

'PRAYING' SCRIPTURE

Travelling with Jesus – Helped by Luke

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PRAYER TO THE HOLY SPIRIT

*'Come Holy Spirit,
fill the hearts of your faithful,
and kindle in them the fire of Your love,
send forth Your spirit
and they shall be created
and You shall renew the face of the earth.'*

FOREWORD

There are two main objects in this book:

- 1) to give examples of one way of praying Scripture that I have found fruitful over many years – personally and with parishioners. It is a series of guided imagination exercises following Luke's order.
- 2) It uses these episodes from Luke to lead towards a particular goal, namely, a new level of companionship with Jesus and a greater awareness of the Gift of Pentecost.



Using these in a newly developed Japanese parish I found that the groups' 'Faith-sharing' contributed greatly to their spiritual growth. Here the book is being also adapted for a habit of privately 'Praying Scripture' and developing fruitful 'Silent Time'. But in the Appendix are 'Hints for forming a 'Faith-sharing' group if desired, 'Why I chose Luke', the 'Fruitfulness of 'Faith-Sharing' and some personal sharing of what I got from 'praying Scripture' and from Luke.

BRIEF EXPLANATION OF 'PRAYING SCRIPTURE'.

*(Hints for Personal prayer, Adoration time,
Prayer groups, private or small retreats,
group reflections etc)*

I was already 20 years ordained and working as a pastor in a Japanese missionary parish when I learned about 'praying Scripture'! (So let nobody feel embarrassed if they are not used to it so far.) I had spent much time talking *to* God. But this 'pondering the Word of God' changed my prayer towards more of an 'interaction'; it provided space, patience and openness to 'listen', to hear and be moved inwardly. So 'Praying Scripture' means the help that a text of Scripture gives towards this personal conversation with God. Remember, that what we see God doing in the Scriptures in the past, is telling us what He is doing, here and now, among us! So beyond our talking to God this helps us to 'listen'. We 'listen' by noticing movements in the heart and mind. Examples; A word in the text may hold my attention and as I dwell on it I notice things in a new way or, pulled by imagination deeper into the scene, I taste feelings of those in it. It can cause memories of experiences to arise. Gradually I will find myself talking to the GOD I MET in my EXPERIENCE. So, noticing movements in my heart and mind become my listening. Later I reflect further on them. Yes, the Holy Spirit is at work. And this builds up a personal relationship. In this process, *waiting* – with openness – is an

important word. Scripture study can add to the pondering, but basically the text alone is all that is needed for ‘Praying Scripture.’

Here are a series of ‘*GUIDED MEDITATIONS*’ that I used with groups. They are examples of what can happen in a ‘praying Scripture’ period. But remember much is based on MY experience. So please be careful to understand that these are only examples of what one might meet. They give reassurance that, if you find them coming into your pondering, you are not being distracted by memories or imaginations about the event but being led on to recognise God acting in YOUR OWN life. YOU take out of your ponderings what vibes with YOUR experience and build on that. Think of this input as ‘hints’, ‘a demonstration’, a ‘springboard.’ Gradually you will find different and deeper insights from yourself or from others but hopefully these examples of mine help you to begin a fruitful ‘praying Scripture’.

I recommend first reading the whole planned text. Then gazing attentively at it, allow the Spirit to lead you here and there. In your planned length of pondering time you may be held on a certain word or part of the text. Stay here as long as held. (It is like, when young, slowly rolling a hard-boiled sweet around in the mouth to get as much taste as possible for as long as possible.) Then, when you feel drawn, continue the text till stopped again. Even after times of having used the whole text one can feel drawn back to it again and again – each time it can provide further noticing. These ‘Guided

Meditations’ are examples of my pondering. Find what moves you.

After your ‘Silent praying period’ a short reflection or thinking time might help you clarify what you experienced in the silent time. Asking yourself a question such as, ‘*Did I see anything in a new way?*’ or, ‘*Was my heart moved in a new way?*’ might help. This can help your noticing when repeating pondering a text. Sharing experiences with another also helps. Repeating pondering the same text gives added fruit – or going back to one before. But you will learn more by doing. Just ‘try and see’ – with a certain perseverance!

1. PONDERING ZECHARIAH AND ELIZABETH. (Luke 1.5-25)

Preparation.

Decide how long you are going to ponder this text on this occasion.

Notice what are you feeling at this moment? Share this with God. Accept He wants to give you something here and now. Tell Him what you want. Become receptive and open – to receive what God wants to give you!

Turn to the text. Read it all through once. Then gazing attentively and patiently at it allow the Spirit to lead here and there. Each time is different.

Luke 1:5-25

During the time when Herod was king of the land of Israel, there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly order of Abijah. His wife's name was Elizabeth; she also belonged to a priestly family. They both lived good lives in God's sight, and obeyed fully all the Lord's commandments and rules. They had no children because Elizabeth could not have any, and she and Zechariah were both very old. One day Zechariah was doing his work as a priest before God, taking his turn in the daily service. According to the custom followed by the priests, he was chosen by lot to burn the incense on the altar. So

he went into the temple of the Lord, while the crowd of people outside prayed during the hour of burning the incense. An angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar where the incense was burned. When Zechariah saw him he was troubled and felt afraid. But the angel said to him, ‘Don’t be afraid, Zechariah! God has heard your prayer and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son. You are to name him John. How glad and happy you will be, and how happy many others will be when he is born! He will be a great man in the Lord’s sight. He must not drink any wine or strong drink. From his very birth he will be filled by the Holy Spirit. He will bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. He will go ahead of him, strong and mighty like the prophet Elijah. He will bring fathers and children together again; he will turn the disobedient people back to the way of thinking of the righteous; he will get the Lord’s people ready for him.” Zechariah said to the angel, “How shall I know if this is so? I am an old man and my wife also is old.” “I am Gabriel,” the angel answered. “I stand in the presence of God, who sent me to speak to you and tell you the good news. But you have not believed my message, which will come true at the right time. Because you have not believed you will be unable to speak; you will remain silent until the day my promise to you comes true. In the meantime the people were waiting for Zechariah, wondering why he was spending such a long time in

the temple. When he came out he could not speak to them, and so they knew that he had seen a vision in the temple. Unable to say a word, he made signs to them with his hands. When his period of service in the temple was over Zechariah went back home. Some time later his wife Elizabeth became pregnant, and did not leave the house for five months. “Now at last the Lord has helped me in this way,” she said. “He has taken away my public disgrace!” (GN)

Here is an example of my pondering. But see what moves you!

‘Childless’.

Gazing at the text ... the words ***‘obeyed fully all the Lord’s commandments and rules’*** hold my attention.... I’m impressed – and envious.... Then the words ***‘no children’*** take over... it leads me to probable feelings of Zechariah and Elizabeth... there is a couples’ natural longing for a child. (Also I have heard that in that Jewish culture children were so central for family existence .. a necessary provision for old age ... for carrying on the family name ... its role in the community... for participating in God’s plan for the Nation.) So to be called ***‘barren’*** is a terrible stigma ... for both parents ..(a valid – and encouraged - reason for divorce.) .. Worse! ... in popular belief not having children ... a sign of being ‘out of favour with God!’ ... how unnerving ... frightening! ... Did they feel like this? I spend time wondering how they prayed ... I imagine a history of their married life till now ... expectations ... then yearning ... soulful petitioning ... waiting ...waiting ... anxiety ... sadness ... Now childbearing time is

gone!... a crushing sadness! Yet, I see Zechariah and Elizabeth perseveringly continuing to ***‘obey fully all the Lord’s commandments and rules!’*** Yes, faithfully observing ... SADDENED, BEWILDERED YET FAITHFUL ... I am admiring! And envious! (*I find myself repeating, ‘Lord, strengthen my heart and TRUST.’*)

‘To enter the Lord’s sanctuary.’ – Chosen!

[There were 20,000 priests living throughout Israel, taking turns in groups of about 800 to serve in the Temple in Jerusalem. Here it is the turn of Zechariah’s group. He has come to fulfill his present two weeks.] But now is a very special moment ... he has been picked ... by lot – out of the 800! .. for an unexpected privilege ... he has been chosen to offer the daily sacrificial prayer of incense ... a prayer of THANKS and PETITION ... for the Nation! Israel is liturgically thanking and begging – we see deeply spiritual, prayerful followers praying outside the Inner Sanctuary. Israel thanks for being chosen ... for knowing better the Creator God ... for being gifted ...cherished ... forgiven ... rescued at different times in the past. But this is also a pleading prayer. Israel needs and wants present saving. It groans under conquest ... poverty ... weak religious leadership ...wayward practices. Not even one prophet in over three centuries! So yearning for the Promised Saviour is deep ... persevering ... but time-testing! And he, Zachariah, has been chosen! To thank and ask!!

As I picture Zachariah entering that majestic, stone, incense-filled Inner-Temple building, what conflicting

emotions must have been eddying inside him?... He the seemingly ‘rejected’ one ... is now chosen – by God! – to enter into this sacred, most awesome place ...to represent all Israel at prayer! .. God’s ways are strange! ... I wonder in his turmoil of emotions, what prayers ... parts of Psalms ... did he pour out as he moves into the inner sanctum. (Here I might be brought back in memory to struggling, conflicting prayer-times on my own spiritual journey. What did I learn?)

God’s presence ‘breaks through’.

The Message is startling.

