MEDITATION AND CONTEMPLATION: TEXTS FOR CONFERENCES

Thomas Green, S.J. Opening to God: “This is an important insight for beginners in prayer. We can come to know the Lord via our reasoning or via our imagination, or, more likely, via a very personal blend of the two. This is the basis of the distinction I have suggested between meditation and contemplation. Meditation is the use of the understanding, the reasoning faculty, to come to know God's revelation better, whereas contemplation is the use of the imagination to achieve the same end. Since both are good techniques for coming to know the Lord, and since some people will find one more helpful and some the other, let us discuss each more fully…. Meditation means using our reasoning to come to know God better. Here [the passage of the Samaritan women] it would mean reflecting on the behaviour of Jesus in this very concrete situation, and on the words he speaks to the woman, to discover more of God’s ways with men…. As we have described it, meditation is the use of our reasoning powers. We said earlier that there is another, equally valid, way to come to know the Lord: contemplation. Contemplation is more imaginative, and is often helpful for those who find difficult the type of…reasoning we have described as meditation. The story of the Samaritan woman can be useful here, since it lends itself as easily to contemplation as to meditation. Let us contrast the two approaches by seeing what it would mean to contemplate the incident at the well. Contemplation involves imaginatively entering into the incident we are considering-being present at the event, seeing it happen as if we were actually participants ourselves…” (emphasis added)

St. John Chrysostom, Homilies on the Gospel of Matthew: “But he was asleep” (Mt 8:23): “Therefore also he sleeps; for had he been awake when it happened, either they would not have feared, or they would not have besought him, or they would not so much as have thought of his being able to do any such thing. Therefore he sleeps, to give occasion for their timidity, and to make their perception of what was happening more distinct.”

Alban Goodier, S.J., The Public Life of Jesus, on the Storm at Sea, Mt 8: “He was with his Twelve, in the cottage by the shore. In the streets outside, and along the water’s edge, many of the people still hung about, squatting in their little groups and discussing far into the night the events of that day; others had settled down to rest here and there, wrapped from head to foot in their blanket. He must get away, if only for a night and a morning. The old desire to be alone at times was never long absent from him; he must get away, and give himself a few hours of peace. He turned to the fishermen; he looked toward the lake. The moon was up; there was a gentle ripple on the water. ‘Let us go over the water,’ he said, ‘to the other side of the lake….’

It was evidently a quiet hour when the little boat put out. As it left the shore the lamp swung at the prow, its light reflected on the water. From behind them as they rowed a few lights glimmered, marking the long line of habitations from Bethsaida to Capharneum and beyond. Here and there a…dog barked, one answering another…. Once in a way a cock crowed, and another replied, a striking feature of an Eastern night. For the rest all was silence, a silence only the more emphasized by these cries. The boatmen submitted to the spell. They went about their work saying nothing; if they had to speak they spoke in low whispers. As soon as they had got away they put up their little sail, and nothing now was heard but the swish of the water around
the vessel, and the creak of a mast as the sail yielded to the wind or the guiding rope. In the stern, on the boards between the sides of the ship, Jesus lay down. A rough cushion had been found for his head, and almost immediately he was fast asleep.”

**Mark** *(praying with John 10, the Good Shepherd):* “It was a beautiful time of prayer, an intimate time. There was so much in the words; it’s so beautifully written. I wasn’t reading words; it was alive, almost directly touching my heart. I had read this text many times, and it hadn’t really spoken to me. The words had just lain there on the page. For some reason, this time I had a deep sense of Christ, of awe, of the Good Shepherd easing my fears, and leading me.

This time of prayer was more meditative and not so much in the imagination. I let those beautiful words sort of swim in my heart, back and forth. That prayer left me spiritually happy, kind of on a high for a day and a half. I couldn’t stop thinking about those words. I used them in some teaching I was doing, and I knew that it wasn’t just teaching; I was teaching from the heart, from experience.

