



THE WISDOM OF IMAGINATION WITH IGNATIUS OF LOYOLA (1491-1556)

Imagination has increasingly been acknowledged by scientists in cognitive therapy and neuroscience as foundational for thinking and emotions. There's a long Christian tradition (that understands imagination's importance in the devotional life of believers. Saint Ignatius believed that God could speak to us just as clearly in our imagination as through our thoughts and our memories -- and he makes liberal use of the imagination and integrated imaginative prayer into the approach to the spiritual life that he outlined in the *Spiritual Exercises*. In his hands, the imagination becomes a tool to help us know and love God.

PRAYING WITH SCRIPTURE

In his *Spiritual Exercises*, Ignatius gives us method of placing ourselves fully within a story from the Gospels. We become onlooker-participants and give full rein to our imagination. Jesus is speaking to a blind man at the side of the road. We feel the hot Mediterranean sun beating down. We smell the dust kicked up by the passersby. We feel the itchy clothing we're wearing, the sweat rolling down our brow, a rumble of hunger. We see the desperation in the blind man's face and hear the wail of hope in his words. We note the irritation of the disciples. Above all we watch Jesus—the way he walks, his gestures, the look in his eyes, the expression on his face. We hear him speak the words that are recorded in the Gospel. We go on to imagine other words he might have spoken and other deeds he might have done.

The best-known example of this use of the imagination in the *Spiritual Exercises* is the contemplation on Jesus' birth in the second week. Ignatius suggests that we imagine "the labors of the journey to Bethlehem, the struggles of finding a shelter, the poverty, the thirst, the hunger, the cold, the insults that meet the arrival of God-with-us." In the course of the *Exercises*, Ignatius proposes many such scenes from the Gospels for imaginative contemplation. He chooses scenes of Jesus acting rather than Jesus teaching or telling parables. He wants us to see Jesus interacting with others, Jesus making decisions, Jesus moving about, Jesus ministering. He doesn't want us to think about Jesus. He wants us to experience him. He wants Jesus to fill our senses. He wants us to meet him.

Following Jesus is the business of our lives. To follow him we must know him, and we get to know him through our imagination. Imaginative Ignatian prayer teaches us things about Jesus that we would not learn through scripture study or theological reflection. It allows the person of Christ to penetrate into places that the intellect does not touch. It brings Jesus into our hearts. It engages our feelings. It enflames us with ideals of generous service.

Imaginative prayer makes the Jesus of the Gospels our Jesus. It helps us develop a unique and personal relationship with him. We watch Jesus' face. We listen to the way he speaks. We notice how people respond to him. These imaginative details bring us to know Jesus as more than a name or a historical figure in a book. He is a living person. We say what

the villagers in John's Gospel told the Samaritan woman: "We have come to know him ourselves, and not just from your report."

WHAT DO YOU WANT FROM JESUS? Imagine Scripture: Mark 10:46-52

Jesus and the disciples spent some time in Jericho. As Jesus was leaving town, trailed by his disciples and a parade of people, a blind beggar by the name of Bartimaeus, son of Timaeus, was sitting alongside the road. When he heard that Jesus the Nazarene was passing by, he began to cry out, "Son of David, Jesus! Mercy, have mercy on me!"

Many tried to hush him up, but he yelled all the louder, "Son of David! Mercy, have mercy on me!"

Jesus stopped in his tracks. "Call him over."

They called him. "It's your lucky day! Get up! He's calling you to come!" Throwing off his coat, he was on his feet at once and came to Jesus.

Jesus said, "What can I do for you?" The blind man said, "Rabbi, I want to see."

"On your way," said Jesus. "Your faith has saved and healed you."

In that very instant he recovered his sight and followed Jesus down the road (MSG).

FIRST READING

Where and when does the story take place? Who is there? What happens?

SECOND READING

What part of the story are you drawn to? Which character do you identify with or are you a bystander?

Now listen for more details. What is the setting like? What time of day is it? Who are the major players? Who else is there? What are they doing? How do they interact? What is the mood, the atmosphere?

THIRD READING

Now visualize yourself in the Gospel and feel yourself in that place. Who are you or what are you? (you may even be an inanimate object, an animal, part of the scenery, a person not mentioned). Don't seek intellectual insights—stay with the imagery.

Experience the story in the role of the character God led you to.

Use your senses. What do you see? What do you hear? What do you smell? What can you taste? What can you feel—the temperature, your clothes, other people?

What are the emotions that you experience?

Let the story continue to unfold within you, in your imagination, mind and heart, as the person/object you are.

Now talk with God. What do you feel? How does this relate to something in your life today?

What is God saying to you?

SOURCES FOR IMAGINATIVE CONTEMPLATION OF SCRIPTURE

<https://www.soulshpherd.org/ignatian-meditation-guides/>

<https://pray-as-you-go.org/retreat/imaginative-contemplation>

<http://www.ignatianspirituality.com/ignatian-prayer/the-spiritual-exercises/pray-with-your-imagination/>