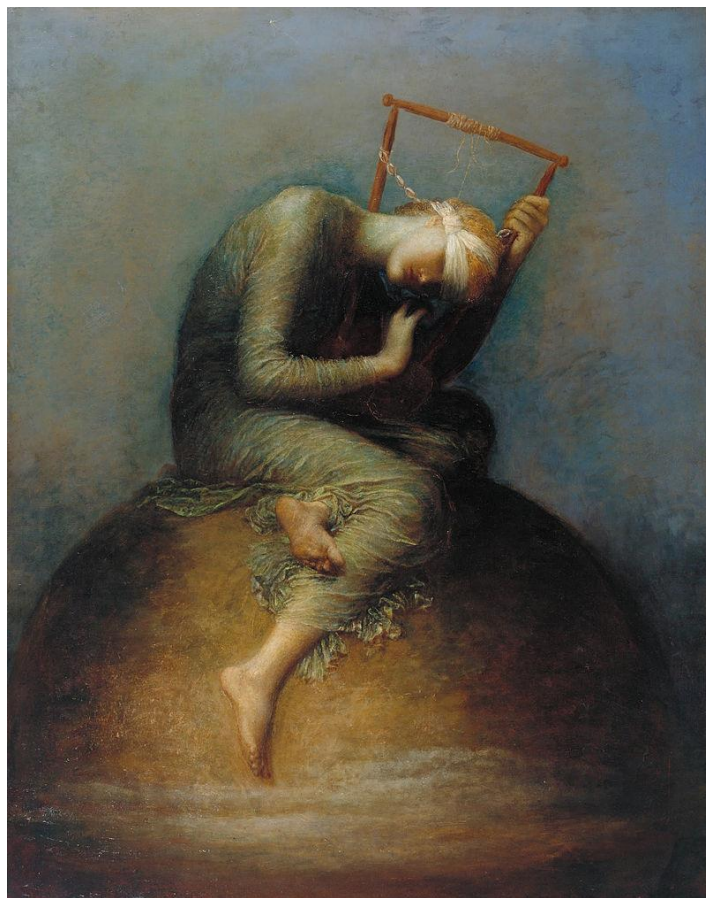


SOUL TO SOUL: SCRIPTURE AND WELLBEING

Michael Pfundner and Fleur Dorrell



Cast all your anxiety on him, because he cares for you.
1 Peter 5:7



Hope by George Frederic Watts, 1886.
Oil on canvas. Tate Britain.

George Frederic Watts and workshop, Public domain, Wikimedia Commons
<https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/watts-hope-n01640>

The symbol of hope is usually identified with an anchor, but the artist George Frederic Watts wanted to explore a new idea on this theme in his art. He painted hope as a blind young woman sitting on a globe playing a lyre with all its strings broken except one. Hope bends her whole body and head to listen to the faint music that only one string can make.

Welcome to *'Soul to Soul: Scripture and Wellbeing'*.

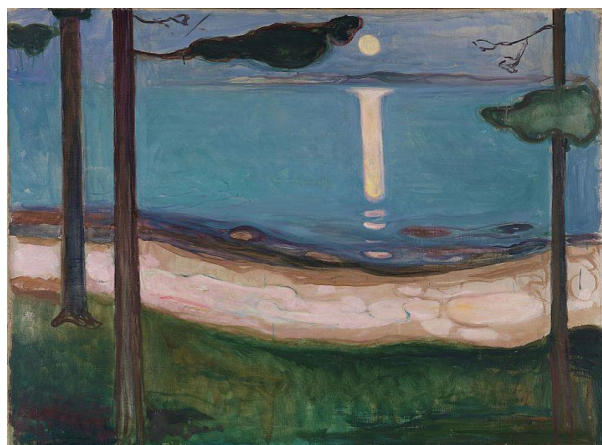
You may have come to this resource out of curiosity. You may be purposely looking on behalf of someone else. Or you may be going through a difficult time. Whatever has sparked your interest, this brief foray into Scripture and wellbeing is not a manual, or six-steps 'guide to happiness'; nor is it meant to replace pastoral care, counselling or psychotherapy (see footnote). What it offers is an opportunity to look at matters of the soul through a biblical lens. It will be a close look, and at times, it might be uncomfortable or even painful.

Mental and emotional wellbeing can be elusive. The mind is a fragile thing. Thoughts and emotions, faced or repressed, run deep. Events lasting seconds can haunt us for a lifetime. Genes and early childhood collude in determining the way we end up seeing the world and dealing with life. Even those of us fortunate enough to have grown up in a loving home can have all manner of fears and hang-ups; but what of people who were rejected, neglected or abused while still utterly dependent on individuals who were meant to care for them?

Meanwhile, we're taught to get on with it. The stiff upper lip is practised well beyond our shores. The supremacy of performance and success transcends national and cultural boundaries. Being the best you can be, and working hard for it, is intrinsically human. But there is a fine line between a healthy degree of self-improvement and damaging levels of perfectionism. In the West, the minimum entry requirement for joining the club of respectable members of the public is the ability to pull yourself up by your bootstraps. Meritocracy, free market, pursuit of happiness – call it what you will – is all about 'stronger, faster, higher'. You've done well in your job; now see how you can improve. You're healthy, now see how you can shed a few pounds to conform to digitally enhanced beauty ideals. Your children are essentially happy; now see how you can beat yourself up about not being the perfect parent. Stronger, faster, higher: Olympian perfectionism forced onto average lives. Millions suffer from burnout and self-loathing, and we wonder why.

Add to that the well-established postmodern crisis of meaning, the inadequacy of earlier philosophical models, the inability of people to shift to more helpful patterns, and with many people struggling to find lasting fulfilment in temporary things. Then, of course, there's the pandemic. As if we didn't have enough to deal with already, before Covid added its daily dose of depressing headlines.

When it comes to today's multi-faceted onslaught on our mental health, how can a collection of texts, written thousands of years and half a world away, help? That's the question we'll be exploring over the next six sessions. As we walk through parts of the biblical story, alongside some of the biblical characters, we'll be looking at spiritual fundamentals like repressing truth about ourselves, the link between faith and meaning, suffering and the 'dark night of the soul', and what salvation might mean in the here and now.



Moonlight by Edvard Munch, 1895.

Oil on canvas.

National Museum of Art, Architecture and Design,
Oslo, Norway.

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Munch_Moonlight.jpg

How this resource works

- a) There are six sessions which contain the following:
 - A central theme with reflection on the theme.
 - A short prayer.
 - Questions for reflection and action.
 - A painting with a short reflection.
 - A Scripture text.
 - Additional Bible references for further reflection.
 - Suggestions for further reading.
- b) We suggest you download one session a week.
 - 'Walk with' the session content, reflecting and trying any of the suggested activities over the course of the week.
 - Or focus on any of the texts or paintings that speak to you more directly.
 - Remember that whatever works for you is the start of taking steps to form habits which will help with your spiritual wellbeing.
- c) At the beginning of each session, ask the Holy Spirit to guide you on your journey this week.
- d) All Scripture passages are from the New Revised Standard Version, Anglicised Catholic Edition.
- e) Please note: Mental ill health covers a wide spectrum of symptoms, from occasional low moods or anxiety common to most people, to states of the mind that require psychological support or psychiatric intervention.

Contact your GP or a mental health professional if you are experiencing mental ill health and are in any doubt about its nature or severity, or your ability to handle it.

Or go online to the mental health charity MIND - <https://www.mind.org.uk/>



Melancholy by Edvard Munch, 1894.

Oil on canvas. Private Collection.

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Edvard_Munch_-_Melancholy_\(1894\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Edvard_Munch_-_Melancholy_(1894).jpg)

SCRIPTURE & WELLBEING

1 In your dreams

Today we're exploring dreams and how God spoke to different people in the Bible through dreams, with a focus on King Solomon seeking wisdom.

Pray

'God of truth, who speaks in all manner of ways, help me to hear and help me to listen.'

Scripture

The Lord appeared to Solomon in a dream by night.

