

Practicing the Presence of Jesus

Week 3 – Encountering Jesus & Discernment

Here's the question that focuses this week's talk: How do we encounter Jesus in a way that we are changed: we're wiser, more compassionate, more at peace, more empowered to live abundantly? (And how do we not do the opposite?)

A Scripture to guide our focus today:

Let what you heard from the beginning abide in you. If what you heard from the beginning abides in you, then you will abide in the Son and in the Father. And this is what he has promised us, eternal life.

I write these things to you concerning those who would deceive you. As for you, the anointing that you received from him abides in you, and so you do not need anyone to teach you. But as his anointing teaches you about all things, and is true and is not a lie, and just as it has taught you, abide in him. (1 John 2.24-27)

A Glimpse into Truth

Remember that what we're talking about here is deeper than encountering Jesus as a rational idea or set of ideas of Jesus. We're talking about a holistic, embodied encounter that is so real it changes what we actually believe; in other words, we're talking about really meeting Jesus.

For most of us, rational thought alone rarely changes what we actually believe. Consider, for example, what happens to lots of people when they go on a mission trip overseas. They've heard all the figures and statistics before; maybe they've even seen pictures. But they don't actually, deeply believe in the reality of that faraway poverty enough to act on it appropriately until they actually go there and meet real people. Holistic encounter, not just new ideas, changes what we deeply believe and therefore who we are and what we do. (But just to complicate the picture, sometimes people choose to change what they do and that becomes the means by which they encounter truth more deeply and then after the doing they begin to deeply believe.)

So, keeping in mind that for truth to change us it needs to be in one way or another an embodied encounter, let's look again at the role of imagination and how that relates to belief.

Imagination when we're not really looking for truth or imagination without belief is like play. If a person has been feeling weak and harassed in his workplace and he, for fun, imagines himself a foot taller striding through his office, commanding attention and respect, he might feel a temporary elation from this play, but that is all. Perhaps he will be a little affected by a glimpse of possibility. But most of us are quite capable of keeping the realm of imagination separate from what we actually believe is real life. Most of the time that is a good thing.

If we believe, however, that imagination can give us glimpses of truth and therefore can lead to an altering of our subconscious beliefs, this also is a good thing – or can be a good thing. This is much more than play; it is a potent source of deep change. This is partly why some Christians have been suspicious of imagination and visualization; they intuitively understand the potency of this practice. But we don't want to throw out the baby with the bathwater – instead of eliminating this practice we use it in a way that is grounded in the Christian narrative, by which I mean primarily Scripture, but also Christian tradition and community.

Now let's go back to that same man feeling powerless and harassed in his office. If that same man imagines that **as he sees himself a foot taller he is experiencing a genuine metaphor – a glimpse of a truth deeper than his past experience – representing an authority that actually exists within himself**, he may start to believe a different way of being is possible, even inevitable. This belief then becomes the wellspring for a variety of subtle and not-so-subtle changes that transform his interactions at work.

If this glimpse of himself as a “bigger” person at work came spontaneously during prayer, as a gift from God, the chances of it leading to this kind of transforming belief is even more likely. Such an imaginary glimpse is one way that God uses imaginative prayer to help bring healing during inner healing prayer or simply guide us into a fuller understanding of God's reality. God does not supernaturally alter our behaviour as if we were robots that he re-programs; it is enough that God encounters us in our imagination and helps to create or reveal the belief, the suggestion, that he is a different person than we thought we was.

This is what I am calling a “glimpse into truth.” With our imaginations we are looking to Jesus, acknowledging his presence, perhaps telling him our thoughts/feelings or at least being aware of our honest selves in whatever situation we are bringing to him, and then we're looking/listening/sensing for a glimpse of truth.

Help for the Right-Brain Challenged

For some people, once the pump is primed by imaginative prayer, these glimpses into truth will simply flow easily and naturally. These are not better or more spiritual people; they are people who for whatever reason are naturally able to dial down the left brain and keep it out of the way, hopefully only until needed (which is the discernment which comes later).

For the rest of us, here are some tips to dial down the left brain:

- 1) We intentionally and sincerely invite Jesus' presence and ask him to guide the prayer time. Then we choose to trust that he is able to do this and will honour this invitation and request.
- 2) If we are people who are especially prone to wanting to stay in control, we might spend a little more time on this step, acknowledging our hesitation or fear of trusting God to be in control of this time. Perhaps we might even ask God to help us see what this fear or hesitation is about. Some will need to do this together with

people they trust first before they can do it on their own.

3) We remind ourselves that we will do more careful discernment later and it is ok to let happen what will happen first.

4) We give up worrying about the boundary between our spirit and God's spirit, remembering that the more time our spirit and the Holy Spirit are dancing and hanging out with each other the less difference there will be anyway (and, again, we'll be doing the discernment later anyway).

5) Try to encourage a more playful and open attitude to the whole experience. Don't evaluate or judge ourselves or the process. Leanne Payne would often quote a teacher of hers who would always say something like, "You can't kiss someone properly and think about it at the same time."

6) Remember that the left brain will always be biased toward past understandings. Rational deduction is one of the only ways for the left brain to get to new understandings and we've often long reached our limits on this score. Trusting a right-brained experience can help free us from ruts.

7) Use music or art (as long as you're not analyzing them).