And it is into this situation that God makes His presence felt in a new, startling, awe-inspiring way...! (I reflect, ‘God, your answer to prayer, when it comes, is not what we expect!’) Zechariah is startled as God now ‘breaks into’ his present ‘world’...The messenger’s presence and closeness first frightens him .. – before it turns to awe. (We need strong TRUST not to fear the unfamiliar and what we cannot control.) He is given ‘good news’ ... and it is part of a greater gift! ... and for the whole Nation!!! ... But it is coupled with such a demanding request! ... one so beyond his ‘common sense’, ... he cannot readily acquiesce. (Did he fear that, in that majestic building, in that candle-smoke, incense-laden atmosphere, in his emotional state, he might be hallucinating?) He hears three intertwined and difficult-to-fathom messages. The first, ***‘Your wife Elizabeth is to bear you a son’!!!*** ... (At their age how hard is that to believe! – opening old wounds.) ... The second and even greater message ... the Promised Saviour is about to come!!

... Thirdly, this, their son ... is to be the voice ***‘preparing for the Lord a people fit for Him!’*** ... I imagine Zechariah doubting and wondering, ‘How can I believe this *message*? How could we, even if we were younger, rear and prepare such a prophet? And now at this age...!’ But he is told, ***‘Do not be afraid.’*** .. That is, he is told to TRUST more deeply ... But that is not easily or quickly done!

‘You will be silenced..’ Silent Time!

I interpret the enforced time of silence not as a punishment but as a help! This ‘silent time’ will be a preparation for accepting and responding to this ‘unbelievable’ invitation. He is being called to participate in such a special way in God’s ‘Saving Plan’.

Next, I imagine him, returned home, and in this enforced, secluded ‘silent time’, struggling through alternating currents of doubt and resolutions to trust. (Did the memory of seeing the effect on the assembled people outside the Temple help?) But of course, Elizabeth becoming pregnant would have been a huge jump forward in wonder, gratitude and trust. It leads him to a full embracing of God’s call, – as his later affirmation, ***‘John is his name’*** will show. But there are still many practical ‘impossibilities’... To embrace God’s plan with complete trust more ‘silent time’ is needed. (Here, I pause and ask for a better habit of ‘silent prayer’ for inner change and fuller participation in what God wants me to do.) I have come to realise that persevering ‘listening’ or openness in silence – even feeling helpless and hopeless – gives God a chance to change us, even down to the deep, unknown parts

of us. And it is out of this contemplative part of ourselves that the most fruitful activity comes. ‘Silent time’ is a foundation for a spiritual journey. Helping others grow in it is sharing a gift!

One or more Questions that might help Reflection:-

- ❖ Has any new awareness of a Caring God come to mind? Might I now ask during the day, ‘God, are you really sending something to me/us now?’
- ❖ Did feelings of people in this story bring up similar feelings in your own experiences? e.g. ‘barren’ periods? A ‘Gabriel’ message? A struggling with challenging invitations?
- ❖ Did you feel drawn to do anything new?

Repeating pondering a text or alternating with a previous one gives added insights and fruit.

Reflection on the call to Zechariah and Elizabeth.

‘Pondering’ this leads me back into one experience that greatly influenced my life. I was already nearly twenty years in Japan and a pastor in a missionary parish. It was a ‘barren’ period where there was no fruit from strenuous labours of studying, trying different advances while doggedly praying and waiting in the yearning. There was very little visible response to our ‘Teaching the Catholic Faith’ efforts. Then Vatican 2 Council ‘appeared’ and helped in different ways.

The Columban superiors asked a Boston Jesuit to come to Japan and help our development in ‘passive’ and ‘receptive’ prayer, in ‘Praying’ Scripture and in nourishing Spiritual Companionship. Realising Christianity is beyond a ‘teaching’ – it is a PERSON – led me to use the Gospels more to ‘Introducing Christ’ – which became the title of our talks and classes. More importantly it deepened my own spiritual life. It also made us more conscious of the Holy Spirit at work in all sorts of ways and places. We found our missionary efforts were visibly more fruitful. This is one example of God ‘breaking through’ into greater awareness. May your own ‘silent time’ eventually become fruitful.

2.

PONDERING THE ANNUNCIATION

(Luke 1:26-38)

Preparation.

Decide how long you are going to ponder and pray this text on this occasion. Maybe, like me, you are feeling needy in many ways and wanting to pray better. So I deliberately 'turn to' God – especially the 'Caring God' that I have begun to meet in Zechariah and Elizabeth's experience. I present my present feelings to Him. I ask for guidance and patience. But I especially ask to be able to 'hand over' in TRUST. I turn to Luke's story of the Annunciation to Mary. I read it through once then, gazing attentively at it, allow the Spirit to lead me here and there.

Luke 1:26-38

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man named Joseph, of the House of David; and the virgin's name was Mary. He went in and said to her, 'Rejoice, so highly favoured! The Lord is with you.' She was deeply disturbed by these words and asked herself what this greeting could mean, but the angel said to her, 'Mary, do not be afraid: you have won God's favour. Listen! You are to conceive and bear a son, and you must name him Jesus. He will be great and will be called son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his ancestor David; he will

rule over the House of Jacob for ever and his reign will have no end. Mary said to the angel, ‘But how can this come about, since I am a virgin?’ ‘The Holy Spirit will come upon you’ the angel answered ‘and the power of the Most High will cover you with its shadow. And the child will be holy and will be called Son of God. Know this too: your kinswoman Elizabeth has, in her old age, herself conceived a son, and she whom people called barren is now in her sixth month, ‘for nothing is impossible to God’. ‘I am the handmaid of the Lord,’ said Mary ‘let what you have said be done to me.’ And the angel left her. (NJB)

Each time results are different but, here is an example of my pondering. See what moves you.

‘Sent’

Gazing attentively, I am drawn to that word **‘sent’**; here it is again! God is again sending an angel – same angel ... and **‘In the sixth month’** ... all this denotes ‘continuity’ – as does, **‘Joseph’** and **‘David’**. *David* also points back to Israel’s history and parts of God’s Saving Plan. And I remember that what Scripture shows God doing in the past tells me what He is doing at present! So what is God sending now into my needs? ... into society’s needs? ... into world needs? I ask to recognise unexpected ‘Gabriels’ that He sends to help me ... and us ... on our journey of being part of His saving plan for all. I ask and spend time waiting with openness. (I notice too that I have progressed to calling God, ‘you’! ‘What do

YOU want me to do now?') I look to the text: for more insight or movement in my heart.

***'To Nazareth'!* 'an unmarried girl!'**

With surprise I notice that it is not to a Religious leader .. or to one of such a family .. nor to someone, like Zechariah, in the Temple of Jerusalem .. but ***'to Nazareth in Galilee'!*** In Israel Galilee is considered 'second-rate' territory with 'looked down upon' religious observances. And Galileans themselves look down on Nazareth village! Yet here we see God sending ***'to Nazareth'!*** And it is to ***'a virgin'!*** She has not even a husband or a son to give her some status in that society. Yet it is to Mary (all she has is a name) that God is sending a world-shaking, everlasting message! .. God certainly picks the 'unnoticeable' ones to distribute His gifts.

Mary's Lifestyle

I try to imagine the daily life of that 'ordinary' girl. I picture her in the family. Parts of her life involved cooking, cleaning, growing vegetables, weaving, tending fowl and goats... a village life of friends, neighbours, young and old, women, men. She carried water from the well, went to the Synagogue – an ordinary young Israelite woman's village-life.

However, I do imagine that 'ordinary' family as probably belonging to a small, .. deeply spiritual, remnant group in Israel who yearned and prayed for a Saviour .. a Messiah .. a Leader.. not of political or temporal glory.. but of spiritual life and strength. I try to picture her praying in the family and in

the Synagogue. I picture her listening to Scriptural readings of God calling Abraham, Moses, David and others - all to participate in His Plan. And I imagine her working alone at indoor or outdoor tasks, reciting in her 'silent time' parts of Psalms as she faced the 'ups and downs' of daily life. (I pause now to ask her to help me get more benefit from the Psalms. I notice I am trying to build up for myself an idea of her ways of praying.)

The Message Awe.

But into this life comes this special overwhelming experience of the presence of God. To an Israelite who, in awe, will not even pronounce God's name, this intense awareness of God's presence ... must be frightening. (Our reaction to the extraordinary is fear – before it turns to awe.) Then, for an 'ordinary' girl to hear herself addressed in words meaning, ***'Most specially chosen one'***.. must have stunned her! And the message is so far beyond anything anyone could even imagine. The invitation! .. is beyond imagination! She is being called to be the mother of the 'Long Awaited One', ***'You are to .. bear a son'*** called ***'Son of the Most High'*** and ... ***'His reign will have no end!'*** Moreover she will bear Him in some unique, unimaginable way! I pause, trying to get some grasp of how she felt. (*'Mary, by my spending time pondering this help me to pray better'*.)

She 'Asks Herself' – She Ponders. (The Story Telescoped??)