1 Kings 3:5



L - Sanctuary of Asclepius, Epidauros © University of Warwick.
R - Statue of Asclepius. 2nd century AD.



Pentelic marble.

Accession number: 263. National Archaeological Museum of Athens. Athens, Greece.
[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Statue_of_Asclepius_\(2\)._2nd_cent._A.D.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Statue_of_Asclepius_(2)._2nd_cent._A.D.jpg)

The god Asclepius leans on a staff, around which his sacred snake is coiled. The snake is one of the most widely recognised medical and health care symbols in the world and features on the flag of the World Health Organisation. The snake-entwined staff symbol is known as the 'Rod of Asclepius'. It originates from the Greek god of healing, Asclepius, who is mentioned by Homer in the *Iliad* (c.8th c. BC), and whose cult developed from c.6th c. BC. Statues of this god appear from at least 4th c. BC which show him holding a rod with a snake coiled around it. But it has an interesting parallel in the Book of Numbers when Moses is trying to placate the hungry and disillusioned Israelites:

And the Lord said to Moses, "Make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live." So Moses made a serpent of bronze, and put it upon a pole; and whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live. *Numbers 21:8–9*

The Israelites were initially hesitant, since God had sent fiery serpents as a punishment among the people before, so why would this 'trick' be anything less than terrifying for them?

Reflection

Two and a half millennia before Sigmund Freud, the pioneer of modern psychology, began to explore dreams as pathways to the healing of the soul, ancient Greeks seeking relief from disease made their way to a temple of Asclepius. There they waited to fall asleep, hoping to be cured by the god as he entered their dreams.

Modern science has managed to cast some light on how dreams transport us from one level of consciousness to another. Deep sleep switches off conscious body control, leaving us effectively paralysed, while other parts of the brain are active and cause us to dream. Our eyes begin to dart around and the moment they stop, we forget what we've just been dreaming about. The only way of remembering is to wake up during a phase of rapid eye movement.

So, in a sense neuroscience confirms Freud's suggestion that the brain operates at more than one level of consciousness. But was he right to suggest that those levels are connected by dreams?

On the one hand, they help us to process recent or distant experiences and emotions. But is that all, or are the bizarre images and 'video clips' made in dreamland actual messages, transmitted from unconscious to conscious? Encrypted truths which our conscious was successfully avoiding, while we were awake? When all our busy daytime consciousness cares about is 'what', 'where', 'when' and 'how', is the job of the unconscious to ask 'why'?

Scripture throws a distinctive extra into this speculative mix: enter the God who speaks. Dr Freud focussed on the healing power of dreams. The Bible is less concerned with the dream phenomenon itself, than the one who fills it with meaning. The message no longer solely comes from the natural force of the unconscious, but from the One who transcends nature.

As God enters the world of the dreamer, he alerts and on occasion personally addresses them. Jacob, the ancient patriarch from whom Israel derives its name, dreams of a stairway to heaven. His son Joseph dreams of being favoured above his brothers. The three Magi dream about God telling them not to return to King Herod. How might things have turned out if any of those divine messages, transmitted via the unconscious, had been ignored?

Now, let's move on to explore one dream in particular and look at it in the context of our subject of wellbeing.

Ancient Israel's most iconic king is undoubtedly David. But his son, Solomon, is a close second: proverbial wisdom paired with prodigious splendour and wealth at the cost of mass organised slave labour make him a complex character. Notwithstanding, God asks Solomon in a dream: 'What would you like me to give you?'

It's a strange question. Solomon is the new king of Israel. He's just got married. His father-in-law is none other than the ruler of the ancient superpower that is Egypt. What else could he want?

'What would you like me to give you?' Is God essentially asking: you're king now, but what makes a good king? You have your life ahead of you, but what will it take to be able to look back at a life lived well? It sounds remarkably like the kind of question the unconscious would ask the conscious.

God picks night-time, waiting for Solomon to call it a day, turn in and switch to 'unconscious' mode. 'What would you like me to give you?' Solomon clever clogs instantly gets the message. Taking God up on his offer, the unbelievably wealthy, recently wedded, politically astute king of Israel asks for something that money, sex and power can't buy: the wisdom to make the right decisions.

'You have shown great and steadfast love to your servant my father David, because he walked before you in faithfulness, in righteousness, and in uprightness of heart towards you; and you have kept for him this great and steadfast love, and have given him a son to sit on his throne today. And now, O Lord my God, you have made your servant king in place of my father David, although I am only a little child; I do not know how to go out or come in.'

1 Kings 3:6–7

Solomon's dream draws him towards the big picture: God made a covenant with his father David and the people of Israel, designed to last to the end of time. Solomon realises the weight of his office, which goes far beyond that of ordinary political rule. His kingship is bound up in a mutual covenant not just between royal and subjects, but the ruler of the universe. No wonder he feels out of his depth.

Solomon's dream also alerts him to his own limitations – his youth and inexperience – which the outward success of enthronement and a strategic alliance with Egypt might easily have led him to forget.

And finally, Solomon is forced to ask what he desires more than anything else. A dream opens the door from the busy sphere of the ego, to the quiet place of true selfhood.

The moral of the story? There is no true wellbeing unless we follow Solomon's example and:

- ... acknowledge our limitations
- ... confront our insecurities and fears
- ... ask how we shall live well
- ... realise our dependence on God
- ... and answer life's fundamental questions.

On the surface, we may feel we're doing fine and even be proud of our achievements. And yet, there could be questions, lingering deep down, resurfacing every once in a while, perhaps in a dream: Is this it? What do I want? What is expected of me? Who am I, deep down?

When Solomon found the answer, we read that God was pleased.

Pray

God of wisdom, whether I'm awake or dreaming, help me to quieten down and hear your voice. Give me the insight to tell what is right, helpful and life-giving from that which is damaging and keeping me from truly becoming the person you want me to be.
Amen.

Reflection and action

If it's a sunny day, take a walk while doing this activity. If it's raining or too cold, then choose a comfortable place to sit quietly. Ponder these questions without rushing or feeling pressurised:

If God asked me 'What would you like me to give you?' what would my answer be?
What might be the unconscious motivation behind my answer?
Is it the only answer I could give?

In the coming days, try to listen to your dreams and ask what they might be telling, or indeed asking you.

More importantly still, try to stay tuned to the voice of God as you go through the day and be ready to experience his revealing, healing presence. You might find that God has more to say to you over the next week, so don't feel frustrated or disheartened if it's not that clear yet. Let God's words emerge slowly.

Reflection on the painting



The Dream of Solomon by Luca Giordano, c.1693–95.

Oil on Canvas. Museo del Prado.

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Luca_Giordano_-_Dream_of_Solomon_-_WGA09004.jpg

This is the moment that God gives Solomon his wisdom in a dream. It is the act of conveying something invisible within the visible domain while still asleep. This painting is sumptuous in style in order to convey the drama of this event and is full of allegorical qualities. God shines the light of wisdom onto Solomon with his up-tilted chin, and provides a vision of what will be Solomon's temple to the right. The Temple would hold the Ark of the Covenant and stand for 410 years before being destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar II.

Above Solomon at the top right is Minerva, the Roman goddess of wisdom, who will inspire Solomon in his judgements. Minerva is also the goddess of music, poetry, medicine, crafts, weaving, magic and warfare. She represents a pre-Christian figure here with the owl of wisdom perched above her head. At her side is a lamb and a book, representing the later arrival of Jesus – the Lamb of God, and the holy book – the Bible. Minerva is predicting the fulfilment of the law through Jesus while two men in the bottom left invite us to be silent.

The ornate bed upon which Solomon sleeps with its golden headboard carved as a faun on which his crown rests (in submission to God), alludes to the fact that fauns unconsciously imparted wisdom – another pre-Christian echo. The muted colours, billowing clouds and organic brushstrokes all emphasise the dreamy mood of this episode. Our artist is portraying a window onto a subconscious state through the veil of the divine. God enters earth in the darkest hour and shines his light upon the king.