**Kathryn:** “Immediately upon beginning the retreat, I found myself desiring to pray with the passion, death, and resurrection of Jesus in the Gospel of John…. I saw Jesus standing before Pontius Pilate and his accusers. *How could Jesus stand there while everyone called for his death,* I wondered. *How could he be so calm?* As I placed myself completely into that scene, feeling Jesus’ calmness, I began to hear Jesus saying quietly to the crowd, ‘Yes. Take me. Do what you want with me, for my death will be your salvation.’ I could see the Father hugging him tightly. ‘Give yourself over to them,’ God told his Son. ‘I can never let you go, no matter what happens. I am with you. You are safe in my arms.’ After a long period of prayer, I realized that the Father was within me as he was within Jesus. He was also holding me: ‘Do not be afraid. You are safe in my arms.’

On another day, I contemplated Jesus right after Pilate had condemned him to death and washed his hands of the whole affair. I saw Jesus dragged off by those who had wanted him dead. The moment of terror I felt, as his final walk through Jerusalem began, was excruciating. I prayed many hours, holding that terror in my heart, desiring to comfort Jesus, to tell him that I was there for him and that I would not leave him alone.

One day in prayer, I stood beneath the cross and sank to the ground at its foot after he had died. I had told Jesus I would not leave him alone, and so I stayed there keeping watch. I kept the cross before my eyes for hours, feeling the sorrow Mary must have felt, as I asked for the courage to stay near the cross. It was at this point my retreat director pointed out to me that perhaps God was bringing together Jesus’ experience and my own. I began to cry when I returned to prayer. For several hours, in prayer...scenes of my hospital stay after my stroke so many years before alternated with scenes of Jesus’ passion and death. It was like watching a movie. My moments of loneliness and fear alternated with Jesus’ loneliness and fear. I cried inconsolably for hours – seventeen years’ worth of tears. God truly was embracing me tightly and saying, ‘Do not be afraid even of this. I am holding you tightly and nothing can hurt you.’

These cleansing tears began a process of healing, a miracle of God’s love for me as I began to pray over my ‘passion.’ Just as I, in that prayer, had remained beneath the cross after Jesus had
died, I now saw Jesus sitting on the floor at the foot of my hospital bed keeping me company. As I had stayed with Jesus, he now kept watch with me. The many lonely years of struggling with the consequences of my stroke...were ‘healed’ in this prayer…. I began to see that though I had kept myself at a sufficient distance from God to protect myself from anything else God could ‘do’ to me, God nevertheless had waited until the right moment to ‘seize me by the arms’ and turn me toward him.

**St. Ignatius of Loyola,** eyewitness: “He would stand there and take off his hat; without stirring he would fix his eyes on the heavens for a short while. Then, sinking to his knees, he would make a lowly gesture of reverence to God. After that he would sit on a bench, for his body’s weakness did not permit him to do otherwise. There he was, head uncovered, tears trickling drop by drop, in such sweetness and silence, that no sob, no sigh, no noise, no movement of the body was noticed.”

*Spiritual Exercises,* no. 75: A step or two before the place where I am to contemplate or meditate, I will stand for the space of an Our Father, with my understanding raised on high, considering how God our Lord looks upon me, etc.

**Timothy Gallagher,** *The Examen Prayer:* How does “God our Lord look upon me” as I begin to pray…? If the unseen God is revealed to us in Jesus (Jn 1:18), then we may rephrase this question as follows: how does **Jesus** look upon those who approach him with humble and sincere hearts? Jesus looks upon Nathaniel and that look tells Nathaniel that he is deeply known and loved; it is a look that changes his life (Jn 1:48). Jesus sees Levi and his look gives fresh meaning to Levi’s existence (Mk 2:14). Jesus sees a woman in tears and her tears are transformed into the joy of life restored (Lk 7:13). A man approaches Jesus and the Gospel tells us that “Jesus, looking at him, loved him” (Mk 10:21). Jesus sees a woman burdened for eighteen years with an illness; she is set free and sings God’s praises (Lk 13:12-13). Jesus looks upon Peter in his time of utter failure, a look that leads to tears and to renewal in a love that will never again be shaken (Lk 22:61).”