'She asks herself.' – I wonder how much silent time did she

need for that? (I ask myself has Luke not telescoped into these few words a longer time period describing how she strives to understand the message.) I try to picture Mary in her prayer time .. as she wrestles .. alone with this .. secret, .. heavenly invitation .. while going about her daily life. Yes, she has to do so all alone .. just a young village-woman. I wonder what Biblical events... or lines of Psalms she might have used to help her. (In prayer time we ask, listen, and wait to hear.) Mary asks a practical question, ***‘How can this happen, since I have had no relations with a man?’*** She asks, listens and hears: .. the answer, ***‘The Spirit will come upon you, the power of the Most High will overshadow you’***

‘let what you have said be done to me’

‘She is invited to open herself up to the action of the SPIRIT of God. It will mean the power of God coming upon her and the Saviour Child being born. I imagine it as receiving a fantastic awareness of God’s love – the Spirit of God. Her great TRUST is shown in her answer. She completely surrenders herself ‘in trust’ by, ***‘let what you have said be done to me’***. She does not understand how it will happen .. nor what situations it will lead her into .. but by OPENING herself up in trust ‘to the mystery’ she lets the Spirit freely work in her.

(She models for everyone openness to the Holy Spirit.)

‘nothing is impossible to God’.

I see the message about Elizabeth as a support, and a deepening of the conviction that, ***‘nothing is impossible to God’.***

‘And the angel left her’.

These words seize my attention. I notice I am annoyed.. I want to protest, ‘Why doesn’t the angel give her more help .. more advice .. more support for such a strange .. unknown .. stupendous undertaking?’ How helpful is the message about Elizabeth? .. Mary seems left alone .. how to tell Joseph .. what to say to her parents .. and so on. There is no advice on how to rear this special child. It leaves me uneasy.

Day-by-day living it out.

I begin to realise .. with new sympathy .. that Mary has agreed to set out on a life of having to face new unprepared-for situations ..each day! That will mean continually asking for .. waiting for .. being open to .. the Spirit’s promptings in making decisions. That will mean much silent listening .. and growing in the awareness that, ***‘Nothing is impossible to God’.***

(Like Mary, I meet times when I feel and ask, ‘How can I do this; I do not have the power.’ So I need to be open and accept the words, ***‘The Spirit will come upon you.’*** I am beginning to pray, *‘Mary help me to be more open to God’s SPIRIT touching my heart and mind’*)

One or more Questions that might help Reflection:-

- ❖ Is my image of God’s relationship to me quietly changing?
- ❖ Is there a new growing awareness of the action of the Spirit? Is Mary helping me be more ‘open’ to the Spirit?
- ❖ Do I feel closer to Mary now?

- ❖ Did I remember when God sent ‘Gabriels’ into my life with invitations to step out into the ‘unknown’? Any fruit from those experiences?
- ❖ Do I now feel drawn to undertake something specific but demanding?

Reflection and sharing on the Annunciation to Mary

I have a growing habit of daily using a short, ‘silent time’ for WAITING to notice positive good things that arise in my day. I mean noticing more fully things, e.g. that ‘turned out well’, finding what was searched for, making a good choice, having a change of heart, being surprisingly generous or patient or ‘letting go’, etc. I see them as our Caring God’s special ‘breaking-into’ events of my ‘lowly’ life. And I ask, ‘Was I letting the Spirit work in me? I still remember the first talk our ‘Gabriel’ – the Spirituality helper – gave us. He briefly, historically sketched how in times of protracted inner turmoil in the Church a greater awareness of the Action of the Holy Spirit re-emerged among the faithful. Now appears to be one of those times. I pray, *‘Mary, lead us to be open to letting the Spirit work through us. May we participate better in God’s saving plan.’*

All this has given me a more familiar relationship to Mary. I ask her to lead me to greater response in TRUST. May I cooperate better in God’s Great Plan of Saving. I now realise that this present growing relation to Mary has developed beyond the one I took from the experiences of others. ‘Praying scripture’ and my own reflections on experiences are helping this.

3.

PONDERING MARY VISITS ELIZABETH

(Luke 1:39-56)

Preparation.

Decide how long you are going to ponder this text on this occasion. What are you feeling at this moment? Share this with God. Pause and accept that He wants to give you something here and now. Start with telling Him what you want. Become receptive and open to what God seems to want to give me now. Spend a little time asking, 'What do YOU want me to do at this time?' For help in receiving promptings we turn to Luke's story of the Visitation of Mary to Elizabeth. Read it all through once. Then, gazing attentively at it, allow the Spirit to lead here and there. Each time is different.

Luke 1: 39-56

Mary set out at that time and went as quickly as she could into the hill – country to a town in Judah. She went into Zechariah's house and greeted Elizabeth. Now it happened that as soon as Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leapt in her womb and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. She gave a loud cry and said, 'Of all women you are the most blessed, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. Why should I be honoured with a visit from the mother of my Lord? Look, the moment your greeting reached my ears, the child in my womb leapt for joy. Yes, blessed is she who believed that the promise made her

by the Lord would be fulfilled.’ And Mary said: My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour; because he has looked upon the humiliation of his servant. Yes, from now onwards all generations will call me blessed, for the Almighty has done great things for me. Holy is his name, and his faithful love extends age after age to those who fear him.

He has used the power of his arm, he has routed the arrogant of heart. He has pulled down princes from their thrones and raised high the lowly. He has filled the starving with good things, sent the rich away empty. He has come to the help of Israel his servant, mindful of his faithful love – according to the promise he made to our ancestors – of his mercy to Abraham and to his descendants for ever. Mary stayed with her some three months and then went home. (NJB)

Mary’s setting out.

Gazing attentively, the words ‘*set out*’ lead me from picturing Mary setting out on that difficult journey to also thinking of her as setting out on a deeper spiritual journey. The physical journey .. daunting enough for a lone girl .. a difficult, four-day walk. (Maybe she was able to pay to join a caravan of traders and their wives as they passed through Nazareth to Bethany and Jerusalem.) No, not an inviting journey. (This might bring up brief remembered feelings from personal experiences of difficult ‘settings-out’. Were they – or this – the beginning of a spiritual journey for me?)

‘as quickly as possible’.

I ask ‘Why did she go? And *quickly*? To me ‘quickly’ says ‘wanting to go very much’. I know family bonds of helping one another were very strong – even separated by distance. So I can imagine her wanting to go to help her aged cousin at this difficult time – in outdoor and indoor house-work and in assisting Zechariah. But beyond manual help was there not the desire to confer? They both had amazing experiences of God’s action. Who could they talk to about it? I expect Mary wanted to. To carry her astounding role, alone and silently, in her everyday surroundings must have been such a terribly heavy burden. And would not the only person who might possibly understand be someone who had some experience of God’s special action? I imagine Mary also deciding that Elizabeth would want to talk. And Gabriel had mentioned Elizabeth to Mary! Was this part of Gabriel’s reason for telling her? It would be good for both of them. This is what ‘quickly’ suggests to me. Is this another example of responding to promptings of the Holy Spirit?

Mary’s Anxiety?

Yet I wonder did Mary, at the same time, carry a gnawing anxiety as she travelled? Mary had been told about Elizabeth’s experience. But it does not say that Elizabeth was told about Mary’s experience. All Elizabeth would know was that Mary has not yet gone to Joseph’s home. Thus she should not be pregnant! Might Mary not at least hear, ‘What? You are pregnant too? But you have not yet gone to Joseph’s house! I don’t want the help of someone like you!’ Yet she sets out in TRUST!

What prayers on the journey?

I try to imagine her constant praying before and during the journey among the women of the caravan .. what parts of psalms did she constantly, silently repeat? Or, using Gabriel's words, did she repeatedly whisper, '***God can do anything, God can do anything***' and then her own, '***Let it happen to me, let it happen***' as she walked on. (May I remember to ask Mary's support when called to step out into an anxious or threatening encounter.)

The Welcome! .. and Sharing God's gifts.

I imagine her with these conflicting emotions approaching the porch of Elizabeth's home and being overwhelmed by the amazing and joyful greeting she gets from Elizabeth. Mary is awed by the goodness and delicacy of her Caring God in preparing Elizabeth for this meeting. And Elizabeth's enforced silent and secluded time has made her so open to inspirations from the Spirit. '***Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit.***' Her greeting is such a gift to Mary. And Mary herself is a gift to Elizabeth – they are channels of the Spirit to each other. Their gratitude increases.

(Pondering this might help us notice examples of where God worked in us and through us for one-another.)

The Magnificat.

This front-door scene of shared wonder, excitement and joy is expressed by the hymn of thanksgiving and praise called the '***Magnificat***'. It is not surprising that the early Christian community, dwelling so much on this meeting and its

implications, turned it into a liturgical hymn. (Songs, Canticles and hymns were a customary Jewish way of keeping fresh the handed-down appreciation of important historical events and their effects. This canticle would have been well developed by Luke's time. He incorporates it into his writing to highlight the importance of this meeting. His presentation here has dramatised the porch 'Greeting' but it expresses the essential core of the emotional exchange of that meeting.)

We say and sing this prayer very frequently. It shows Mary's attitude to God .. her growing relation to God. She is so aware of receiving God's gifts. She responds with thanks and praise. (It is the relation that I want Mary to help me grow in. I ask to accept, like she did, the special – even if tiny – part of God's saving Plan that He has given 'lowly' me. May I be more generous in my sharing with the 'needy' what I have received. May I better support all who work for spreading justice for everyone. Above all I pray to be more conscious of the *mercy* of God.

The Continued Sharing.