Solomon is classically beautiful, supine and vulnerable. There is no cowering in fear; rather an openness to what he receives, and an intensity in knowing that he has absolutely no control over this spirit-led experience. *The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom* as Proverbs 9:10 reminds us all.

Solomon's dream

Solomon made a marriage alliance with Pharaoh king of Egypt; he took Pharaoh's daughter and brought her into the city of David, until he had finished building his own house and the house of the Lord and the wall around Jerusalem. The people were sacrificing at the high places, however, because no house had yet been built for the name of the Lord.

Solomon loved the Lord, walking in the statutes of his father David; only, he sacrificed and offered incense at the high places. The king went to Gibeon to sacrifice there, for that was the principal high place; Solomon used to offer a thousand burnt-offerings on that altar. At Gibeon the Lord appeared to Solomon in a dream by night; and God said, 'Ask what I should give you.' And Solomon said, 'You have shown great and steadfast love to your servant my father David, because he walked before you in faithfulness, in righteousness, and in uprightness of heart towards you; and you have kept for him this great and steadfast love, and have given him a son to sit on his throne today. And now, O Lord my God, you have made your servant king in place of my father David, although I am only a little child; I do not know how to go out or come in. And your servant is in the midst of the people whom you have chosen, a great people, so numerous they cannot be numbered or counted. Give your servant therefore an understanding mind to govern your people, able to discern between good and evil; for who can govern this your great people?'

It pleased the Lord that Solomon had asked this. God said to him, 'Because you have asked this, and have not asked for yourself long life or riches, or for the life of your enemies, but have asked for yourself understanding to discern what is right, I now do according to your word. Indeed I give you a wise and discerning mind; no one like you has been before you and no one like you shall arise after you. I give you also what you have not asked, both riches and honour all your life; no other king shall compare with you. If you will walk in my ways, keeping my statutes and my commandments, as your father David walked, then I will lengthen your life.'

Then Solomon awoke; it had been a dream. He came to Jerusalem, where he stood before the ark of the covenant of the Lord. He offered up burnt-offerings and offerings of well-being, and provided a feast for all his servants.

Bible texts for further reflection**Jacob's ladder****Joseph's dreams****The Magi's dream****Mindfulness at the feet of Jesus with Mary and Martha****Genesis 28:10–17****Genesis 37:1–11****Matthew 2:1–12****Luke 10:38–42****Further reading**

Anam Cara: Spiritual Wisdom from the Celtic World by John O'Donohue, Bantam Books, 1999.

Dream Work by Mary Oliver, Atlantic Monthly Press, 1994. (A collection of poems).

Let us Dream: The Path to a Better Future by Pope Francis and Austen Ivereigh, Simon & Schuster, 2020.

SCRIPTURE & WELLBEING

2

Morning blues

Today we're prayerfully exploring the connection between motivation and meaning with a focus on Jesus praying in the morning before healing a leper in Mark's Gospel.

Pray

'God of life, thank you for waking me this morning.'

Scripture

In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed.
Mark 1:35



Praying Hands by Albrecht Dürer, c.1508.

Brush drawing on blue primed paper. Albertina Museum, Vienna.

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Albrecht_D%C3%BCrer_-_Praying_Hands,_1508_-_Google_Art_Project.jpg

This pen and ink drawing is also known as 'Study of the Hands of an Apostle' and shows a detailed portrayal of two male hands held in prayer with the man's sleeves rolled up slightly in order to focus on the spiritual act. The hands are believed to belong to one of Dürer's 18 siblings. Andy Warhol's tombstone has a carving based on these hands.

Reflection

Waking.

Dreams fade.

Contours of curtains and furniture. Birdsong and a car engine refusing to start. The warm cocoon of blanket and mattress suggesting an extra dose of shuteye.

Getting up. How hard can it be? Well, it depends.

When our mental wellbeing is under assault, the moments of regaining consciousness can be downright tough. No matter how many hours of rest we've had, fatigue hasn't lifted; fear and dejection lurk in the shadows and the question, how to face another groundhog day, hangs in the morning air.

The action-packed Gospel of Mark presses the pause button on one occasion: Jesus rises before dawn, leaves the town and seeks out a quiet place to commune with his heavenly Father. The most extraordinary life, the most astounding person in history, immersed in prayer, grounded in God.

He must have been praying for a long while, because the narrative suggests that, by the time his friends finally worked out where he'd gone, it was broad daylight and everyone was going about their business.

Is the account primarily or even purely theological – demonstrating the unique union between the Father and the Son? Does it also speak of prayer requiring silence, time and focus? And might St Mark be urging the reader to follow Jesus' example of inviting God into their day, before anyone or anything else, including difficult people or situations, begin to claim their attention?

As you wake up in the morning, why not try imitating Christ's 'God first/prayer first' approach? If you're struggling with a period of poor mental health, you may be unable to manage more than a shortened version of a meditative prayer which was practised in the ancient eastern Church. In essence, it consists of three words: 'Lord, have mercy.'

In your mind, utter the word 'Lord' as you breathe in, and the words 'have mercy' as you breathe out. Repeat the prayer a number of times, while you fully wake up, acknowledging God's presence and your utter dependence on him to make it through the day. 'Lord, have mercy.'

As you get out of bed, rather than immediately rising to your feet, linger for a moment, feeling the floor beneath you, reminding yourself of the need for foundation and balance. Where will these come from, so long as it feels as though the rug has been pulled from under you? 'Lord, have mercy ...'

To wash and get dressed first thing can be a small, but significant victory during times of depression. As you do so, focus on the moment: the creaking floorboards, the door handle in your palm, water coating your skin, the miracles of movement and touch.

Try and get some fresh air before breakfast if you can, even if it's just for ten minutes. If possible, take a walk. If you can't, try a similar activity in or just outside your home. Focus again on the moment: the dew glistening on blades of grass, smoke rising from a chimney, the sounds of engines, barking or purring, depending on where you live, the rhythm of your steps, your chest expanding as you inhale the crisp morning air.

Return to your silent prayer, repeating it as you walk: 'Lord, have mercy.' Add another prayer, such as the one Jesus taught his disciples.

Our Father, Who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name. Give thanks to God for being a caring father while acknowledging his holiness and sovereignty.

Thy kingdom come; Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Heaven, in ancient Jewish thinking, wasn't 'up there' but 'just next door'. Pray that God might grant you a brush with his healing presence and enable you to live according to his will.

Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. Compromised wellbeing is likely to be located in one or several of the areas listed by Jesus: deprivation; guilt – imagined or real – or past hurts we won't let go of; the evil of addiction, obsession or suffering of some kind or other. Pray that God might intervene and deliver you.

As you return home for breakfast, do nothing except eating. No phone, news or music. Remain in the moment, savouring every mouthful, and end by thanking God for waking you this morning, thereby affirming his desire for you to exist and his power to help you make it through the day.

All of what we're considering here is an expression of the Christian conviction, not only that we can trust God with our lives but, more fundamentally, that those lives have meaning because life comes from God. Ironically, it was the atheist philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche who said, 'Those who have a "why" to live, can bear with almost any "how"'. The Bible answers the question why we are here, by pointing to the One who created us. Ultimately, what gets the believer out of bed in the morning, is the conviction that whatever life's challenges, they're worth facing because life is good, even when it is tough, for the creator of life himself 'saw that it was good' (Genesis 1). The Christian, who has a 'why', can bear with the 'how'.

During times of mental ill health, that vision can be clouded. Yet, when morning blues strikes, when motivation is weak, life – even a life marred by suffering – is never rendered meaningless. God is still there, waiting for us to seek his presence as Jesus did, right at the start of the day.

Pray

'God of mercy, thank you that, by waking me this morning, you confirmed that I am wanted, that in your eyes my life has purpose, and that whatever happens, I am safe. Amen.'

Reflection and action

Begin by asking: how do I start my day?

Try taking a 'sensory walk', outdoors or if that's not possible, indoors.

Using all your senses, acknowledge things you can see, things you can hear, things you can touch, things you can smell and things you can taste.

Explore how this activity draws your attention away from past or future events that might be worrying or burdening you, and how it enables you to 'be in the present' as you focus on the here and now.