**St. John of the Cross,** *Spiritual Canticle:* “The look of God is love and the pouring out of gifts.”

**Bernard Bassett,** *Let’s Start Praying Again:* “Once, some years ago, I read…a description of the prayer of St. Jane Frances de Chantal…. Jane Frances, when she was a widow caring for her little children, would read a gospel passage carefully. Next, she would picture the scene [Mt 8:5-13] with elaborate care, noting Christ, the disciples, the crowd, the centurion in the foreground, and would then listen to his act of faith…. Here was her backdrop. Weeks later, she had only to recall the scene and say, ‘Lord, I am not worthy,’ and the content of the centurion’s prayer flooded back. Later she found that she had only to say the one word, ‘Lord,’ and she could pray as he had; finally, she said no words but allowed the scene to calm her until she became the Centurion.”

**Brian:** When I pray with a Gospel event, I enter the scene by trying to look at the surroundings. I ask myself: What does this place look like? Where am I in that setting? Am I sitting? Standing? I focus on Jesus. What is he like? Is there tension in the air? Peace? What kind of
day is it? Are there people around? Are we in a desert place? In a town? What is life like in this place? Are there conversations going on? And where am I in relationship to Jesus?

St. Ignatius of Loyola, *Spiritual Exercises*:

“The person, kneeling or seated, according to the greater disposition in which he finds himself and as more devotion accompanies him, keeping the eyes closed or fixed on one place, without going wandering with them.” (252)

St. Catherine of Siena, *a witness*: “She was not concerned about reading a lot or saying many prayers. Rather she would chew on every single word, and when she found one she especially liked, she would stop for as long as her mind found pleasure grazing there.”

St. Philip Neri, *If God Be With Us*: “To get good from reading the lives of the saints and other spiritual books, we ought not to read out of curiosity, or skimmingly, but with pauses; and when we feel ourselves warmed, we ought not to pass on, but to stop and follow up the spirit which is stirring in us, and when we feel it no longer then to pursue our reading.”

St. Francis de Sales, *Introduction to the Devout Life*: “If your mind finds enough appeal, light, and fruit in any of them [the subject of the meditation or contemplation], remain with that point and do not go any further. Imitate the bees, who do not leave a flower as long as they can extract any honey out of it. But if you do not come on anything that appeals to you after you have examined and tried it out for a while, then go on to another, but proceed calmly and simply in this matter and do not rush yourself.”

Georges Vanier, in Jean Vanier, *In Weakness Strength*: “Today, as usual, I started by thanking God for allowing me to come to see Him. Then, as is my custom, I said I had come to adore Him, Creator of Heaven and Earth. After a minute or two (I think, but am not sure of the time) I said to Him that I wanted to love Him more and more, that I know He loves me, asked Him to show me how to love Him as I did not know and needed His help. I then had a surprise; I began to repeat, in a way that was both intense and spontaneous, that I loved Him, thanking Him for giving me the grace to love Him thus. For some time I could not move on to the next point, but kept repeating that I loved Him, and wanted to love Him more.

I never passed on to the next point – firstly I was held back at this moment of love and also had no desire to leave it – the next point usually was that I wished to conform my will to His. After this my custom was to ask for graces for certain persons who were suffering or who need God’s help for various reasons.”

Thomas Merton, *Journal, 12/23/1949*: “Fra Angelico’s *Annunciation* on a postcard [sent by a friend]…. (Late afternoon.) The quiet of the afternoon is filled with an altogether different tonality. The sun has moved altogether around and the room is darker. It is serious…. I take time out to pray, and I look at the Angelico picture, feeling like the end of Advent, which is
today…. For about eight minutes I stayed silent and didn’t move and listened to the watch and wondered if perhaps I might not understand something of the work Our Lady is preparing.

