



# Into the Silent Land

A Lenten Resource based on the book by Martin Laird, O.S.A.

Prepared by The Rev'd Brenda Rockell for St John's Anglican Church Royal Oak.

## Welcome to week five of our Lenten journey of contemplation for 2021

This week, we are looking at excerpts from the fourth, fifth and sixth chapters of *Into the Silent Land*. In these chapters, Martin Laird begins to describe some of the effects of longer or more advanced practice. Large parts of these chapters may be opaque for beginners, but I have done my best to select fragments that point toward a progression, for those of us just starting out.

Please know that this resource is not designed to introduce (or recommend) any one form of silent prayer or meditation. It's meant to be something of a 'taster', to encourage us to give silence a try, to lessen any discomfort we may have with the idea of it, and to help us move through the inevitable difficulties and distractions that arise when we attempt it. If you have found this material helpful, you will probably benefit from choosing a particular form of meditation from one faith tradition and going deeper into that.

It was good to gather with a small group last Sunday to discuss our journey with the readings and with our practice of silence. The next opportunity to get together with others is at the quiet day/retreat on Saturday afternoon, 27 March, starting with lunch at 12.30pm. All are welcome to that, whether you have engaged deeply or only glancingly with this resource. RSVP to Brenda: 0212611292 or [vicar@stjohnsroyaloak.net](mailto:vicar@stjohnsroyaloak.net) for catering and planning purposes.

## Excerpts from *Into the Silent Land*, Chapters 3-6

### THE PRAYER WORD

The prophetic voice of Isaiah announces the inner disposition of contemplative prayer. "You keep him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on you" (see Is 26:3). In Mark's Gospel it is Jesus' mind that is stayed on one of his followers. Jesus meets the rich young man and is moved by his desire for eternal life. In a touching scene Jesus fixes his gaze on the rich young man. "Jesus looked steadily at him and he was filled with love for him." (Mk 10:21). Many contemplatives feel their prayer to be simplified to little more than allowing their awareness to rest in this mutual gazing announced by Isaiah and Mark. Our self-forgetful gaze on God is immersed in God's self-emptying gaze on us, and in this mutual meeting we find rest. John of the Cross came to define deep prayer along similar lines. "Preserve a loving attentiveness to God with no desire to feel or understand any particular thing concerning God." By means of this loving attentiveness one begins to move into God.

...As the early contemplatives worked the example of Jesus into their own desert psychology, they realized the importance of not getting caught up in interior dialogues; for this gives way to the obsessive thinking that spells the ruin of inner peace, to say nothing of prayer.

...It is important to notice that it isn't a question of having no thoughts... there is a dimension of the mind that is always doing something. So give it something to do: let it quietly repeat a short phrase. This is the specific purpose of the prayer word: to keep the attention from chasing thoughts and, once catching them, which it does with lightning-quick speed, whip up some commentary about the thought. Once you are aware that the attention has been stolen by a thought, simply bring your attention back. In the struggle with thoughts, the prayer word offers great assistance.

...When it comes to practicing with a prayer word or phrase such as the Jesus Prayer, the basic instruction couldn't be simpler: at the time of prayer let go of all other concerns, recollect yourself, and begin to repeat silently the prayer word. Whenever you become aware that your attention has been

stolen, gently return your attention to the prayer word. Thus begins a journey to the depth of the present moment that can never be fully fathomed.

...It should likewise be emphasized that cultivating a contemplative practice, such as using a prayer word, the breath, sitting in stillness, is not to reduce prayer to a technique. Techniques imply a certain control and focus on a determined outcome. Contemplative practice is a skill, a discipline that facilitates a process that is out of one's direct control, but it does not have the capacity to determine an outcome. A gardener for example, does not actually grow plants. The gardener practices finely honed skills, such as cultivating soil, watering, feeding, weeding, pruning. But there is nothing the gardener can do to make the plants grow. However, if the gardener does not do what a gardener is supposed to do, the plants are not as likely to flourish. In fact they might not grow at all. In the same way a sailor exercises considerable skill in sailing a boat. But nothing the sailor does can produce the wind that moves the boat. Yet without the sailing skills that harness the wind, the boat will move aimlessly. Gardening and sailing involve skills of receptivity. The skills are necessary but by themselves insufficient. And so it is with contemplative practice and the spiritual life generally. Contemplation is sheer gift.