Reflection on the painting



Untitled (Black on Grey) by Mark Rothko, 1970.

Acrylic on canvas. Solomon Guggenheim Museum, New York.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Untitled_\(Black_on_Grey\)#/media/File:RothkoBlackGray.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Untitled_(Black_on_Grey)#/media/File:RothkoBlackGray.jpg)

Looking at this Rothko painting of a black rectangle and a grey rectangle might feel either bleak or spot on depending on your mood today. However, the more you look at this picture the more you'll notice the build-up of translucent layers of differently shaded greys, which have a shape and a feel that are strangely ambiguous. There is space and substance, emptiness and void. Holding the two colours together is silence. Sometimes silence is what we need most, at other times we would like to run far away from it.

Rothko himself wanted viewers to experience his art close up to create '*a sense of intimacy, awe, a transcendence of the individual and a sense of the unknown*'. To be engulfed by the painting or to become a part of it was his aim. He did not distinguish between the canvas and the world outside – '*... the first experience is to be within the picture...*' he said. So you notice the stark simplicity and the absence of any symbolic reference. This frees the viewer to focus on the depth and intensity of colours. It exposes the sense of vulnerability in creating this picture, as well as the gazing at it without any pointers or guidance – where do you start or end? Does it matter?

If you have time to give to it, then patience will reward you, as the painting unravels itself very slowly. This unravelling challenges us in our prayer; we can begin at any time and from any point. It challenges our motivation – where is meaning and purpose for you when all is stripped away, when only the greys and blacks are standing tall?

Rothko's paintings whilst abstract are mostly about the power of birth and death. They invite us to encounter ourselves, and others, without a mask or veneer. Our painting here asks us to confront the morning of our lives and everything in between. The pursuit of the spiritual chases our fears, our isolation, our hopes and shattered dreams, and offers us a window onto transcendence. Today might be hard but tomorrow might be better.

A Preaching Tour in Galilee

In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed. And Simon and his companions hunted for him. When they found him, they said to him, “Everyone is searching for you.” He answered, “Let us go on to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do.” And he went throughout Galilee, proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons.

Jesus Cleanses a Leper

A leper came to him begging him, and kneeling he said to him, “If you choose, you can make me clean.” Moved with pity, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, and said to him, “I do choose. Be made clean!” Immediately the leprosy left him, and he was made clean. After sternly warning him he sent him away at once, saying to him, “See that you say nothing to anyone; but go, show yourself to the priest, and offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded, as a testimony to them.” But he went out and began to proclaim it freely, and to spread the word, so that Jesus could no longer go into a town openly, but stayed out in the country; and people came to him from every quarter.

Bible texts for further reflection

Hello, darkness
Here for a reason
A prayer between heaven and earth

Psalm 88
Psalm 139:13–16
Matthew 6:9–13

Further reading

This Too Shall Pass: Stories of Change, Crisis and Hopeful Beginnings by Julia Samuel, Penguin Life, 2021.

Music: The Sound of Silence by Simon & Garfunkel.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6ukmjBSQY-c&form=MY01SV&OCID=MY01SV>

Also on Spotify, Apple Music and Deezer.

For listening to a led daily prayer – <https://pray-as-you-go.org/>

SCRIPTURE & WELLBEING

3

Heat of the day

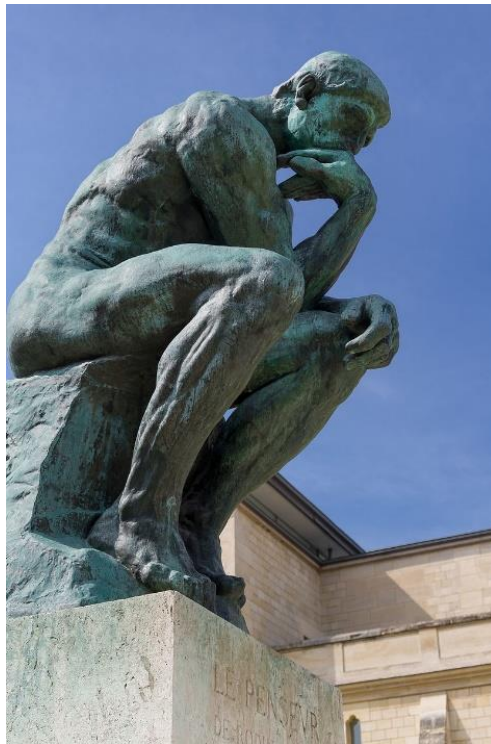
Today we're exploring whether busyness might mask emptiness with a focus on some of the Wisdom literature to guide us along the way.

Pray

*'God of peace, teach me what it means that "our heart is restless until it finds its rest in you".'*¹⁾

Scripture

In everything you do be moderate, and no sickness will overtake you. Ecclesiasticus 31:22



The Thinker by Auguste Rodin, 1904.

Bronze statue in the Garden of the Musée Rodin, Paris.

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:The_Thinker_close.jpg

The Thinker is a bronze sculpture by the French artist Rodin, and is one of the most famous artworks in the world. There are 28 versions of this sculpture on show today. The work depicts a male nude figure sitting on a roughly hewn rock. As he rests his chin on his right hand, he leans forward with his muscular body in contemplative thought.

¹⁾ St Augustine, Confessions, chapter 1. Penguin Classics (new edition), 2002.

Reflection

'Seize the day!'

'Remember you must die.'

Those were the two defining mottos of the Baroque age: live life to the full before it is too late. Extravagant churches sporting gilded columns and chubby angels, the voluptuous vacuity of Paul Rubens' nudes, the genius of Handel spent on pompous royal entertainment – they all embody an exuberant party mood which conceals the flipside of the shiny coin: the reminder of inescapable death.

Of course, there is nothing wrong as such with being active or enjoying life. The question is, when does activity turn into restlessness and restlessness into exhaustion? When does pleasure become addiction? At what point does the noise drown out the emptiness? When does ecstasy serve to soothe the pain?

It would seem fair to say that the contemporary Western world is fundamentally baroque in character and has the 17th century motto 'Seize the day' written all over it. The focus is on the here and now. Busyness, ambition and enjoyment make up the secular holy trinity, at least among those whose highest aspirations are to produce and consume happily ever after. As firm beliefs in God, eternity and moral absolutes dissolve, self-actualization, the choice of pleasures and the pleasure of choice rule the day. No doubt, Sirach (also known as Ecclesiasticus) would diagnose lack of moderation as the quintessential Western disease, whilst St Augustine would locate our restlessness in our spiritual muddle.

None of this, though, is new. Take this passage of Scripture from what a friend called the first postmodern book, *Ko'helet* in Hebrew, or *Ecclesiastes* in our English Bible translations:

I said to myself, 'Come now, I will make a test of pleasure; enjoy yourself.'... I made great works; I built houses and planted vineyards for myself; I made myself gardens and parks, and planted in them all kinds of fruit trees. I made myself pools from which to water the forest of growing trees. I bought male and female slaves, and had slaves who were born in my house; I also had great possessions of herds and flocks, more than any who had been before me in Jerusalem. I also gathered for myself silver and gold and the treasure of kings and of the provinces; I got singers, both men and women, and delights of the flesh, and many concubines. So I became great and surpassed all who were before me in Jerusalem; also my wisdom remained with me. Whatever my eyes desired I did not keep from them; I kept my heart from no pleasure, for my heart found pleasure in all my toil, and this was my reward for all my toil. Then I considered all that my hands had done and the toil I had spent in doing it, and again, all was vanity and a chasing after wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun.

Ecclesiastes 2:1; 4–12

Asceticism is rarely found in Judaism; God's creation is celebrated and enjoyed. Significantly, Jesus turned water into wine, not the other way round. Ecclesiastes doesn't deny the goodness of creation, nor its enjoyment, but asks, when the dust settles after the heat of day, is this all there is? Does all the work and play have any lasting significance? If there's nothing at the centre to hold everything together, do we end up like the crowd in Lowry's painting below: rushing, aimless and disconnected?