As I ponder this text, I imagine these basic deep feelings of praise and thanks 'at the front-door' continuing and expanding through frequent sharing all during the three months visit. I have a mental picture of these two pregnant women every evening, after the housework has been done, at the equivalent of 'around the fire', sharing about what they are experiencing God doing in themselves. The more they share, the more they also become aware of what God

has done in Israel's history. And they become more aware of God's mysterious power now working in 'lowly' people like themselves for the salvation of all. This text has helped me in my prayer time notice that out of my visiting someone, they received something positive. I now realise God worked through me. Further I can realise I too received. God was at work through the other for me also. This helps me in further visitations.

Future Trials ahead.

Staying with this scene of a happy, daily sharing practice enlivens me. I may imagine Mary and Elizabeth welcoming me into their company ('around the fire') *listening* to my sharing and encouraging me.

But nudged further in the text and seeing in Mary's preparing to return home the words, '**to her own home!**' awakens my anxiety. Noticing '**own**' and not 'to the home of Joseph' says to me that she has not yet told Joseph about what has happened to her. So she still has that worrying ordeal, – among others – ahead of her. Thus she is going back to a very difficult future! I feel sad at this. My only consolation is that this sharing time with Elizabeth has given both of them more strength and even deeper trust to go forward into their difficult futures with HOPE. I ask that my practice of *faith-sharing* increases my understanding of how the SPIRIT also works through us for one another and for the Community. I reflect that in the Annunciation, Mary is being called into a deeper union with the TRINITY. In the Visitation she is being drawn to help others along that spiritual journey.

Questions that might help Reflection or Sharing:-

- ❖ Did Mary's example of 'stepping out' help your thinking about your own spiritual journey?
- ❖ Any experience of needing courage and trust to set out to share with another? Would you say the Spirit was prompting?
- ❖ Any experience of someone's visit becoming a thanking, sharing, even a prayer-together time giving new 'life' to both?
- ❖ Has talking to Mary and Elizabeth taught you more about the value of faith-sharing? .. of listening? Do you feel drawn into something new to help more in God's plan?

Repeating 'pondering' a text or alternating with a previous one gives added insights and fruit.

A reflection and sharing on the Visitation.

Pondering this text reminded me of times when I '*stepped out*' out with trepidation, but determination, to seek another's sharing help and God produced fruit from it. Other times came up when I '*set out*' to share about happy, God-related experiences and that increased thankfulness and further insights. And at still other times memories of people coming to me to share joyous – or painful – experiences and ultimately we both received fruit from that sharing. I think such meetings are a favourite work-place of the Holy Spirit. My experience has taught me the great value of '*faith-sharing*' with another or in a group. And I strive for and pray for a better ability to listen and to share about 'spiritual journeying'.

See Appendix 3: The Value from Faith-Sharing.

4. Pondering THE BIRTH OF JOHN THE BAPTIST (Luke 1:57-80)

Preparation.

Decide how long you are going to ponder this text on this occasion. What are you feeling at this moment? Share this with God. Mary and Elizabeth's example has opened us to see God wanting to work in us and through us. Ask, 'What do YOU want me to do at this time?' For help in receiving promptings we turn to Luke's story of the birth of John the Baptist. What is God's Spirit preparing us for? Read it all through once. Then gazing attentively at it, allow the Spirit to lead here and there. Each time is different.

Luke 1: 57-80

The time came for Elizabeth to have her baby, and she gave birth to a son. Her neighbours and relatives heard how wonderfully good the Lord had been to her, and they all rejoiced with her. When the baby was a week old they came to circumcise him; they were going to name him Zechariah, his father's name. But his mother said, "No! His name will be John." They said to her, "But you don't have any relative of that name!" Then they made signs to the father, asking what name he would like the child to have. Zechariah asked for a writing pad and wrote, "His name is John" How surprised they all were! At that moment Zechariah was able to speak again, and he started praising God. The

neighbours were all filled with fear, and the news about these things spread through all the hill country of Judea. Everyone who heard of it thought about it and asked, “What is this child going to be?” It was plain that the Lord’s power was with him. John’s father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and he spoke God’s message. *“Let us praise the Lord, the God of Israel! He came to the help of His people and set them free. He provided a mighty Saviour for us, who is a descendant of his servant David. Long ago by means of his holy prophets he said this: he promised to save us from our enemies, and from the power of those who hate us. He said he would show mercy to our ancestors, and remember his sacred covenant. He made a solemn promise to our ancestor Abraham, and vowed that he would rescue us from our enemies, and allow us to serve him without fear; to be holy and righteous before him, all the days of our life. You my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High God. You will go ahead of the Lord to prepare his road for him; to tell his people that they will be saved, by having their sins forgiven. Our God is merciful and tender. He will cause the bright dawn of salvation to rise on us, and shine from heaven on all those who live in the dark shadow of death, to guide our steps into the path of peace.”* The child grew and developed in body and spirit. He lived in the desert until the day when he would appear publicly to the people of Israel. (GN)

‘The time came’

Three words. But they cover a long time. Elizabeth and Zachariah have endured a long, painful journey to this moment. It covers the long period from a dedicated couple anticipating children to one of painfully and gradually accepting the crushing sentence of ‘barrenness’ and then being overwhelmed by an experience of God’s special appearance in their lives and its consequences. Now nervous, but trusting they face the special moment of birth, ***‘the time came for Elizabeth to have her child’!*** I start imagining the flash of intense joy of a mother at the miraculous moment of hearing, seeing and touching her new baby. How much did Elizabeth’s experience magnify that, experiencing what was impossible! Besides feeling awe at participating in God the Father’s love in gifting new life she was further participating in His great Life-giving Plan for everyone. I try to contemplate Elizabeth’s and Zachariah’s joy, their awe and thentthankfulness! I imagine a little of their intense feeling of, ***‘how wonderfully good the Lord had been.’*** (This urges me to be more conscious that THANKSFULNESS is central in my deepening relationship to God. We are called to growth in noticing reasons for it. It leads to deeper acceptance of being loved and thence to growth in giving love. Love shares itself.)

‘They all rejoiced with her.’

Here is an example of awe, joy, thanks and love, sharing and being shared. It permeates the community, ***‘they all rejoiced with her.’*** (Memories of shared family and community

celebrations for grateful experiences deepen this awareness. And we feel again the atmosphere of solidarity. It generates prayers of thankfulness and for greater closeness.)

John is circumcised. ‘*John is his name*’

The Israelite ceremony of circumcision of a firstborn male symbolised the offering of the child back to God. Here we see Zechariah and Elizabeth doing it, not just liturgically, but in fact! Their strong affirmation of, ‘*John is his name*’ shows the full acceptance that, first Elizabeth, and then the silent Zechariah have accepted God’s message and Plan. Their grown openness to God’s prompting and Spirit shows this. But this means that after rearing John, they will have to give him away to participate in that plan. So there will be no son to care for them in their old age .. no son to carry on the family name .. nor the family’s priestly role in the Temple! Yet in trust they surrender to God’s plan. And God ‘puts his stamp’ on their act. He publicly affirms their whole-hearted, generous offering by dramatically restoring Zachariah’s speech, ‘*Zechariah was able to speak again.*’ And the first use of that speech is to publicly ‘empty his heart’ in praise and thanks to God, ‘*filled with the Holy Spirit, and he spoke God’s message.*’ (The Benedictus is a later ritualised and repeated *canticle* summary of what he proclaimed.)

The Community Participation

Now I am imagining these friends and neighbours listening to Zachariah. Their awe has increased. They become even more aware of the ‘*hand of the Lord*’ at work among them. It leads them to ask, ‘*What will this child become?*’ (And

here am I – and us – at this moment – prompted by this text of Luke to ask on what journey was *‘this child’* sent to lead me – and us.)

‘BENEDICTUS’ Canticle

I say Zachariah’s *‘BENEDICTUS’* very often. I find I now say it more prayerfully. It draws me to THANK and PRAISE God for sending the promised Saviour and all he will do for us. And John will go ahead of him leading people close and receiving light and peace. I am asking to recognise His present-day prophets. Prophets see to the heart of things and point them out for us. They *‘make known to people their salvation’*. Like John they will point to the Saviour. But it reminds me that I too am being called to participate in ‘pointing out’. I notice that when praying this I receive HOPE.

The Desert.

John *‘grew and developed in body and spirit. He lived in the desert until the day when he would appear publicly to the people of Israel.’* At first glance it looks as if Luke is just giving us an historical inkling of the future life of this special child. But now I see it as teaching us about the value of ‘going through the desert’ especially as a preparation for ‘pointing out’ the Saviour. For the ‘needy’ but ‘chosen’ Israelites in their history the desert was a place of PREPARATION e.g. for the people before entering the Promised Land, and for special ‘messengers’ preparing to speak God’s message to the people. Our assumption is that,

because it is a place of physical and emotional emptiness, of neediness, loneliness, suffering and yearning, it would be no place to 'find' God. But by allowing God to bring us into it and through it (not just into it) we grow more aware of our dependence on Him, grow more trusting and much closer to Him. And we are changed to become better participants in His plans. This leads to bringing other people closer to Him. (I notice that as a preparation for his mission it was not into the Temple that John was led to be schooled in religious observances and laws. No, it was into the desert!) It confirms for me, what experience has also taught me, that the foundation of a mission has to be, first, that interior journey into a close dependence on, then gratitude to, then a greater trust in God. (Here, are we being told again that we need similar interior preparation before we can help others 'meet' the saviour? Repeatedly I pray, '*God, May I allow Your Spirit to work in me and through me.*')

One or more Questions that might help Reflection:-

- ❖ 'Who was joyful when I was born?' 'Who is now joyful that I was born?' 'Whose birth makes me joyful and thankful?'
- ❖ Am I becoming more aware of gratitude in my prayer and in my behaviour?
- ❖ How conscious am I of what I have received from God through my family? .. through the larger circle of friends, teachers, community....?
- ❖ Does any word, phrase, image or thought which, during your day, sum up and refresh what you have learned from pondering and praying this, e.g. 'GRATITUDE'?

