

## 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](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/>