Today's relentless pursuit of enjoyment and success not only reflects a society drifting in spiritual relativism and apathy, but can seriously compromise our wellbeing at an everyday level. Who hasn't occasionally longed to escape the rat race, looked at their pressured lives and asked the rhetorical question: 'Really ...?' It's not that God isn't with us in our busyness, he is always with us. However, we can lose ourselves, and our anchor points, quite easily if our life is out of balance. When we're distracted by the noise we don't always hear God calling us home.

As we noted earlier, the baroque motto, 'Seize the day!' was countered by another: 'Remember you must die'. The origin of 'Seize the day!' is 'Carpe diem' from the Odes (23 BCE) of the Roman poet Horace. In a sense, it is about living mindfully in the present as tomorrow can bring death or disaster. So since our time here is short we should use it well.

These days, the reality of a pandemic has brought the former dinner table taboo to the forefront of our conversations, as we seek solace in talking about the unspeakable which surrounds us like never before. Yet, death in a figurative sense can be equally painful: when dreams are buried, a relationship ends, a lifetime ambition fails to materialise, or a deep longing is never fulfilled.

Death – literal or metaphorical – can heighten the sense of ultimate futility. Aeons before the Baroque and present-day eras, the author of Ko'helet puzzled over this conundrum:

For the fate of humans and the fate of animals is the same; as one dies, so dies the other. They all have the same breath, and humans have no advantage over the animals; for all is vanity. All go to one place; all are from the dust, and all turn to dust again. Who knows whether the human spirit goes upwards and the spirit of animals goes downwards to the earth? So I saw that there is nothing better than that all should enjoy their work, for that is their lot; who can bring them to see what will be after them?
Ecclesiastes 3:19–22

The inclusion of Ko'helet in the Hebrew canon of Scripture was contested by some. You can see why. There seems to be no grand divine masterplan, no focus on the beyond, where all will be resolved and everything will become clear. The book's conclusion recaptures some sense of divine order, but the fact that it diverges from what went before may suggest that it was added by a later hand.

Scripture is neither a step-by-step manual nor a seamless manifesto. It is a rich, multifaceted narrative that doesn't plaster over life's existential cracks. Ko'helet makes us ask tough questions and refuses to give glib answers.

So, for the purpose of today's session, let's bear the tension of the unresolved and face Ko'helet's enigmas squarely without rushing for instant solutions. And let's ask ourselves to what extent society's frantic activity and pleasure-seeking, driven by the fear of death, might have an undue hold over our own lives and compromise our spiritual wellbeing.

Pray

'God of life, when my past achievements no longer count in the present, when hopes are dashed and disillusionment sets in, and when the spectre of death threatens to annihilate all meaning, meet me in my fear and turmoil. Amen.'

Reflection and action

Take time out to think about your priorities in life. Ask yourself: 'If I had only one more year to live, how might this change my priorities? What would I start, or stop, doing immediately?'

In the coming days, try to listen to your deepest desire and ask what it might be telling, or indeed asking you.

Take time in prayer and Scripture reading and reflect on God's priorities.

Reflection on the painting



Going to Work by L.S. Lowry, 1943.

Oil on canvas. Imperial War Museum North, Salford.

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Going to Work - L S Lowry.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Going_to_Work_-_L_S_Lowry.jpg)

Lowry's painting shows factory workers going to the engineering firm, Mather and Platt, in Manchester in a haze of white air which was originally thought to be snow, but is in fact, the effects of industrial pollution. It was commissioned by the War Artists Advisory Committee of the UK government at the height of WWII, who wanted to acknowledge the importance of heavy industry in the war effort.

Lowry is celebrated for his portrayals of busy urban landscapes in the north of England filled with stylised figures referred to as 'matchstick men'. His distinctive perspective with crowds converging to a central point creates the atmosphere of rush hour frenzy and the feeling of imminent collision on the way to work.

Instead of accuracy of line and features, Lowry gives us the imagination of the daily grind. We are swept up in this melee of anonymous people, all hurrying to be on time; too fast to stop and chat, since factory working keeps strict rules or pay is deducted in the race to fulfil the production line. Without a glance, this corner of England earns its keep on yet another stressful day.

For landscape painting, it is odd not to provide any clues about the weather or shadows around the people in their stride. Lowry saw his approach more in terms of dreamscapes than landscapes, which enabled him to be more fluid in what he wanted to emphasise – mood over reality. Yet in this painting, we are easily drawn in; we join the crowd and don't look back, otherwise we might just lose our step and be late for work all over again.

Everything Has Its Time

For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven:

a time to be born, and a time to die;
a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted; a time to kill, and a time to heal;
a time to break down, and a time to build up; a time to weep, and a time to laugh;
a time to mourn, and a time to dance;
a time to throw away stones, and a time to gather stones together;
a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;
a time to seek, and a time to lose;
a time to keep, and a time to throw away;
a time to tear, and a time to sew;
a time to keep silence, and a time to speak;
a time to love, and a time to hate;
a time for war, and a time for peace.

The God-Given Task

What gain have the workers from their toil? I have seen the business that God has given to everyone to be busy with. He has made everything suitable for its time; moreover he has put a sense of past and future into their minds, yet they cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end. I know that there is nothing better for them than to be happy and enjoy themselves as long as they live; moreover, it is God's gift that all should eat and drink and take pleasure in all their toil. I know that whatever God does endures forever; nothing can be added to it, nor anything taken from it; God has done this, so that all should stand in awe before him. That which is, already has been; that which is to be, already is; and God seeks out what has gone by.

Bible texts for further reflection

True riches
Humility and simplicity
The key to living wisely

Luke 12:13–21
Matthew 19:13–15
Psalms 90

Further reading

A Blessed Life: Benedictine Guidelines for those who long for good days by Wil Derkse (translated by Martin Kessler), Liturgical Press, 2009.
Inviting God in: Scriptural Reflections and Prayers Throughout the Year by Joyce Rupp, Ave Maria Press, 2001.
Falling Upward: A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life by Richard Rohr, Jossey-Bass Books, 2013.

SCRIPTURE & WELLBEING

4

Exhaustion

Today we're exploring exhaustion and burnout with a focus on the biblical prophet Elijah, who at one point in time suffered a mental breakdown.

Pray

'Thank you, Lord, for promising to be my strength when my strength runs out.'

Scripture

'A sound of sheer silence.'

1 Kings 19:12



The Prophet fed by a Raven by Clive Hicks-Jenkins, 2007.

Acrylic on Panel. Private Collection.

<https://clivehicksjenkins.wordpress.com/tag/the-prophet-fed-by-a-raven/>

Clive Hicks-Jenkins is a contemporary Welsh artist who has painted Elijah with a modern twist. Elijah has to face, not just dependency on the elements for his survival, but on God for his direction. God works with everything and nothing, so our offering can always become something; and it can be silence that helps us in our darkest times.

Reflection

To Jewish people, he is a prophet of the highest order, a miracle-working hero of faith who kept Israel from sinking into idolatry, was mysteriously whisked off to heaven and will return one day to announce the Messiah and God's eternal *Shalom*. Characteristically, though, Scripture doesn't shy away from also showing us the man as human and vulnerable:

Ahab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done, and how he had killed all the prophets with the sword. Then Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah, saying, 'So may the gods do to me, and more also, if I do not make your life like the life of one of them by this time tomorrow.' Then he was afraid; he got up and fled for his life, and came to Beersheba, which belongs to Judah; he left his servant there.

He himself went a day's journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a solitary broom tree. He asked that he might die: 'It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors.' Then he lay down under the tree and fell asleep. Suddenly an angel touched him and said to him, 'Get up and eat.' He looked, and there at his head was a cake baked on hot stones, and a jar of water. He ate and drank, and lay down again. The angel of the Lord came a second time, touched him, and said, 'Get up and eat, otherwise the journey will be too much for you.' He got up, and ate and drank; then he went in the strength of that food for forty days and forty nights to Horeb the mount of God. At that place he came to a cave, and spent the night there.