     It is an hour of tremendous expectation.

     I remember my weariness, my fears, my lack of understanding, my dimness, my sin of over-activity. What is she preparing?... What is coming up? She loves me…. Her love shapes worlds, shapes history…gives birth to the City of God…. I look at the serene, severe porch where Angelico’s angel speaks to her. Angelico knew how to paint her. She is thin, immeasurably noble, and she does not rise to meet the angel…. Mother, make me as sincere as the picture. All the way down into my soul, sincere, sincere. Let me have no thought that could not kneel before you in that picture. No image. No shadow. I believe you. I am silent. I will act like the picture…. It is the end of Advent and the afternoon is vivid with expectancy.

William Barry, S. J., *God and You:* “Sometimes people get concerned about deluding themselves by letting their imaginations run free with a text of Scripture. First of all, we remind ourselves that Scripture aims at engaging our imagination as much as our mind. It is imaginative literature…. Second, we pay attention to the scripture text itself and let it dictate where our imagination will go. Third, we trust the Holy Spirit who dwells in our hearts to guide our imagination, to reveal the truth of God to us.”

“How can we be sure that the whole thing is not just a fanciful daydream that we piously call prayer? My first answer is trust in tradition. God has, it seems, used the imagination of saints like Ignatius of Loyola, Francis Xavier, and Margaret Mary Alacoque to draw them into a very deep intimate friendship with him. And then I would point to a need for discernment, but a discernment that does not take as a starting point suspicion of our human nature, but trust that God has made us good…. If our use of the imagination leads to such feelings [gentleness, peacefulness, quiet confidence] as well as to an increased faith and hope and love and a desire to know God and Jesus more, then we can have confidence that the Lord is using our imagination for his purposes and our good.”

“People obviously differ in their imaginative abilities, or, perhaps better, in the kinds of imagination they have. Some people seem to be able to visualize in colorful detail the whole gospel scene, almost as though their imaginations were creating a Technicolor movie. Others have a vivid auditory imagination so that whole conversations seem to go on in their heads and hearts. Others, and here I count myself, do not seem to see or hear much at all, but to feel the story and the characters in a way that is hard to describe…. Actually, everyone has an imagination. If you wince when someone describes the impact of a hammer hitting his thumb, you have an imagination; if you can enjoy a good story, you have an imagination. Imaginations differ; we need to let God use the one we have…."

Monica: I follow the Lectionary [book with the readings for Mass] in choosing my Scripture for daily prayer. Every so often I may use a different passage if one suggests itself, but generally I use the daily readings for Mass. This helps me feel more engaged with the Church.

Robert: Over these years I’ve gone systematically through the Gospels, one by one. The evening before, I read the Gospel I’m going through until a passage strikes me. I don’t
necessarily pray with the one which follows the last one I prayed with. I pray with the next one that strikes me.

Sometimes I choose a text based on what I’m experiencing that day. Or it might be from something that strikes me in spiritual reading I’ve done that day. For example, one time I was reading about the Holy Eucharist. So I prayed with John 6 [the discourse on the bread of life] and with the Last Supper [the institution of the Eucharist]. I stay with these texts as long as I find fruit. Sometimes I repeat a passage if it speaks to me. Another time I was reading a book on union with Christ. The author mentioned John 14-16 and spoke about the Mystical Body of Christ. So I spent two weeks praying with those chapters in John’s Gospel. I went over them two or three times, and I felt them more deeply each time. When things strike me like this, I set aside the systematic prayer with the Gospels, and I pick it up again when I’ve finished.

I go through the Gospels in order: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. When I’ve finished, I start again. The first two years I jumped around quite a lot. Then I began this systematic way. Now I’ve been through the Gospels two or three times.

I prepare for the prayer the evening before. I choose the Scripture and then I read a short commentary on it, not a heavy intellectual one. I read the Gospel passage two or three times before going to bed. I do my prayer the next morning at the start of the day.