Reflection and Sharing on Birth of John the Baptist.

Pondering this text increases my realisation that GRATITUDE is the foundation of a true RELATIONSHIP TO GOD. I spend time developing awareness that I am continually receiving from a Caring, Gifting God. I grow in noticing more quickly and deeper His working ‘behind the scenes’, even in small events. This deepens my gratitude, trust and generous sharing with others. I have developed a daily practice of making a short, set time in which I ask God to let me recognise more clearly some of the ‘good things’ that He gave me during the day. In that exercise I push out negative things (to be faced later) and keep waiting for God to make me more aware of and dwell on good things, even small things like finding my keys, meeting a friend, being surprisingly patient and so on. I have discovered that in time I notice them faster and deeper. That includes good changes in me. I am discovering an image of a concerned God, a Gift-Giver’. This gives a closer relation to God. It also enables me in prayers to GO BACK TO WHERE I ‘MET’ GOD BEFORE – even in these small ‘gifts’ – and ask THAT GOD – even though now I might want to beg or complain. I can find myself saying, ‘You were there then, - and then- but where are you now?’ It helps me WAIT before this God in this way, (even if it is in a ‘desert experience’) for some ‘Good thing’ – and thus God’s concern – to show itself. It leads me to ‘talk to God about the problem’ and not just ‘talk to the problem’ or ‘talk to myself about the problem.’ This ‘Good-things’ prayer habit has built up my gratitude and deepened my trust and closeness. Feeling thankful helps me to hear the invite to the next step.

Note.

During a prayer time a fruitful pondering of e.g. ‘who was joyful when I was born?’ or a memory that raises gratitude or a past experience now giving insight or such might use up the whole time. It might continue to fill up subsequent returns to pondering the same text. But that is good! Don’t dismiss it as a distraction. God is enlarging my gratitude etc. It develops reflection too.

5.

PONDERING THE BIRTH OF JESUS

(Luke 2: 1-20)

Preparation.

Decide how long you are going to ponder this text on this occasion. What are you feeling at this moment? Is it that you feel that in so many areas and levels of the world around – and in yourself – you want things improved. You long for ‘a Saviour? Luke has shown the Caring God preparing to send such help, externally through unexpected – but accepting – humans, – Zachariah, Mary and Elizabeth, and internally, through sending His Spirit. So now let us open ourselves to receive. We want HOPE and TRUST, guidance and courage as we ponder Luke’s telling of the Birth of the Saviour.

Read it all through once. Then gazing attentively at it, allow the Spirit to lead you here and there.

Luke 2:1-20

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and

who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid; for see – I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.

And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, 'Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favours!'

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, 'Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made know to us. So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them, But Mary treasured all these words and

pondered them in her hart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them. (NRSV)

Joseph and Mary setting out in TRUST into the unfamiliar and unknown.

I first pause at, *'In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered.'* I ponder the implications. One is that so many diverse and distant peoples were united under the control of that Roman Empire. So communications, travel, interaction, etc were advanced – a seemingly very good and advantageous thing for unity. But *'All went to their own towns to be registered'* makes me reflect. This speaks of 'control' or subjection to self-interests. It means hardship for Joseph and Mary who *'also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David, called Bethlehem'*. I imagine the trials of that difficult journey, especially for a pregnant woman. I see it as journeying into an uncertain future. I notice myself reacting; I am asking, 'Why God, did You allow the census for now?' Or 'Why the birth at this time?' Mary will not even have the help of family or familiar village surroundings. ..Yet here we see them – journeying on – in trust! I imagine Mary's trust, I wonder was her constant prayer, *'Let it happen, let it happen'* as they travelled. Even in the shock, the frustration and the disappointment of finding there is no place to stay, *'no place for them in the inn'*, I see them – in trust – 'making the best of it'. They use a stable! And with care! She *'wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger.'*

(Pondering their TRUST I pause to ask them to help me to accept things ‘as they are now’ and to *go forward in trust*. I spend time on this – feeling it in my own experience – waiting for an experience akin to the next event.)

God inviting ‘unsuitables’ to share the ‘Good News’.

Scene two. Again God doing the unexpected – the unthinkable! God does show special signs of His power and presence – but to the most unlikely people one could think of. The messengers of the ‘Good News’ that all Israel has been waiting for are Shepherds who ‘lived rough’ – *in the fields*. In their ragged, smelly, grubby clothes .. they were never welcome in the towns .. they were always treated with suspicion. (They were even forbidden to enter Synagogues.) Yet at least they were responsible; here we see them *‘keeping watch over their flock by night’* .. attentive, observing. But they lacked every quality of an ideal messenger. I can not imagine what the special flash of God’s nearness and power might have been but it obviously greatly moved them within. Yet to them it was so inconceivable that the message be given to them first! All Israel has been yearning .. and begging .. for this Good News.. for centuries! Now the message has come. ‘THE LONG AWAITED SAVIOUR HAS COME!’ And ‘He is here .. nearby!’ and .. they are the first to be told! And beyond that, they!! are given the task of telling .. *‘all the people’!!* Now that is even harder to believe! Surely it was ‘beyond’ the power of uneducated, ‘to-be-avoided’ ones like themselves. Were they hearing correctly? I imagine their questioning themselves, ‘Who

would believe us? It is alright to say, ***“Do not be afraid”*** and ***“I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people”*** .. but we have no standing’. Telling the people, ..‘The Saviour, .. the descendant of King David .. has at last been born! – ***“this very night!”*** .. and nearby! and ***‘lying in a manger! a manger!’*** And God told us to tell you!!! People will laugh at us; they will say we got into the wine. We will be chased out of town!’

‘Unsuitables’ responding; Beginning of The Relationship with Saviour; Being changed and sharing it; Fruit of The Nativity.

Yet with trust and courage they step out ... ***‘Let us go’*** ..(with openness!) ***‘and see.’*** They go searching .. ***‘with haste’*** and find! .. in a stable! .. in a manger! I imagine them, with much cautiousness and nervousness, carefully approaching the likely stable. .. I hear their diffidently calling out, ‘Excuse us but we have been sent’. Mary and Joseph, besides the natural awe and gratitude that a new baby brings, are trying to face into the mystery this special Child brings. Now they are surprised by the shepherds’ arrival. .. But they welcome them so warmly. They listen to the shepherds’ story and usher them up close around the Baby... I notice the shepherds’ awkward shyness and embarrassment at their own unkempt appearance disappearing. They are so reverent as they approach the baby. This also increases the wonder, gratitude and joy in Mary and Joseph! The shepherds’ presence is a sign that God had been working quietly .. ‘behind the scenes’ .. all the time! .. And as the shepherds gaze at the baby, Mary and Joseph see the

change that is taking place .. in these rough, awkward men .. – a new softness, a deepening gratitude and a desire to help. (Babies do draw out the best in us!)

The shepherds go off, *‘thanking and praising God for all they had heard and seen’.*

The change in them shows in external acts! We read, *‘all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them.’* Obviously the shepherds are not avoiding the unfriendly townspeople but deliberately going out to them to share the ‘good news!’ Another sign! God’s power is already beginning to work through the baby Saviour! This is a movement into uniting. (It reminds us that, *‘God saves us by making us one’.*)

Mary’s pondering; Our pondering

I watch Mary as she cares for the baby and continues to *‘treasure these things... and ponder them in her heart.’* I see her again recognizing God’s care and power working in events even when it looks the opposite! (Have we any experience of this?) She also now realizes that Jesus had to be born in the stable!!! How else could the shepherds have visited Him? They would not have been allowed into the inn! She ponders long and deeply, letting it prepare her for the future.

‘Mary, help me in my pondering.’

As I ponder, different memories might come up. These could be called, ‘set-out-for-Bethlehem’ times, or ‘no-room-in-the-inn’ times, or ‘accepting-a-stable’ times, times of ‘special

challenge' or times surprised by God's working 'behind the scenes', times of delight and discovering that myself, the limited shepherd, was setting out on a new journey to closeness with Jesus. It would mean inner changes that would also lead to going out and sharing that developing closeness. **Special 'messengers' helped develop my 'night-watch' time.** Sometimes I feel the pressure of today's 'Roman Empire', that is, the advances in communications, global turmoil and self-centered, obsessive controls. Does the Nativity not open my/our eyes to the answer?

One or more Questions that might help Reflection

- ❖ Has God ever invited and helped me to go out with trust and perseverance (like Mary and Joseph)?
- ❖ Or with trepidation yet determination (like the shepherds)? What eventually happened?
- ❖ Has this made me aware of being called to 'meet' and begin a deeper relationship to Jesus?
- ❖ Like the shepherds, am I being changed to tell others about Jesus, the Saviour?