Then the word of the Lord came to him, saying, 'What are you doing here, Elijah?' He answered, 'I have been very zealous for the Lord, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away.'

He said, 'Go out and stand on the mountain before the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by.' Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence. When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. Then there came a voice to him that said, 'What are you doing here, Elijah?'

He answered, 'I have been very zealous for the Lord, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away.' Then the Lord said to him, 'Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus; when you arrive, you shall anoint Hazael as king over Aram. Also you shall anoint Jehu son of Nimshi as king over Israel; and you shall anoint Elisha son of Shaphat of Abel-meholah as prophet in your place.'

1 Kings 19:1–16

Theologically speaking, the story of Elijah is a monotheistic manifesto; the God of Israel is the only God, Baal is fake news, as is any other foreign deity under the sun. Unlike Baal, God is not some nature god, but the creator and ruler of the cosmos. Evidently, some ancient Israelites believed in cocktail religion: take some Yahweh worship and add a dash of Canaanite spirituality. Elijah will have none of it. The God of Israel is the one true God and his followers must be devoted to him alone.

Elijah's journey to Mount Horeb and his encounter with the Lord echo the account of Moses at Mount Sinai during a forty-day period. Such is Elijah's status that, in the Gospels, he appears alongside Moses to converse with Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration. It is all the more remarkable that we are given access to a low point in the great man's life: a period of

depression. Elijah displays symptoms of burnout, triggered not only by an intense and prolonged struggle against the forces of idolatry, but by the queen's threat to kill him. Jezebel is the final straw. Exhausted by his battle with Baal's prophets, Elijah no longer has the energy to face yet another threat.

Generally speaking, threat and depression are psychologically linked. People, for example, who were made to feel unwanted in early childhood can spend the rest of their lives doubting their right to exist. They may have long forgotten the Jezebel of their childhood: someone who rejected them or simply couldn't deal with them. They may fail to make the connection between early trauma and their sense of being superfluous and in other people's way. Unaware of how this narrative is shaping their behaviour, they worry about being a burden, apologise for everything, try to please everyone and ignore their own needs. They may even think of themselves as loving and humble, while failing to identify their obsequiousness as a form of self-rejection, caused by the distant, primal experience of being unwanted. Inevitably, the constant tension between loving others and hating themselves eventually results in the emotional exhaustion we call depression.

After being cornered by the hostile forces of paganism and overcoming them, Elijah is finally knocked out by one rejection too many: 'It is enough,' he says. Suddenly, his achievements appear null and void; he is literally losing the will to live: 'O Lord, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors.' (1 Kings 19: 4). Just as people who suffer separation and loss of love often end up in depression, Elijah, cut off completely from other human beings, doesn't want to go on living. There is no way he can help himself. So God sends an angel, who brings him food. Elijah experiences what we all crave, deep down: to be wanted, even when we're too drained to be useful. It's what people on the fringe, who were considered worthless, experienced when Jesus ate with them: they were of no use to him either, and yet he wanted to be with them for their own sakes.

Notice how God's 'therapy' includes Elijah's physical needs. Body and soul are a unit, and delivery from depression is never merely a mental process. At first, an angel's touch brings Elijah back to life, so to speak. And Elijah accepts the need for food and sleep. What really brings him back to the land of the living, though, is neither the tender angelic waiter, nor the 40-day Mount Horeb exercise regime, but his encounter with God, who asks him a question reminiscent of the one we came across in Solomon's dream: 'What are you doing here, Elijah?' The prophet has lost his bearings. God meets him in his confusion. When Elijah thinks all is lost, God renews his calling and restores his vision for the future: he will be anointing rulers and discipling his successor. Life will go on. Elijah is still wanted, still of value, still loved in his hour of weakness and need.

Elijah's encounter with God is not linked to earthquake, fire and storm, but happens in silence, when God, as other Bible translations put it, speaks to him in a still, small voice. No doubt there is a theological message here: Baal, the Canaanite god, was associated with the natural phenomena listed in the account, but the true God wasn't in them: God transcends nature. There's something else: Elijah needs the noise and the action and the drama to stop, in order to hear God's voice again, in the stillness that follows the storm.

Pray

Thank you, Lord, for your steadfast love for me, and that in times of exhaustion, self-doubt or isolation I am not alone. Help me to hear your voice and feel your touch. Amen.

Reflection and action

Take time this evening to enter the silence at the end of the day, and listen to God. If you are going through a period of mental ill health, ask yourself if there might be a link between how you feel about yourself in the present and your earliest childhood experiences. Do you notice behavioural patterns now that might be linked to those early experiences? Could it be time to explore these links in a counselling setting?

Reflection on the painting



**Young woman sleeping
by Rembrandt van Rijn, 1654.**
Brush with brown wash.
The British Museum, London

www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/P_1895-0915-1279

One of the most beautiful discoveries you will find in the British Museum's print room is this drawing of a young woman sleeping with her head resting on her right arm. It is Rembrandt's second great love and common-law wife, Hendrickje Stoffels, who he had a relationship with after his beloved wife Saskia died tragically young. This extraordinary artist uses a single brush as if it were calligraphy and to create the shadows he drags the ink sideways. Every single line, curve and curl is spot on – nothing is out of place. It is drawing as perfection, and love at its most intimate since here is a picture of someone totally at ease, while fast asleep.

At first sight, this picture might appear quite simple. How wrong we would be, since the longer we gaze at it, the more we see its brilliance. We can feel the weight of exhaustion in the woman's body, the shoulders and arms vying to hold her face from falling inwards. Her left leg is bent outward to maintain gravity while sinking deeper into oblivion. Rather than focus on her anatomy, Rembrandt creates an affectionate vision of this woman in rapid flourishes. This vision enhances the power of the unconscious when we are not awake. The soporific atmosphere created by the angle and pose make us want to join her in a nap.

Rembrandt is at the height of his powers with this liquid gold, a far cry from his biblical canon and magnificent self-portraits. This is life at home and in miniature, not blatant patronage of the wealthy and the proud. Here is empathy and curiosity, emotion rather than expression. Rembrandt has suffered enough and yet more tragedy is to come; still he finds meaning in the domestic, the ordinary behaviour of those around him. He longs to live and to love. The older we are, the more we realise that life is beyond our control. Today is all we can know and Rembrandt paints this wisdom best.

Do not fear for I have redeemed you ... I love you

But now thus says the Lord,
he who created you, O Jacob,
he who formed you, O Israel:
Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;
I have called you by name, you are mine.
When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;
and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;
when you walk through fire you shall not be burned,
and the flame shall not consume you.
For I am the Lord your God,
the Holy One of Israel, your Saviour.
I give Egypt as your ransom,
Ethiopia and Seba in exchange for you.
Because you are precious in my sight,
and honoured, and I love you,
I give people in return for you,
nations in exchange for your life.
Do not fear, for I am with you;
I will bring your offspring from the east,
and from the west I will gather you;
I will say to the north, "Give them up,"
and to the south, "Do not withhold;
bring my sons from far away
and my daughters from the end of the earth—
everyone who is called by my name,
whom I created for my glory,
whom I formed and made."
Bring forth the people who are blind, yet have eyes,
who are deaf, yet have ears!
Let all the nations gather together,
and let the peoples assemble.

Bible texts for further reflection**Separation****Self-hate and self-harm****Starting afresh****Exodus 2:1–10****Mark 5:1–20****Luke 15:11–32****Further reading**

The Return of the Prodigal Son: A story of Homecoming by Henri Nouwen, Darton, Longman & Todd publishers, 1994.

The Ignatian Adventure: Experiencing the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius Loyola in Daily Life by Kevin O'Brien, Loyola University Press, 2011.

Thinking, Fast and Slow by Daniel Kahneman, Penguin Books, 2012.

SCRIPTURE & WELLBEING

5

Dark night

Today we're exploring how our image of God can affect our spiritual wellbeing in times of suffering and crisis with a focus on the figure of Job.

Pray

'Lord, in your Word you say you care. Thank you.'

Scripture

'As a father has compassion for his children, so the Lord has compassion for those who fear him.'
Psalm 103:13



Christ of St John of the Cross by Salvador Dali, 1951.

