

THEOLOGICAL HORIZONS

JESUS ENCOUNTER

Experiencing the Gospel Story for Myself

Contemplation = 'a long, loving look at the real.'

What is imaginative contemplation?

Imaginative contemplation is all about getting to know Jesus. **It is a method of prayer in which you imagine yourself as present in a Gospel scene, stepping into the story and encountering Jesus there.** St Ignatius, who taught this way of praying, firmly believed that God can speak to you just as clearly in your imagination as through your thoughts.

The idea that God can speak to people through their imagination can seem a bit strange. Isn't this just making things up in your head? On the contrary, the imagination is foremost a gift from God in the same way that a person's intellect or memory is a gift from God. Christianity is clear that **God speaks to people through the scriptures and the sacraments, through daily experiences and their emotions.** If God can do all of these things, **God can speak through the imagination too.**

How does it work?

Imaginative contemplation is **a way of praying that engages your full person: your imagination, your senses, and your heart.** This is intended to bring about interior transformation, by going beyond the intellect, moving from the head to the heart, and meeting Jesus there. In imagining Jesus and contemplating how He acts in the Gospels, you will also be challenged. The first step is to come to **know Jesus Christ**, the second is to **love Him** more, the third is to **follow Him** and imitate His example of radical love, living it out in your own life.

'Imagining Christ Our Lord before me on the cross... asking how it came about that the Creator made Himself man, and from eternal life came to temporal death, and thus to die for my sins. Then, turning to myself I shall ask, what have I done for Christ? What am I doing for Christ? What ought I do for Christ?' --St Ignatius of Loyola, Spiritual Exercises

Why the Gospels?

Imaginative contemplation is best suited to what we read in the biblical books of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. These reflections are all accounts of Jesus ministering to people. Let the events of Jesus' life described in these reflections be present to you right now. At some point, place yourself in the scene and meet Jesus there.

A note about the experience

Throughout the time of prayer, take whatever you need. You might close or open your eyes, draw on paper or take notes; you might wish to get up and move around. Your mind may wander. Your experience is uniquely your. You are free to leave at any point. At the end, sharing is completely optional.

How do I experience imaginative contemplation?

1 Imagine the place

The first step in an Imaginative Contemplation exercise is 'composing the place': **setting the scene**. So, what is the location? What does it look like? What details do you see? Get into the details here.

'Composition, seeing the place. Here it will be to see with the eyes of the imagination the road from Nazareth to Bethlehem, considering the length and breadth of it, whether it is a flat road or goes through valleys or over hills; and similarly to look at the place or grotto of the Nativity, to see how big or small it was, how low or high, and what was in it.' -- St Ignatius, Spiritual Exercises, writing about his contemplation on the Nativity

2 Engage all your senses

Imaginative contemplation goes beyond just what you can see, it requires you to engage all of your senses. **Fully immerse yourself into the story; What do you smell, hear, taste and touch?** Follow whatever thoughts help you fill out an imagined sensory experience of the place.

3 Let the scene play out

Now move into the 'action' of the scene. Let the story unfold in your mind. You are not just watching the scene from the outside, as a viewer of a scene from a movie. Instead, **see yourself as a character inside the story. Allow yourself to be drawn into whatever captures your imagination**. It may be that you are drawn not to the main action of the story but towards unexpected details on the periphery

'This is to see the people, i.e. Our Lady, and Joseph, and the servant girl, and the child Jesus after his birth. Making myself into a poor and unworthy little servant, I watch them, and contemplate them, and serve them in their needs as if I were present, with all possible submission and reverence'. -- St Ignatius, Spiritual Exercises

4 Open your heart to Jesus

Conclude with **a conversation in your imagination between Jesus and yourself**, as one friend speaks with another. Express what is in your mind and heart. Let Jesus express His responses too.

5 Reflect

As the contemplation concludes, **take some time to reflect** on your experience. Ask yourself:

- What did I find myself thinking and feeling? What moved me?
- Did Jesus' words or actions in the contemplation bring up any emotions or thoughts?
- What struck me? anything unusual, unexpected? Why did I react the way I did, I wonder?
- Did anything in the contemplation shift the way I see God, myself, or others.

If you are in a group, is there anything, however large or small, that you would like to share, ask or discuss? You have freedom to either speak or remain silent.

Adapted from: <https://www.jesuit.org.uk/spirituality/imaginative-contemplation>