...What precisely is the prayer word doing? The prayer word gently excavates the present moment. The resulting interior focus eventually sets off and maintains a process of interior silencing. This interior silencing in turn begins to clear away much of the noise in our head. We discover in the process that there is more depth within us than we ever dreamt. There is not only chaos, confusion, emotional attachment, anxiety, and anger's nettled memory; not just the marvel of discursive reason, imaginative insight, and unconscious instinct, but also an abyss of awareness that is always flowing with bright obscurity, grounding all these mental processes, one with all and one with God. The prayer word assists this excavation of the present moment until such time as the prayer word too falls silent. Ultimately all strategies of spiritual acquisition become silent and our practice, if it can be called that any more, is simply luminous vastness gazing on and gazed through by luminous vastness.

...The best response to this grace is to gather in the folds of this mantle of silence and wrap them around us. Concretely this means frequent practice. Just as we cannot expect to be in good health by eating a nutritious meal once

a week or to be physically fit by walking around the block once a month, so it is with contemplative practice. Like physical health and fitness the fruits of contemplative practice are seen in regular practice.

...But as important as time set aside specifically for prayer, is learning to sit when you are not sitting. By this I mean, whenever the reasoning mind is not required for a specific task, take this as an opportunity to practice.

...With so much focus on contemplative practice and interior stillness, what about other forms of prayer? Do they simply disappear? This does happen. But it is simply because a deeper discovery has been made. By sheer grace of God, our very being itself is prayer... There is still an important role for intercessory prayer, but don't be surprised if you discover that silent communion with the ground of all being becomes the most natural and simple way of being in solidarity with all humanity and holding all our needs before the Creator of all... Community prayer remains important, but how you participate in it changes. Liturgical prayer has a way of becoming a fountain of grace... However, just because we come to intuit this as the simplest truth about liturgical prayer, this does not necessarily mean that it is easy to cope with large doses of liturgy... Sadly much liturgical prayer is often hopelessly cerebral, self-conscious, verbose, and distracted... This is no environment in which simplicity can easily flower. Each will have to negotiate these tensions for oneself.

## DISTRACTIONS

The distractions we encounter... teach us, they train us, and they hold out to us the following riddles. First, are you your thoughts and feelings? Second, what do thoughts and feelings appear in? Third, what is the nature of these thoughts and feelings, and who is aware of them? Again, these riddles are not answered by our reason but by our own inner silence.

...If we think we are our thoughts and feelings, we go through life simply reacting to what is going on around us, with little awareness that we are even doing this or that life could be otherwise. When we try to pray, distractions will strike us as being especially ensnaring, even overwhelming... Peace will indeed come, but it will be the fruit, not of pushing away distractions, but of meeting thoughts and feelings with stillness instead of commentary. This is the skill we must learn.

It is precisely this deeply ingrained habit of meeting thoughts with commentary, sometimes frenzied and obsessive commentary, that creates the noise in our heads, a good deal of suffering, as well as the sense of being separate from God and isolated from others. Sometimes these thoughts arrange themselves in such a way that they become a mental strategy. Among these mind games, and there are many, three are especially common: judging the quality of our own prayer, attempting to recreate positive experiences, and ego backlash.

...Allow to arise whatever arises, without determining what is allowed to arise in awareness and what is not. Meet everything with a steady, silent gaze. What notices the mind game is free of the mind game.

...Ego backlash is fairly common at this point in one's practice and not all that complicated. The ego is accustomed to keeping a tight grip on things and always having the last word. Any growth in contemplation is going to loosen the ego's grip, and the encounter with silence will for once leave it speechless. Sometimes the ego then reacts by tightening its grip again, and, after taking a step forward, we're left with the impression of having taken three steps back. It's best to become comfortable with the sense of always being a beginner

Distractions...serve a purpose. They initiate us into a sort of education by ordeal. The fruits of this education are manifold, but three that are fundamental [are]... First, we realize that we are not our thoughts and feelings. It is very liberating to realize that what goes on in our head, indeed the entire mindstream, does not have the final word on who we are. Life is simplified. Second, once we have crossed this threshold of realizing we are not the mind-stream of thoughts and feelings, we find the tensions of life easier to live through. Our interiority is not so cramped; indeed it is a vast and spacious flow...Clouds of thoughts and feelings come and go. We can identify these clouds with precision, but we no longer identify with them. Third, we realize that what beholds this vast and flowing whole is also the whole.

#### FROM VICTIM OF AFFLICTION TO WITNESS

...This skill of observation and discernment, which the ancients call "vigilance," has three elements. First, turn around and meet the afflictive emotion with stillness. Without a dedicated practice this won't be possible.