Reflection and Sharing on the Birth of Jesus

In my missionary work it was not long till I realised that God had invited me, a 'quite unsuitable' 'shepherd' with my poor understanding of Japan and the very difficult Japanese language to come and meet Jesus in a new way there. And in so doing to experience been inwardly changed and thus enabled to share 'new life' with others in that highly

developed, deeply cultured, 98% non-Christian nation. It also led to changing the name of our explanation classes from 'The Teaching of the Catholic Church' to 'INTRODUCING CHRIST'. Pondering and sharing this insight led us (I now see) to mirroring the role of the shepherds and to leading others to 'meet' the new Jesus. When I had arrived in Japan I soon felt like Joseph and Mary may have felt on arrival in Bethlehem, - bewildered, unimportant, 'forgotten' by God'. Vatican 2 and some special 'messengers' led us in a new way to 'find' Jesus in the Gospels, grow in relationships to Him and share that with Catechumens and new Christians. Now they are the 'shepherds' going out into the Japanese society. I experienced over forty Christmases in Japan. As I stood for the last time at the pulpit in a crowded Fujisawa church I was so conscious I was looking at my – and our – missionary successors. God was inviting those 'ordinary' Christians – many of them only recently baptised – to, like the shepherds, go out into society and share the 'Good News'. It was in a group of rather new Christians sharing on 'praying the Nativity Scripture' that one excitedly burst out saying, 'But he HAD to be born in a stable! How else could the shepherds have visited him!' And I was shocked! I had never realised that myself! And yet there is a mountain of teaching in that fact. So now, as I ponder this text or experience a Christmas-Time, I ask to be more conscious of being a 'shepherd' invited to begin a deeper relationship with the Saviour who has come among us and to share it. I suppose sharing my experiences of 'praying Scripture' in this little book is continuing my 'shepherds' experience'.

6.

THE PRESENTATION OF JESUS

(Luke 2-21-40)

Preparation.

I decide my length of praying time. Pondering Luke has made more conscious Mary and Joseph journeying day by day into God's mysterious future. I realise more the assistance of God's Spirit might come in unimagined ways through unimagined people. I am learning also that I am being drawn out on the journey of Salvation with Mary and Joseph. I ask, through praying 'the Presentation' for greater openness to the Spirit for journeying in trust.

Luke 2:21-40

After eight days had passed, it was time to circumcise the child; and he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb.

When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, they brought him to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord (as it is written in the law of the Lord, 'Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord'), and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, 'a pair of turtle-doves or two young pigeons.'

Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; this man was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy

Spirit rested on him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple, and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him what was customary under the law, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying,

'Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.'

And the child's father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him. Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother Mary, 'This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed – and a sword will pierce your own soul too.'

There was also a prophet, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, having lived with her husband for seven years after her marriage, then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshipped there with fasting and prayer night and day. At that moment she came, and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem. (NRSV)

‘they took him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord’.

I remind myself that Mary has now also entered the ‘world of being a mother’. I imagine Mary and Joseph carrying the child from Bethlehem to Jerusalem and up into the Temple. (The Temple was the symbol and special reminder to the Israelite people of the presence of God. Of course God is everywhere but the Temple especially was to help bring that into their greater awareness in daily living and to help their interaction with God. But over-human activity could also in ways smother this – as might also be happening here.) For Mary and Joseph it must have been a deep emotional experience. Now I picture them as ‘swallowed up’ and insignificant in those crowded and imposing surroundings. I can only imagine that Mary’s experience of God’s action in the Annunciation, in her time with Elizabeth and Zechariah, in the birth of Jesus and meeting the shepherds – that experience of the all-faithful, yet ‘behind the scenes’ God ‘now strengthening them here too. Her continual *‘Let it be done, let it be done’* prayer of TRUST accompanies them as they enter that overpowering, busy Temple ***‘to present’*** the new baby, Jesus ***‘to the Lord’***. (It evokes much reflection.)

The offer of self

I reflect more. Offering back to God acknowledges returning in thanks what has been received from God, the giver-of-all-gifts. (Later we will begin to notice how conscious Jesus will be in offering himself in accomplishing God’s great plan. This is a preview of his mission of drawing and

empowering others in offering themselves back to God through giving themselves to neighbours too.) These ponderings are dramatised by Simeon and Anna, two ‘ordinary’ people, coming out of that ‘busy’ crowd to give encouragement and consolation to Mary and Joseph. They are instruments of God sent to support and enlighten them (and us) further.

Simeon and Anna’s Contribution

Simeon appears – out of nowhere. It seems his life has been especially a preparation for this meeting. He is a man of integrity – *‘righteous’*, and prayerful – *‘devout’*. His habit of prayer has brought him into a close relationship to God. It has helped him listen to God. Thus, *‘it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit .. he would .. set eyes on the Christ of the Lord’*. And so here, *‘prompted by the Spirit’*, he arrives. He is overflowing with gratitude to God for sending the Saviour into the world and secondly, for his own receiving this astounding gift of personally meeting the promised Saviour. He reverently accepts the child *‘into his arms’*. Now his cup of happiness is full. His joy, thankfulness and awe move the hearts of Mary and Joseph. But he has been inspired beyond even what Mary and Joseph were realising. This Saviour was not only the Promised One for the Chosen People, Israel but *‘for all the nations’*! No wonder Joseph and Mary *‘stood there wondering!’* Here is so much more for them to ponder!

Now Simeon blesses them as they listen in wonder. And then to Mary he foretells some of the suffering it will bring her.

She will loose Jesus to his mission. (Our minds may jump ahead to what we have learned of Jesus' ongoing mission.) Today's PRESENTATION (handing over) will become a more conscious reality. It will demand a huge 'letting go'. Jesus will continually reveal to Israel truths beyond what are already held and practised. There will be much resistance. Mary will suffer seeing him opposed, spurned, rejected and condemned by so many. She will continue to pray, bewildered and anguished, as his mission will seem a complete failure. Her heart will be broken! Yes, Simeon foretells her grief:- ***'a sword will pierce your own soul.'*** I think of Mary's prayer life. My mental picturing of her praying and waiting for guidance, courage and strength is drawing me closer to her. Also Luke's frequent mentioning of the Holy Spirit reminds me that this is Mary's greatest trait – openness to God's Spirit. (I pause to ask her help in being open to the Spirit. I see Mary as an understanding, consoling and praying-with-me mother in my times of 'loss'.)

Anna had experienced seven year's of married life – before becoming a widow. Widows in Israel were in a marginalised role. Being eighty-four years old (in those days!) made it even worse. Yet here she is playing such a significant role! (Luke so often balances the woman's contribution with the man's.) Her prayer life has enlightened her to come at this time and speak ***'of the child to all who looked forward to the deliverance of Jerusalem'***. She is an agent of support and comfort for Mary and Joseph. She is also a fore-sign of us all who are called to pray and draw others' attention to Jesus among us.

Pondering Simeon and Anna

Pondering Anna's participation reminds us that we too are on a journey to point out to 'seekers' why the Promised Jesus has come among us. We too are to share '*about the child.*' A habit of prayer is a necessary preparation for that. In my pondering I imagine the Holy Spirit hovering over that Temple crowd offering insights into their busy lives and each individual's level of response or resistance. But seeing Simeon and Anna's response stimulates us.

Also Simeon and Anna both make me reflect more on 'praying in old age'. It makes us, 'retirees' conscious of developing a deepening habit of prayer into a life that has 'let go' much 'activity'. I sometimes wonder if this would not be the most important part of our lives. I even sometimes ask God, 'Could all my life till now have been a preparation for this stage of it?'

(I pray, repeating '*Help me Lord, to do what You want me to do today.*')

Again I become more conscious of the action of the Holy Spirit. Here is an example of the effects on those open to the Spirit especially in listening prayer time. (I was surprised to notice that in three consecutive verses Luke mentions the Holy Spirit three times: as abiding – 'rested on', enlightening – 'revealing', prompting – 'guiding'.)

Questions that might help Reflection or Sharing

- ❖ Has this helped your awareness of God 'working behind the scenes'? .. in an unexpected time or way?

- ❖ Has ‘praying’ Scripture increased your openness to the Holy Spirit? Is it helping your stepping out in trust?
- ❖ Any noticing of a time when, through another, the Spirit gave you affirmation and encouragement?
- ❖ Any noticing of God’s Spirit prompting you to affirm, comfort and support others?
- ❖ Has my way of talking to Mary – or Joseph – in prayer time changed in any way? e.g. talking to a Mary who had her heart broken.

The Rosary – Using the Scripture to ponder the ‘Presentation’ makes me think of what the Rosary habit had prepared me for. I think of the great help the Rosary has given down through the ages especially when few people could read or afford a written bible. It has helped my practice of meditatively going over the mystery and the ‘mysteries’ of the Saving Jesus coming among us. And praying ‘with Mary’ has helped me be more open to promptings from the Spirit. All this now helps me receive wider fruit from ‘praying’ the Scripture text.

The Return to Nazareth. (Lk 2:39,40)

‘When they had finished everything required by the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth.’

The Journey Continues

I picture them travelling back to the village of Nazareth. I find myself following – at a distance. As I go I am

pondering, 'Jesus is entering the growing experience of family life in a community. And Mary and Joseph will also learn and develop as a family in that community. I see them prayerfully answering the day-by-day promptings of the Father's Spirit. As I go I am praying, *'Mary, Joseph, help my openness to the Holy Spirit. May I allow God's action to work in me and through me for others in my surroundings'*.

7.