Susan – First Day: Susan began praying with Scripture one year ago. Initially she prayed for twenty minutes each morning. Now she prays for a half hour, and occasionally longer if time permits.

Susan prays with the readings from the Mass of the day. Some months ago, she saw a spiritual commentary on the Gospels in a bookstore and liked it. She acquired it and uses it to prepare her daily prayer.

Now it is Wednesday evening. Susan is in her room as the day is ending. Before retiring, she looks at the readings for the following day. The Gospel is the cleansing of the leper (Mk 1:40-45).

Susan reads this Gospel. She is especially drawn to the dialogue between the leper and Jesus: “If you wish, you can make me clean”; “I do will it. Be made clean.” She then turns to the commentary. It offers a page and a half on this Gospel. One paragraph in particular strikes her:

Mosaic law separated lepers as outcasts from the rest of the people and required them to cry out, “Unclean, unclean,” when others approached (see Leviticus 13:44-46). The leper who approached Jesus directly was breaking Mosaic law. He must have deeply believed and desperately hoped that Jesus had the ability to heal him, for he said, “If you will, you can make me clean” (Mark 1:40). Not only did the leper know his need, he also had to believe that Jesus was the answer to that need.¹

This scriptural background gives Susan new insight into the leper’s action and Jesus’ response. Something gently stirs in her heart as she reads this paragraph. Susan knows that she will return to this in prayer the next day. With this, she concludes her brief preparation and retires.

Susan rises the following morning and prepares for the day. As she does so, the passage of the leper is quietly present in her heart.

Now Susan is ready to begin her prayer. She lifts her heart to the Lord, aware of Jesus’ look of love. She asks Jesus for openness in this prayer. She takes the Scripture and attentively rereads Mark 1:40-45. She also rereads the paragraph in the commentary that spoke to her the preceding evening.

Now she sees the Gospel setting – the place where Jesus and the leper meet. As she enters this scene, she asks Jesus for his healing touch in her life, too.

Susan tries to contemplate the Gospel, but is distracted for some minutes. Then she focuses on the moment when the leper kneels before Jesus. She sees him kneel, she hears his cry for help…and something again gently stirs in her heart. She finds herself saying those same words to Jesus: “If you wish, you can make me clean.” The courage of the leper, his willingness to risk so much to approach Jesus, his desperate need, and his great hope, all speak to her heart. She asks Jesus to touch the place in her that is afraid, to strengthen her in love, to help her respond fully to him this day.

For some minutes, she is simply there with Jesus. Peace comes into her heart, and the beginning of tears. She spends the final minutes of her prayer thanking the Lord. She says an Our Father, and quietly rises from her prayer. As she prepares for the activity of the day, Susan continues to dwell on the gift of this prayer. The prayer helps her be attentive to and patient with others throughout the day.

**Second Day** – It is Thursday evening, the end of a busy day. Susan looks at the readings for the coming day. The Gospel is the healing of the paralytic lowered through the roof (Mk 2:1-12). She reads the passage and the commentary. Though this passage is rich, Susan is drawn to remain with the healing of the leper. She decides to pray again with the same Gospel.

Susan begins her prayer as usual the next morning. Again there are times of distraction, but she is able to enter the passage. The prayer is simpler than the day before. She is just there with Jesus, speaking from her heart: “If you wish, you can make me clean.” The words express her deep longing for communion with Jesus. And she hears Jesus reply: “I do will it. Be made clean.” The rest of the prayer is spent in this sharing of hearts. She rises, strengthened for the day.

**Third Day** – On Friday evening, before retiring, Susan again looks at the readings for the following day. This time she is drawn to the First Reading (Hb 4:12-16), and especially to the final verses: “We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who has similarly been tested…. So let us confidently approach the throne of grace to receive mercy.” She decides to pray with these verses, and does so the next morning.
The Following Days – At Mass on Sunday, the Gospel is the encounter of Jesus with the first disciples (Jn 1:35-42). The homily is focused on Jesus as the “Lamb of God” (Jn 1:36), and Susan is drawn by the richness of this title. She decides that she will pray with these words the following morning.