Second, allow [the distressing emotion] to be present. Third, let go of the commentary on the [emotion]. This third element is the most challenging.

...Growth in inner stability, even in the midst of chaos, deepens our capacity to be aware of what is happening within us *as it is happening*. With this move from passive victim to vigilant witness we begin to see with greater clarity the fits of obsessive commentary that we supply.

...Fear, anger, envy—any afflictive thought or feeling—cannot withstand a direct gaze. But if we look at the *story* and feed on the story we tell ourselves of our fear, anger, envy, etc., affliction thrives. Affliction feeds off the noise of the commenting, chattering mind.

One of the great paradoxes of the spiritual life is that our struggles are not separate from the luminous vastness within each of us. We don't get rid of struggle to discover this open space; nor does its discovery necessarily rid us of our struggles. The riddle of the obstacle is solved not by pushing it away or by holding on to it, but by meeting it with silence and by discovering in this meeting that sacred ground, which upholds both joy and sorrow, both struggle and freedom from struggle.

Most of us live much of our lives caught in the whirlwind of the stories going on in our heads. As our contemplative practice matures we are presented with opportunities to drop the story and to look straight into these thoughts and feelings that lead many of us around by a nose ring. And we see they are without substance. Without the story, they have no power. This insight is behind Mark Twain's famous line. "I'm an old man now and have had a great many problems. Most of them never happened." A lot goes on in our heads that is quite worthless. The silent mind knows that what sees the fear, the pain, the inner chaos, is free of the fear, pain, or chaos. But for the noisy mind it all becomes a huge problem. Contemplation is the way out of the great self-centered psychodrama. When interior silence is discovered, compassion flows. If we deepen our inner silence, our compassion for others is deepened. We cannot pass through the doorways of silence without becoming part of God's embrace of all humanity in its suffering and joy.

## Questions for reflection

+ Do you resonate with the observation that three of the major ‘mind games’ in relation to silent practice are: ‘judging the quality of our own prayer, attempting to recreate positive experiences, and ego backlash.’ Which of these connects most with your experience? How do you respond in the moment when you notice it happening?

+ Laird recommends taking opportunities to ‘sit when you’re not sitting’? What activities might lend themselves in your life to practising with word or breath while you are otherwise engaged with your hands?

+ What is your personal answer to the first of the riddles posed by our mental distractions: ‘am I my thoughts and feelings?’ If your answer is a form of ‘no’, what is your response to the question ‘what else am I?’

+ How do you relate to the distinction between our immediate feelings and sensations, and the inner ‘story’ or dialogue that becomes a mental commentary about those feelings and sensations? Have you had the experience of being able to separate the two, and let go of the story through practising silence?

*You may wish to keep a notebook and journal your responses to these questions and your ‘field notes’ from your practice of silence as the weeks of Lent pass.*

## Invitation to practice

Last week, the focus was on posture and using the breath to carry the prayer word or phrase repeatedly throughout the meditation. This way of being in silence is very embodied and attentive to the here and now of the present moment. If you want to keep going with that, great. You may find it helpful to add in a brief prayer, scripture reading or chant to begin or end your practice.

Alternatively, you may wish to try a different form of prayer that is less focused on the body and the present moment, such as Centering Prayer. In Centering Prayer, the prayer word is just that, a word (or two at the most) not a phrase, and there is no attending to the breath for the duration. Instead, the time of silence begins with some anchoring in repeating the word, but then the word drops out, and the prayer is 'just sitting,' open and consenting to the hidden work of God in the soul. It is only when you notice yourself distracted by thoughts that the prayer word comes back in, and is repeated in the mind once or twice to assist in letting go the distraction. Then the open silence resumes. The thoughts are not observed or witnessed with any particular intention, they are just allowed to drift by, and there is no attention on the breath or body or on any external image.

Alternatively again, you may wish to use the [10 minute icon link here \(https://youtu.be/hiHXjcykUtY\)](https://youtu.be/hiHXjcykUtY) not just as a time-keeping device, but as a form of visual prayer. Put the you tube video on full screen and sit in front of the icon. Use your prayer word or phrase to help let go of distractions, and simply be with the image. Try not to 'think about' the icon or address yourself to it in any way with prayer or inner dialogue. Simply allow yourself to encounter it, and let yourself be seen by the gaze of the icon. Feelings may come and go – let them arise and subside. Let the image lead you into 'loving attentiveness': "Our self-forgetful gaze on God is immersed in God's self-emptying gaze on us, and in this mutual meeting we find rest."