Oil on canvas. Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum, Glasgow.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christ_of_Saint_John_of_the_Cross#/media/File:Christ_of_Saint_John_of_the_Cross.jpg

This painting by the Surrealist artist Dali, depicts Jesus on the cross in a darkened sky, hanging over a body of water complete with a boat and fishermen. Dali was inspired by a crucifixion sketch that the Spanish Carmelite and mystic, St John of the Cross, drew in 1550; and by an unusual dream. Here, Jesus is outstretched and outcast, but not outdone.

Reflection

A religious sceptic may ask a believer: 'How can you believe in a loving God, so long as you and yours are okay, knowing that minute by minute, since the dawn of time, countless lives across the globe have been marred and wiped out by violence, disease and natural disasters?'

The way we feel about God is rarely a matter of logic. For the believer, these things are more visceral than intellectual. As the philosopher, Blaise Pascal, quipped: 'The heart has its reasons which reason knows nothing of.'

There is no rationally satisfying answer to the problem of pain. And if there was, the last thing we would want to say to someone who had just been diagnosed with an incurable disease, is: 'Now, let me explain why this has happened to you.' All we'd want to do is, sit with them in silence and with compassion.

There are numerous passages in the Scriptures that grapple with evil and suffering, and none of them more so than the Book of Job.

It's a bit of an outlier, like Ecclesiastes. But it's in the Bible, nonetheless.

The framing story is that of a righteous man whose loyalty to God is tested to the limit as he loses loved ones, health and livelihood. Even in the face of extreme suffering, however, Job does not become an atheist, for which God rewards him in the end.

This simple prose account may have been the original story: trust God even when the going gets tough and ultimately all will be well. But then there are 40 chapters of poetry in between, perhaps inserted by a later hand, and they are nothing like the beginning and the end.

The bulk of the Book of Job asks all the questions we would never utter in polite society. Job laments, loudly. He cries out to God. He stamps his foot. 'Why?' he asks, desperate for an answer to the problem of evil. But no answer comes.

Three friends, who attempt to comfort Job in his grief, insist that he must have done something to deserve divine punishment. Yet Job insists categorically, that he has done nothing wrong.

When, eventually, God does decide to reply to Job, there is still no resolution to the problem of pain. All Job realises is that God is sovereign and the human mind too limited to understand the mysteries of the universe. God argues against the idea of retributive justice – that only sinners will suffer –, which Job's friends were so fond of. God also corrects Job's conclusion that he doesn't care about his suffering. Bottom line: the world is too big for finite human minds.

Logic and reason can neither satisfy Job's hunger for understanding, nor cure his utter depression and despair. There is only one way to God: a journey through the dark night of the soul, as St John of the Cross poetically put it.

Job takes that journey and, for all his questioning of God's ways, he never lets go of God himself.

We can learn a number of things from Job's journey through the dark night:

Bad things happen to good people. Some Christians would turn this on its head and ask, why do good things happen to bad people; in other words, why would God care at all about a blatantly sinful race? Be that as it may, be wary of people peddling the idea that 'God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life', i.e. that all will be well and you'll experience abundant blessings, so long as you just have enough faith. According to Job, anyone

embarking on the spiritual journey would be well advised to expect headwinds and giant waves.

There is no automatic link from misfortune to sin. It's what Job's friends thought, and God refutes them, telling Job that life is a lot more complicated. Equally, don't expect God to punish you every time you say or do something wrong. Trust in his forgiveness and compassion.

The riddles of the universe, including the problem of pain, are an equation which human maths can't solve. Job learns to accept suffering as a part of life and a part of maturity.

And the Book of Job reminds us of the reality that the long journey towards God can include a 'dark night' – an arduous time of spiritual growth pains, of crisis, of doubt.

Most importantly, God turns up in the end: a holy, overwhelming presence, yes, but ready to meet a frail human in their despair.

The message of Job: don't let go of that hope, even after years of turmoil – that God is there with you, from beginning to end.

Pray

Lord of light, guide my steps as I walk through the dark night of suffering and doubt. Let me end up praying, like Job: 'I know that my redeemer lives' (Job 19:25). Amen

Reflection and action

Take time to mull over one or more of the following questions:

Am I angry with God? Is it sinful to feel that way?

Do I believe that evildoers should always get their comeuppance?

Do I believe that everything happens for a reason, or can I live with unsolved mysteries?

Reflection on the painting



Isle of the Dead by Arnold Böcklin, 1880 version.

Oil on canvas. Basel Museum of Art.

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Arnold_B%C3%B6cklin_-_Die_Toteninsel_I_\(Basel,_Kunstmuseum\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Arnold_B%C3%B6cklin_-_Die_Toteninsel_I_(Basel,_Kunstmuseum).jpg)

This sinister picture is the best-known painting of the 19th century Swiss Symbolist artist, Arnold Böcklin. It was said to hang in every Berlin home because it epitomised the period with its combination of stillness and the sublime, death and Dante-esque journeying. See how the symmetry of the rocks holding the stage, embraces blackened cypress trees which seem to lead the viewer into another world. The white figure guarding the shrouded coffin draws you ever nearer to the void. This is grief, this is death, but is there hope?

With only the moon for light, this desolate and rocky islet floating on an expanse of dark water calls to the oarsman as he approaches the shore. This moment of mourning in time with the water's rhythm is a funeral song to all those who grieve. Cliffs and crevices, caves and grottos have always been places of sanctuary or flight. The longer we gaze, the quieter the scene becomes. If we heard a pin drop, the echo would travel far.

Some people have interpreted the oarsman as the Greek boatman Charon, who ferried the souls of the dead across the river Styx in Greek mythology. They see it as a vision of the departed one into the murky underworld – en-route to meet its fate. There are no birds circling, no vultures waiting for dinner; no stars for comfort or wind in the trees. There are no people waiting to meet the boat and its crew. How did we arrive here? What happens next?

The dead of night is bleak, it is powerful. It is magical and beyond the known world. Arnold Böcklin has created a space and a place for all our fears and anxieties. He has opened the door onto the subconscious and permitted us to cry out with all our doubts and sorrows. In this painting, nothing is too difficult to comprehend. We just need to let go, and let God in.

Scripture passage

Psalm 130

A Song of Ascents.

Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord.
Lord, hear my voice!
Let your ears be attentive
to the voice of my supplications!

If you, O Lord, should mark iniquities,
Lord, who could stand?
But there is forgiveness with you,
so that you may be revered.

I wait for the Lord, my soul waits,
and in his word I hope;
my soul waits for the Lord
more than those who watch for the morning,
more than those who watch for the morning.

O Israel, hope in the Lord!
For with the Lord there is steadfast love,
and with him is great power to redeem.
It is he who will redeem Israel
from all its iniquities.

Bible texts for further reflection

Does God care?
Seeing God for who he is
What is this? Why is that?

Job 22:1–9
Job 42:5–6
Ecclesiastes 39:12–21

Further reading

The Shattering of Loneliness: On Christian remembrance by Erik Varden, Bloomsbury Continuum, 2018.

Dark Night of the Soul by St John of the Cross, Dover Publications, 2003.

Praying our Goodbyes: A Spiritual Companion through Life's Losses and Sorrows by Joyce Rupp, Ave Maria Press, 2009.

SCRIPTURE & WELLBEING

6

New dawn

In our final session, we'll enter a story of emotional and spiritual healing with a focus on the story of Jesus and Zacchaeus.

Pray

'Only say the word and my soul shall be healed.'

Scripture

'Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today.'

Luke 19:5



Christ and Zacchaeus by Niels Larsen Stevns, 1913.

Oil on canvas. Randers Museum of Art, Denmark.

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Niels_Larsen_Stevns-Zak%C3%A6us.jpg

Niels Larsen Stevns' Biblical works always focus on transformation and the promise of spiritual life; offering that which the material world cannot offer. In deciding to give half his possessions to the poor, Zacchaeus is not obeying a rule that Jesus promulgated, rather Zacchaeus's gift is a spontaneous act of repentance, love, and gratitude.