On Monday evening none of the readings particularly draws her. Susan remembers the Gospel of the paralytic lowered through the roof, and how it had spoken to her a few days earlier. At that time, she had preferred to remain with the healing of the leper. She now decides to pray with the healing of the paralytic the following morning.

St Anselm, Proslogion: “O little man, escape from your everyday business for a short while, hide for a moment from your restless thoughts. Break off from your cares and troubles and be less concerned about your tasks and labors. Make a little time for God and rest awhile in him. Enter into your mind’s inner chamber. Shut out everything but God and whatever helps you to seek him; and when you have shut the door, look for him. Speak now to God and say with your whole heart: I seek your face; your face, Lord, I desire.

St. Catherine of Siena, Dialogues: “A soul rises up, restless with tremendous desire for God’s honor and the salvation of souls. She has for some time exercised herself in virtue and has become accustomed to dwelling in the cell of self-knowledge in order to know better God’s goodness toward her, since upon knowledge follows love. And loving, she seeks to pursue truth and clothe herself in it.

But there is no way she can so savor and be enlightened by this truth as in continual humble prayer, grounded in the knowledge of herself and of God. For by such prayer the soul is united with God, following in the footsteps of Christ crucified, and through desire and affection and the union of love he makes of her another himself.”

Julien Green, Diary: “In a corner of one’s room when the day is closing, when the sounds of the city and of life die down a little, when in us lies the silence of twilight where God is perhaps more perceptible than at other moments – that is the time to open the Bible and listen to what it is going to say to us. To talk to God with a heart still warm with happiness. How He must love to be told that He is loved! And the more we tell Him so, the more He loves us…. The Bible is a book that stays open forever, since it speaks only of the eternal present.” (May 28, 1956)

John Paul II, Novo Millenio Ineunte: “This training in holiness calls for a Christian life distinguished above all in the art of prayer…. But we well know that prayer cannot be taken for granted. We have to learn to pray: as it were learning this art ever anew from the lips of the Divine Master himself, like the first disciples: "Lord, teach us to pray!" (Lk 11:1)….

Yes, dear brothers and sisters, our Christian communities must become genuine "schools" of prayer, where the meeting with Christ is expressed not just in imploring help but also in thanksgiving, praise, adoration, contemplation, listening and ardent devotion, until the heart truly "falls in love".
Venerable Bruno Lanteri, *Letters*: “You must be consistently faithful to meditation and spiritual reading, and the same also for the examination of conscience, which you can do while you are working. Do not forget to raise your heart frequently, with tenderness and peace, to God, and to make acts of mortification, especially interior ones; for you, this means the effort to live each moment with a gentle and joyful spirit….

Do not wait until you have devotion to begin all this; begin all the same, without devotion, because devotion will come with time, and these are the very means to acquire it.”

St. Jean Vianney, *Catechism on Prayer*: “My little children, reflect on these words: the Christian’s treasure is not on earth but in heaven. Our thoughts, then, ought to be directed to where our treasure is. This is our glorious duty: to pray and to love. If you pray and love, that is where our happiness lies.

Prayer is nothing else but union with God. When one has a heart that is pure and united with God, he is given a kind of serenity and sweetness that makes him ecstatic, a light that surrounds him with marvelous brightness. In this intimate union, God and the soul are fused together like two bits of wax that no one can ever pull apart. This union of God with a tiny creature is a lovely thing. It is a happiness beyond understanding….

My little children, your hearts are small, but prayer stretches them and makes them capable of loving God.”

Venerable Solanus Casey: “Do not pray for easy lives, pray to be stronger. Do not pray for tasks equal to your powers, pray for powers equal to your tasks. Then the doing of your work shall be no miracle but you shall be a miracle. Every day you will wonder at yourself, at the richness of life which has come to you by the grace of God.”

Romans 8:26 “The Spirit too comes to the aid of our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words.”