SEARCHING FOR AND FINDING JESUS

(Luke 2-41-52)

Preparation.

Decide how long you are going to ponder this text on this occasion. What are you feeling at this moment? What are you hoping for? Share this with God. I ask that pondering this 'Searching for and finding Jesus' I am guided by the Spirit to continue my own journey of response. What do you ask?

Then gazing at the text let us become passive and wait for the Spirit to lead us here and there, slowly moving the mind and heart so that we see and act in a different way.

Luke 2:41-52

Every year his parents used to go to Jerusalem for the feast of the Passover. When he was twelve years old, they went up for the feast as usual. When the days of the feast were over and they set off home, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem without his parents knowing it. They assumed he was somewhere in the party, and it was only after a day's journey that they went to look for him among their relations and acquaintances. When they failed to find him they went back to Jerusalem looking for him everywhere. It happened that, three days later, they found Him in the Temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them, and asking them questions; and all those who

heard him were astounded at his intelligence and his replies. They were overcome when they saw him, and his mother said to him, 'My child why have you done this to us? See how worried your father and I have been, looking for you.' He replied, 'Why were you looking for me? Did you not know that I must be busy with my Father's affairs?' But they did not understand what he meant. He went down with them then and came to Nazareth and lived under their authority. His mother stored up all these things in her heart. And Jesus increased in wisdom, in stature, and in favour with God and with people. (NJB)

'Every year his parents used to go to Jerusalem for the feast of the Passover.'

'Go up' .. 'journeying' again! .. ***'to Jerusalem'*** .. to the Temple .. symbol of God's presence and special relationship to Israel .. ***'for the feast of the Passover'*** .. the central feast of the year! It re-lived God coming to save .. from slavery .. graphically leading out .. through sea and desert .. testing .. yet developing them .. preparing them for a 'new land' .. drawing them closer to Himself. Participation in this Ceremony .. deepens awareness that GOD IS SAVING US NOW. (*Pause to reflect*) This feast was ritually celebrated only in Jerusalem. But Jerusalem .. a four days' walk from Nazareth .. at least 10 days absence .. expensive (and not earning) .. physically demanding. All distant believers aimed to visit at least once in a lifetime. ***'his parents' 'go up' ..'every year'!*** What does that say to us?

‘When he was twelve years old.’

This year Mary and Joseph are extra thankful and joyful. Jesus will be with them! He is now ***‘twelve years old’***! This is regarded as entering adulthood. He will be entered on the Temple-tax rolls! They are also thankful that through love shown, through example and instruction they have been able to rear, guide and lead Jesus thus far into a greater knowing and closeness to God the Father. Sharing in their praying time, instruction time, synagogue time he is so familiar with the events of Abraham, Moses, prophets and so on. I wonder how the Spirit moved his heart while praying Psalms with them – and then so often alone. At the same time I see him helping in the carpenter’s shop. His daily activity is that of a village youth’s life. Now he is taking a big step in life. I ask, ‘Jesus what were your feelings, thoughts and desires as you prepared for the pilgrimage? At Jerusalem you will experience so much of what you have been told about. How are you praying as you go?’

‘When the days of the feast were over and they set off home, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem without his parents knowing it.’

‘after a day’s journey’. I picture the Nazareth pilgrims thankful, prayerful and joyful on their first day journeying home. Women, men, young people, each in their own group, have travelled separately. They come together for their evening meal. But suddenly, Shock! ***‘They failed to find him.’*** Mary and Joseph cannot find Jesus! I watch their growing bewilderment .. then unease .. then beginning

energetic searching of different groups .. the growing fear ‘he is lost’. (my experiences of shock, loss, separation, bewilderment and such influence my imagining of Mary and Joseph’s feelings. I switch to imagining their prayer .. during the night.) Next morning, oh, so early, I see Mary and Joseph hurrying back the over twenty miles to Jerusalem asking everywhere along the road and then throughout the city.

‘The boy Jesus stayed behind without his parents knowing it’.

I try imagining circumstances leading to this. Did experiencing the atmosphere of the Temple, did witnessing that noisy, jostling, frantic, hectic selling, buying, the individually slaughtering and offering of thousands of sheep for ceremony preparation – did all this make the youth Jesus feel the spirit of prayerfulness .. of consciousness of God’s presence being crushed? Was immersion in externals and activity smothering the deeper spiritual importance? Was the Passover being confined to a few key moments (like Christmas- and Easter- among us!)? In fact, I wonder was the boy Jesus ‘shocked’? He had been taught that the Temple was ‘*a house of prayer*’ but was he not seeing the crushing of prayer and reflection time? I wonder did it move him next morning to slip off very, very early to the Temple to pray? And there he would have found only a few praying people like Simeon or Anna – ‘*who never left the Temple; day and night she worshipped God.*’

I try to imagine the prayer of Jesus. Would he have started with thanks; thanks for attendance at the Passover

Ceremonies .. thanks for his rearing till now? Then this moving on to his bewilderment and upset and his asking, ‘Heavenly Father, through this where are You leading me to, here and now?’ I imagine this leading him to seek out and ask questions of the gathered scholars of Israel .. those gathered in a special part of the Temple, Doctors of the Law, Scholars, Scribes .. gathered there to advise pilgrims from throughout Israel .. or distant countries. But the crowd around them would be big and it would take time for it to lessen before a young ‘country boy’ could get close to ask questions.

‘They found him’; .. ‘three days later’.

On the third day they found him .. not a speedy finding. Even if they had looked at the crowd around the Doctors of the Law they would not have looked into the middle of them, at least till the crowd became smaller. But it is where they eventually find him!

‘Sitting among the teachers.’

Then, with astonishment they become conscious of his surroundings. Jesus is sitting! On a level with the teachers!! Among them! (What an acceptance!) And then Mary and Joseph also notice how much amazement Jesus has been causing to those around! He is not just listening, but asking deep questions! – and even more astounding, offering amazingly deep comments! ***‘all...were astounded at his intelligence and replies’.*** He has started many thinking more deeply!

But also Mary and Joseph! His questions and answers make them realise that this is a Jesus beyond the one they thought

they knew. Now a new searching was beginning – to discover more fully the Jesus growing up with them! (I too realise I am being called out further on a journey. It is finding a Jesus far beyond the one I thought I already knew sufficiently for my needs.)

‘They were overcome’.

I visualise their first moment of excitement .. joy .. relief .. gratitude at the discovery. But into that relief intrudes bewilderment, weariness and reproach .. **‘Why?’** Their rearing can’t explain this. **‘See how worried!’** **‘Why?’** They are still searching – now searching to understand!

(At times I have found myself saying to God, ‘Why have You let this happen to me?’ And normally I have had to wait and pray at length to discover what it wants to teach me.)

‘I must be about My Father’s affairs.’

Luke’s word can be translated as ‘Father’s place’ or ‘Father’s interests’. I find both words help my pondering. I think of Jesus growing up and opening himself to receive a clearer image of God than so far presented. There was no tradition or practice of calling God a ‘Father’ or thinking of Him in that way. Did the growing Jesus’ openness to the Holy Spirit lead him to spend more time on the parts of Scripture showing God as a parent?.. for example, loving them *‘more than a woman loves her child’*.. or regarding them as so important as to *‘carve their names in the palm of His hand’*? I am now imagining the young adult Jesus as growing in constant awareness of a God .. as always Present, Caring and a Loving

Parent to all. He is not only calling God ***‘Father’*** – an unheard of thing – but using an intimate word like ‘Daddy’. Is he also discovering his desire to make people aware of this image which shows God’s heart .. care .. plan? Does this idea prepare me to know Jesus growing up to spread the ‘Father’s Plan’?

‘Came to Nazareth and lived under their authority.’

Into imagination springs the mental picture of these three figure journeying .. (‘journeying’ again highlighted) .. journeying back the long pilgrim route into the family-life and village-life of Nazareth .. and for many years! ***‘under their authority’*** says to me ‘fully living the family and village life’ as he continues praying and asking the Father, ‘What are You leading me to do next?’

‘His mother stored up all these things in her heart.’

This symbolises our own spiritual journey. Mary and Joseph had found a Jesus beyond the Jesus they thought they knew. Now in Nazareth .. in prayer .. in pondering .. in family living .. in continuing seeking new understandings, Mary continues ‘pondering’ their experiences – as she did after the shepherds, after Simeon and Anna, and after Jesus with the Teachers in the Temple.

And Jesus too continues .. in his prayer.. questioning .. and finding. I picture Jesus growing in deeper awareness of his relationship to God, his Father and with others. ***‘Jesus increased in wisdom, in stature, and in favour with God and with people.’*** I pray, ‘Jesus may I continue to know you

deeper and deeper'. And may he lead me to knowing God, our Father more deeply and in cooperating in His plan.

One or more Questions that might help reflection.

- ❖ Did any memory of praying through past or present experiences of 'loss,' (separation, anxiety, bewilderment, yearning) come up? Did it lead to longer, deeper prayer time? Has it led to growth?
- ❖ Am I finding that I am being called to know a Jesus beyond what I am aware of at present?
- ❖ Does this Scripture help my growing image of God to be more of a caring Father? Is He coming closer?
- ❖ Does this help bewildered and anxious parents of young adult children to talk to Mary about it?
- ❖ Do I wish I had discovered earlier the nourishment in the Psalms? Am I grateful for family prayer?

