfulness in your life at present? Label your tree and spend some time considering its strengths and weaknesses. Give thanks for where growth is present and ask God to show you how you could enable growth where there are weak spots. Speak to God about the fruit you desire to bear and imagine such fruit growing in abundance as you draw up strength through your roots. The image of a tree suggests that growth takes time. There is a need for patience, attentiveness, the expectation of fruit and a discipline of regular watering and pruning. Is there one practical step you could take to move your desire for fruitfulness towards reality? Tell someone what you have decided to do.

Watering the garden

Prayer

St Teresa of Avila (1515–82) had many struggles in prayer and described it as being like watering a garden. She wrote that all prayer is prompted by the Holy Spirit, but it sometimes seems akin to drawing water from a well and involves considerable effort. At other times, prayer is like watering the garden with a ‘windlass’, a kind of pulley. Effort is involved, but we experience a surge of fresh water into our lives, bringing the joyful presence of Christ. Then there are times when the ‘garden’ of our soul seems to have a stream flowing through it and we rest in its life-giving waters. The best time is when gentle rain falls on the fertile soil. Teresa describes these different ways of watering a garden as stages but most of us find ourselves having a wonderful prayer time one day only to struggle and be distracted the next.

As water is to life, so prayer is to the Christian. Teresa is not setting us up to fail with her picture of prayer. Indeed, she said she often returned to the first stage and, as with any well, it occasionally runs dry and all we can do is wait until God fills it up again. All prayer needs to be centred on Christ, so that, like thirsty ground, our souls may soak up his grace.

Ponder the image of the water and how you experience this when you pray. When have you experienced it as flowing freely, refreshing your soul? Talk to God about your desires concerning prayer and picture clear water flowing freely.

A hazelnut

Imaginative

Julian of Norwich was a remarkable woman who lived as an anchoress in the 14th century. This meant a life of solitude and prayer and the giving of spiritual guidance to those who came seeking. In 1373 Julian had a series of visions during a severe illness, from which she almost died, and she spent the rest of her life reflecting on her 'shewings', as she called them. One of the most famous reflections focused on a hazelnut.

It was at this time that our Lord showed me spiritually how intimately he loves us... And he showed me more, a little thing, the size of a hazel-nut, on the palm of my hand, round like a ball. I looked at it thoughtfully and wondered, 'What is this?' And the answer came, 'It is all that is made.' I marvelled that it continued to exist and did not suddenly disintegrate; it was so small. And again my mind supplied the answer, 'It exists both now and forever, because God loves it.' In short, everything owes its existence to the love of God.

Revelations of Divine Love, 5 (Penguin, 1966), p. 68

Julian looked carefully at a tiny part of creation and pondered its meaning. She went on to explain her findings: ‘In this “little thing” I saw three truths. The first is that God made it; the second is that God loves it; and the third is that God sustains it.’ We don’t have to scale huge mountains or go on a lengthy pilgrimage to meet God in creation. We need only look at the intricacy of frost on a window pane, or hold a piece of fruit in our hand. In your time with God today take something small in your hand like a hazelnut and examine it closely: its texture, shape and colour. What do you notice about it? Does it remind you of anything in the character of God or in your experience of him? Perhaps it brings to mind a verse or passage of scripture. Perhaps its very smallness leads you to reach out in trust to your heavenly Father, conscious of the fragility of creation as well as its strength. Try drawing what you see and in so doing, pay attention to the detail and talk to God about the details in your own life that concern you just now. Remember that we exist because God made us, he loves us and he sustains our being day by day.

The character of God

Spotlight

We rightly think of God as utterly different from ourselves, wholly other and therefore beyond all our attempts to pin him down in words. But God is relational and wants us to know him. He has made himself known in different ways: through nature, through the words of scripture and ultimately through Jesus Christ. Scripture itself sometimes struggles to find words to describe what God is like and frequently draws on the natural world for help. Some of these metaphors are familiar ones that we turn to often. God is our rock (Psalm 18:2), solid and dependable. He is closely associated with clouds, for example when he guided the Israelites through

the wilderness (Exodus 14:19) or met with Moses on the mountain (Exodus 19:9) and we are reminded of the awe and mystery that surrounds him. In the New Testament, his Spirit is like a mighty wind (Acts 2:2), reminding us that we cannot control him. One of the most well-known metaphors which shows how closely we are connected to God in Christ is the vine. Jesus said 'I am the vine, you are the branches' (John 15:5).

There are other metaphors, however, that may be less familiar, but they are equally relevant for our understanding of God's nature and his relationship to us. In Deuteronomy 32:11–12, God is likened to a mother eagle: 'As an eagle stirs up its nest, and hovers over its young; as it spreads its wings, takes them up, and bears them aloft on its pinions, the Lord alone guided [Israel].' Some images have a multiplicity of meanings. Hosea 14:5 tells us that God is 'like the dew to Israel'. In a country that does not have rain from April to October, the dew is vital for vegetation to flourish. But dew symbolises refreshing too.

Sometimes one image follows another in rapid succession. Deuteronomy 32 says God is Israel's father who created them (v. 6), but also that he is the 'Rock that bore [them]' (v. 18). These images and many more enrich our understanding of the character of God, and their variety and close proximity defy our attempts to pin God down. In the same way, as we ponder some of the metaphors used in the Bible that focus on our relationship with God, we learn what that relationship means in our daily lives. To take just one example, we are the sheep and he is the shepherd (Psalm 23). You may like to take a favourite metaphor from nature that describes God and do a search on it using a Bible dictionary or concordance. You may also think of other images that you have observed in nature that remind you of an aspect of God's character. Add to your list when you go out walking, watch a nature programme or read an illustrated book or magazine and allow each one to speak to you of God.

Experience a deeper relationship with God by praying the *Quiet Spaces* way

Quiet Spaces is BRF's prayer and spirituality journal. Published three times a year, each edition journeys through up to nine themes drawn from the Bible, spiritual writers, the natural world, the lives of Christians from across the centuries or from Christian spiritual traditions.

Each theme is explored in twelve prayerful ways using creative activities, your personal faith experience, poetry, liturgy, reflection, imagining and meditation, helping you into a heart encounter with God.

Ideal both for those who have discovered the benefits of reflection, meditation and contemplation and are looking for a resource to guide their periods of quiet, and for people coming to reflection and meditation for the first time.

Contributors in this issue: Lisa Cherrett, Liz Hoare, Janet Lunt, Joy MacCormick, Sue McCoulough, Claire Musters, Jean Sims, Sally Smith, Sally Welch

'There seems to be something for everyone and I look forward to what each section has to offer.'

Mary Taylor, subscriber

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Sally Smith



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