Reflection

We're nearing the end of our journey through the biblical world of spiritual wellbeing.

We've asked how God might use a dream to pose some of life's fundamental questions.

We've considered the value of starting the day in a state of prayerful mindfulness.

We've reflected on ways of dealing with the heat of day of modern life and all it throws at us, and whether, paradoxically, the hustle and bustle might keep us from living.

We've considered the need for restoration in times of physical and spiritual burnout.

We've made connections between suffering and the 'dark night of the soul'.

So here we are, about to meet the one who came for people as insecure as young Solomon, as disillusioned as the writer of Ecclesiastes, as exhausted as Elijah and as unable as Job to face another day of pain; one who came 'to seek out and to save the lost' (Luke 19:10).

Jericho lay on the route from Galilee to Jerusalem, so we can expect Jesus to have passed through the town repeatedly. It was an attractive place, coveted by the likes of Herod and Cleopatra, and the mansion of one of its citizens would have blended in nicely with the gentrified feel: a chap named Zacchaeus.

He was a senior tax collector by trade. Not a particularly popular profession at the best of times. In Zacchaeus' day, things were made worse by the fact that the taxes he collected on goods transported around the country went into the coffers of the enemy: Rome. Not to mention the fact that people like Zacchaeus had a reputation of charging a mark-up to line their own pockets. No wonder, eyebrows were raised when Jesus singled him out from the crowd:

He entered Jericho and was passing through it. A man was there named Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax-collector and was rich. He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see him, because he was going to pass that way. When Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, 'Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today.' So he hurried down and was happy to welcome him. All who saw it began to grumble and said, 'He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner.' Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord, 'Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much.' Then Jesus said to him, 'Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost.' *Luke 19:1–10*

Zacchaeus: rich, corrupt, despised – and the focus of Jesus' attention. No doubt he didn't expect to be called down from the safety of the tree. No doubt he didn't enjoy the sudden, unwanted attention of the crowd. They ignored him at best and hated him at worst. They saw nothing but the money-grabbing sycophant, ready to betray his own people. But Jesus saw something else.

If you've ever been in love, you may have noticed how everyone around you treated the beloved pretty much the same, giving them an average degree of attention. Only you noticed the loose strand of hair gleaming behind their ear and found the peculiar way they held their fork endearing, you seemed to be the only one who registered how their voice dropped by a halftone or two whenever they felt unsure about something, and while others carried on chatting as your beloved got in the car and fastened the seatbelt, a sudden sense of the fragility of life punched you in the gut.

Love is not always blind; it also opens our eyes. Jesus could see something in Zacchaeus that others couldn't.

How surprised would he have been when the Rabbi invited himself to dinner? And how might he have felt when the penniless preacher from up north entered his luxurious courtyard and settled down for a time of fine dining? What happened between Jesus entering Zacchaeus' posh executive home and the words: 'Today salvation has come to this house'?

C.G. Jung – one of the fathers of psychology – saw the house as an image of life, so much so that he fashioned his own house as a kind of mirror of his own unconscious. And it's interesting to note that Jesus doesn't lecture Zacchaeus on financial misconduct at the foot of the tree but insists on going to his house. Did Zacchaeus realise in Jesus' presence that his house was a reflection of his dubious and contradictory existence? Was this the key to the salvation Jesus referred to later on? So taken by his encounter with the Lord was Zacchaeus that it transformed his life.

Now let me invite you to spend a few minutes in silence as you picture Jesus visiting, not Zacchaeus, but you.

Depending on which of the topics and biblical figures we discussed previously you identify with the most, start off by picturing yourself with that hurt, that doubt, that fear, as you sit in your living room, your bedroom or perhaps even in a far corner of your shed or loft, where no-one can find you.

Close your eyes and silently view yourself in that place, clinging to whatever it is that is weighing you down. Feel the weight, without trying to push it away.

Then, keeping your eyes shut, picture Jesus entering with the words: 'I must stay at your house today'. Will you let him into your well-guarded space?

Sense his presence for a minute or two. Then, ask him to take your burden off you, whatever it might be. And hear him say to you: 'Today salvation has come to this house. For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost.'

Finally, open your eyes and slowly read the story of Zacchaeus as if it was written to you.

Expect no magic, no miracle cure. But take the time to contemplate your hurts and fears and allow Jesus into your most private, most painful space; today, tomorrow, each day. And trust that salvation will come.

Pray

'Lord Jesus – forgive me; heal me; restore me. Amen.'

Reflection and action

Over the next few days, take time to read one Gospel account a day in which Christ is healing or teaching, and imagine yourself as one of the story characters. See whether this helps you to deepen your appreciation of Christ's words and deeds, and their significance to your life.

Think about your hurts and fears, past and present, and consider the destructive impact they might be having on your daily life. Ask yourself whether it might be worth revisiting them with the help of a professional counsellor.

Reflection on the painting



Norham Castle, Sunrise by J.M.W. Turner, 1845.

Oil on canvas. Tate Britain Gallery, London.

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Joseph Mallord William Turner - Norham Castle, Sunrise - WGA23182.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Joseph_Mallord_William_Turner_-_Norham_Castle,_Sunrise_-_WGA23182.jpg)

Turner is arguably the finest landscape painter of all time. And this painting is a perfect example of his gift with light. Here, the landscape and architecture merge to an almost unrecognisable form diluted by the omnipresent light of the sunrise. It is a moment in time, which Turner loved creating, as he was more interested in showing the atmosphere created in a single moment, than the actual physical objects of the place he loved so dearly. Only the title tells us that there is a castle since it is all but disappeared. The cows serve as the only clue that this is not some other surreal fantasy, but an actual English landscape.

Norham sits on the river Tweed in Northumberland, on the English side of this famous border with Scotland. Turner first saw Norham Castle in 1797, during his grand tour of northern Britain, and was taken with it immediately. He returned to the ruins several times throughout his lifetime, painting it during each visit, and this work comes later in his career.

Turner represented this castle like no other before him. He found a beauty where no one else looked, painting an ordinary British mist with cosmic effect. He always recognised the sublime ignored by so many artists. And then revealed it slowly through his brushstrokes; each layer speaking to us gradually, seamlessly in tune with the dawn of a new day. Turner was inspired by the purple rocks, blue river pools, shimmering trees and the endless hills that this location had to offer.

Turner wanted the atmosphere to dominate, to evoke nature without man-made intervention. To arouse and stir our hearts with the truthfulness and changing moods of nature at its best.

A Sinful Woman is forgiven

One of the Pharisees asked Jesus to eat with him, and he went into the Pharisee's house and took his place at the table. And a woman in the city, who was a sinner, having learned that he was eating in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster jar of ointment. She stood behind him at his feet, weeping, and began to bathe his feet with her tears and to dry them with her hair. Then she continued kissing his feet and anointing them with the ointment. Now when the Pharisee who had invited him saw it, he said to himself, "If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what kind of woman this is who is touching him—that she is a sinner." Jesus spoke up and said to him, "Simon, I have something to say to you." "Teacher," he replied, "speak." "A certain creditor had two debtors; one owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. When they could not pay, he canceled the debts for both of them. Now which of them will love him more?" Simon answered, "I suppose the one for whom he canceled the greater debt." And Jesus said to him, "You have judged rightly." Then turning toward the woman, he said to Simon, "Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has bathed my feet with her tears and dried them with her hair. You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not stopped kissing my feet. You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. Therefore, I tell you, her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little." Then he said to her, "Your sins are forgiven." But those who were at the table with him began to say among themselves, "Who is this who even forgives sins?" And he said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace."

Bible texts for further reflection

**I have seen the Lord.
Receive the Holy Spirit.
And their eyes were opened.**

**John 20:1–18
John 20:19–29
Luke 24:13–35**

Further reading

The Other Side of You by Salley Vickers, Harper Perennial, 2007.
The Divine Dance: The Trinity and your Transformation by Richard Rohr, SPCK Publishing, 2016.
Monsignor Quixote by Graham Greene, Vintage Classics, 2000.