[A Parenthesis on Stuckness – Both the left brain and the right brain can keep us stuck. The right brain keeps us stuck by getting into emotional ruts of worry and negativity. These ruts ("playing tapes") will shut down creativity and problem-solving. The left brain keeps us stuck within particular paradigms or thinking patterns. So the left brain can problem-solve well within a certain paradigm, but because of the limits in any paradigm this, too, will often keep us stuck.]

The brain hemispheres need to help each other to break free. The left brain can help us by interrupting the emotional worry ruts through sneaky indirect means (can't be direct because thinking about the worries will usually re-trigger the emotional pattern and shut the left brain back down again). Four quick easy suggestions:

- doing any kind of puzzle that holds our attention (Sudoku, free cell, jigsaw)
- going for a walk and paying close attention to our senses and nature
- reading a novel that we like and can get into
- listening to music that holds our attention

Then once we're relatively, and temporarily, free of the worry/depression, we need to flip back to more right-brained means to be open intuitively to new paradigms/experiences.]

Discernment

Even though this is a big concern theoretically, my experience has shown me that when practicing the presence of Jesus is done together with others in a healthy Christian community, it will largely take care of itself. For example, in my fifteen years or so of doing inner healing prayer a fair amount, I don't think I have ever seen an example where I would attribute any experienced results from the prayer as coming from something evil that has sneakily intruded – i.e. Satan or demonic forces. I believe that in the context of a person or community that has grounded itself in the Christian story responsibly practicing Jesus' presence, the Enemy's effort is almost completely devoted to shutting the process

down through fear and resistance to change rather than through any significantly distorted revelations. So, I suppose it could happen, but I just haven't seen it myself.

What is much more likely is some level of distortion coming from immature parts of our own spirit. The most common I would suggest is that occasionally people will **project fears or expectations from unhealthy cultural or parental understandings onto God**. So, for example, I once had a woman who was feeling quite trapped in a bad common law relationship because of a shared child. It filled her with a shame that she felt hopeless to ever escape. I had her pray about how Jesus would relate to her in her situation – just looking for some bit of experienced hope. What she saw in prayer was a stern, judging Jesus saying, “You made your bed now lie in it.” I suggested that this didn't sound much like Jesus to me and read her the story of Jesus and the adulterous woman and asked her how the two compared. She noted a significant difference. When I asked whether the fake “Jesus” in her imagination reminded her of anyone else, she said that that's what her mom would say to her all the time. We repeated the prayer, this time inviting her to practice the presence of the Jesus of the gospels rather than the presence of her mother in disguise as Jesus, which led to much better results.

A second common possibility is that we **project our own unhealthy desires onto God**. So I've seen a few situations where someone has experienced Jesus blessing a freedom to continue living in a clearly sinful lifestyle or exacting cosmic revenge on someone they are deeply angry at. Challenging these kinds of experiences is a little more tricky, and I would prefer to ask people questions rather than risk projecting my own narrow wisdom on the possible broad, timely and flexible wisdom of God. So I might ask, “So did you get the impression that Jesus thought that ___ was actually a good thing or that he didn't care?” And then someone might respond with, “No, it was more like Jesus wanted me to focus more on other things first,” and I would be glad I wasn't overly directive about my discernment.

Shared prayer, of course, is usually a little better because there is some built-in communal discernment. When we are practicing Jesus' presence on our own, we need to be a bit more intentional or responsible to discern. The foundation, again, for this discernment is a commitment to and experience with the Christian story: Scripture – especially the New Testament, healthy Christian tradition, and Christian community.

In that context, here are some questions:

- Does it seem more likely that an experience is coming from negative emotions like fear, guilt, shame, anger, bitterness rather than Jesus?
- Does Jesus' presence seem more like my parents or an embodiment of my culture than like the Jesus of the gospels?
- Will the prayer experience lead toward or away from life or *shalom*? (I.e. a well-rounded, biblical picture of the kind of fullness of peaceful, harmonious life that God intends for us.)
- Does the Jesus I imagined “smell like Jesus” – does the experience line up with the kinds of things we see of Jesus in the gospels (with appropriate cultural shifts)?

Discernment questions not to ask (if the above all seem ok)

- Is this only my own imagination? (Perhaps – but why didn't you seem to really know this before? Perhaps it is your own imagination and Jesus might be there beside you patting your own spirit on the head and saying good work, you're starting to think like me and dad.)
- Is this supernatural or am I "pretending"? (Even if it were pretending but it leads to your being wiser, more compassionate, more at peace, and more empowered to live abundantly, I would suggest that you just keep on pretending.)

In other words, discerning between the godly parts of our own intuition and imagination and what we intuitively and imaginatively hear from the Holy Spirit is, for the most part, impossible and usually unnecessary.

Homework – Four Steps:

- 1) Think of some situation or decision or something like that which is causing you particular stress or making you upset – something that has been consciously bothering you lately.
- 2) Remember a time when you felt the presence of Jesus with you. Take a minute or two to recall this moment deeply and what it felt like. Give thanks for it.
- 3) Bring 1 and 2 together – perhaps by telling Jesus about the situation while imaginatively recalling the time he was particularly present with you. Invite and allow Jesus to be present to that situation, perhaps responding in some way.
- 4) For the sake of discernment and accountability for what you gained, do something objective with the results. Either talk about them with a friend (or email me) or journal them.