APPENDIX. 1

HINTS FOR A 'PRAYING SCRIPTURE' GROUP

(If necessary see a Brief Explanation of
'PRAYING SCRIPTURE' in the INTRODUCTION.)

**Each session will have three parts;
GUIDED MEDITATION, SILENT PRAYER PERIOD,
SMALL-GROUP SHARING.**

After we listen to the text, the leader gives a GUIDED MEDITATION – which is some examples of what he/she got from 'pondering' or praying the text at different times. They are prompts towards your noticing new things and making your own discoveries.

SILENT PRAYER PERIOD. *(length of time depending on the experience of the group. Even from the beginning I would usually allow ten minutes or longer.)*

The explanation for praying Scripture gives hints of how the prayer can develop in this period. Remember its object is learning better WHAT GOD IS 'SAYING' TO YOU HERE AND NOW THROUGH THE SCRIPTURE TEXT. Regard a feeling of being moved to act beyond what you have been doing up till now as something to return to and reflect on.

SHORT REFLECTION TIME. *c. 5 minutes.*

After the Silent Period there will be a short reflection or

thinking time to help clarify what you experienced in the silent time. This can also help your contribution to the sharing. *A self-question may help, such as ‘Did I see anything in a new way?’ or ‘was I moved in a new direction?’* or, see more Questions after each Guided meditation..

GROUP SHARING. (*BIGGER GROUPS divide e.g. into threes or fours.*)

Each one now can share on things noticed and influencing during their silent time. But there must be no feeling of being COERCED! If a person is not ready they just say so and listen. Learning to listen is so valuable. This is not a time for discussion. (Of course I must tell you that I do not receive conscious help in every ‘silent prayer period’. Some periods are just times of barrenness or frustrated struggle while waiting for new fruit to emerge. In these times, all I can do is come back to the text in the next silent time and wait in hope and trust. I might have to do this over many periods. So in my sharing I would just mention my waiting, maybe my struggle to do so, or feelings of frustration but determination to wait. Hearing another share this can be strengthening. But in everything, attentive listening to what others share is so very fruitful.

BETWEEN GROUP GATHERINGS use your own ‘silent time’ to repeat pondering this text – and DISCOVER! After praying this passage, and reviewing it, sharing with another – or others – opens us up to receive even further awareness and insights. So, if you get a chance to share, so much the

better –even by phone or email! REMEMBER: What you do in a group session is valuable but what you do between sessions is even more valuable!

[Practising ‘Praying Scripture’ was a big step up in my own spiritual life - and in my pastoral and missionary life. I also shared it with my parishioners. Out of it grew this ‘Praying Luke’ course.]

Of course these talks can be used for help in private prayer time. In fact most of the material comes from there. But I found that where it was possible to have a group, progress moved much faster.

APPENDIX. 2

WHY LUKE?

(Further reasons for choosing Luke.)

Luke is a non-Israelite himself writing mainly for non-Israelites, (like I was in Japan). Like the other Evangelists, he teaches that God's great plan for all to be saved is shown, firstly, through Israel, then through Jesus coming, and then through the Holy Spirit working especially through Jesus' disciples. But he introduces Jesus more gradually. He begins by 'summarising' and connecting up with the Old Testament. Note how often he mentions the Spirit.

Scholars point out that Luke puts Jesus' life and mission into the framework of one long journey from Galilee to Jerusalem, to be united with God the Father through Calvary. He makes this journey, guided by the Spirit of love and trust, through all sorts of opposition.

But I also see it as a description of the disciples' journey into knowing Jesus more and more. Continually when they think they now know Jesus well, they are confounded into asking, 'Who is this man?' I see them as being prepared for a further share of his Spirit.

And thirdly, I see it as a description of the journey that Luke wants to lead me further on. Luke is writing for the new disciples of Jesus in his newly born Christian community. He wants to help them on their journey towards closer intimacy with Jesus. So he is writing for me on my spiritual journey

within my present-day Christian community. Our journey too is a series of settings out after waiting and listening for guidance in prayer.

Luke also spends time emphasising values which I find the need of so much. These values are prayer, thanksgiving, joyful praise, compassion, forgiveness, reconciliation, unity and peace; all values needed to become the kind of disciple desired.

He gives the most examples of women's contribution in Jesus' ministry. This is becoming more necessary to be recognised in the present time. In Japan the greater number of 'seekers', new Christians, participants in 'introducing Christ', organisers and workers in the Christian community were women. John and Mathew might point to the deeper role of women but Luke includes them more often.

There is a contemplative instinct in everyone though maybe not developed. Japanese culture may be very industrious and work-orientated but deeper down the contemplative instinct is very strong. So beginning 'pondering' Scripture' by using Luke was also helpful.

These are my reasons why I started with Luke for my 'Praying Scripture' groups. I hoped that Luke and the Acts of the Apostles would lead me – and the community – deeper into 'Who is this man?' I wanted us in meeting Jesus, getting glimpses of his attitude to his Father and to people, and through his Death, Resurrection and sharing of his Spirit, to grow as a missionary community of disciples.

SHARING ON OUR PRAYING EXPERIENCES

Helping One Another On Our Spiritual Journeys

The Value of ‘Faith-Sharing’.

By faith-sharing I mean sharing about discoveries in one’s prayer time or of noticing where God seemed to be ‘at work’ behind big or small events in one’s life and how that affects us and changes us. I am thinking of two people sharing, or a small group sharing, or a large group divided into different smaller groups. Obviously, reflection is a necessary preparation for this kind of sharing. Experience will teach that sharing with others about these discoveries increases manifold the good effects of the prayer and reflection.

Sharing becomes easier, deeper and very fruitful.

Sharing about inner experiences is not easy, especially in the beginning. But encouragingly it becomes easier and more fruitful with practice. The value comes from:- 1) in order to tell another about it, the effort needed to clarify my own experience makes the experience *more vivid and deeper* for myself. 2) hearing others share of their discoveries of God working in their lives can *help me notice* similar things that God is doing for me too, but which I hadn’t noticed before this. 3) hearing how God is working in others too, and in so many different ways, gives me a much wider view and deeper admiration of God at work.

It must be done freely, respecting one's own privacy.

No one should feel that they 'have to share'. It means waiting for the moment when one feels they wish to share, even though it will probably require effort to do so. It also means deciding about how much to share at any time! We must always respect our own privacy! We should feel free to choose what parts we want to share at any time. Whom we are with, our present mood, etc, will determine our decisions. If there is any doubt, wait! If we can't arrange our thoughts about what we experienced or how to say it, we are not ready to share. So we must wait.

Good listening.

Listening is as valuable as speaking. One reason is that attentive listening helps another to share. It gives support and an unspoken message about the importance of the sharer. It is easy for a listener to fall into the mistake of 'half-listening' and, while someone else is sharing, to be mentally preparing their own material for sharing. This spoils good listening. One must listen and concentrate on what the other is sharing and trust God to help, if necessary, when time comes for one's own sharing. Otherwise, without embarrassment, simply saying, 'I have nothing to share today' is itself good sharing. If there is no one ready to share and everyone becomes silent, that is not a loss. It can be a very fruitful period of silence together.

Remember, we are told that the way we listen to another person, tells us how we listen to God!

Confidentiality

Of course, we must respect the privacy of others too, and be very careful to keep what is shared within the group. Finding that others are not critical or shocked if I share my struggle, failure or a slump, becomes a big consolation to me. When another shares about a failure to respond to God's gifts or invitations, it consoles me to know that I am not the only one who has embarrassing weaknesses inside me. In fact this sharing brings us closer together. We realise that we are weak, struggling people, journeying together, trying to do our best and that God's Spirit is working through us to help one another.

Growth in sharing.

But when beginning this practice of sharing on prayer experiences, first look for and share on ***good-things*** – even if it seems only a very small *good thing*. Start there! There will be many times of confusion, struggle or barrenness and to share these will be very helpful but I recommend first trying to notice experiences of '*good things*'. During sharing, even between two people, a short break for silent reflection or prayer can be fruitful.

Feelings.

We will notice that we gradually begin to share more about how we feel as we discover these workings of God, e.g. joy, surprise, or gratitude. We will be able to share about how we respond to these with, e.g. trust, generosity, courage, or hope. Later, we will be able to talk about negative feelings and responses too.

Remember! In troubling times, in this kind of ‘sharing’ we just don’t share about our troubles but about how we *talk with God* about our troubles!

Growth in sharing is part of our journey into intimacy with God, with self and with others. It is *wrong to compare oneself to others*. Each one’s rate of growth is unique. It is important to develop at each one’s own pace. Even as we progress it is not at a steady pace. We will probably find that we move more like a frog – a series of not moving but then a sudden, long leap forward!

In the parish I developed faith-sharing groups using ‘silent praying’ and ‘praying Scripture’ times. Not only did the participants learn from one another but I also learned more and more through them. Since most of our parishioners were women so were the prayer groups. They gave added dimensions to my discoveries. These faith-sharing groups became very important in developing in many ways the new Christian Communities that we were slowly building up in Japan. I was so impressed that having to write a paper on the formation of students for ministry I stressed very much the value, from the beginning, of listening and developing *faith-sharing groups* for spiritual growth and maturity.

APPENDIX. 4

LUKE HELPING MY OWN SPIRITUAL JOURNEY

After seven years of Philosophy, Scripture, Theology, etc and then Ordination, I and six others found ourselves joining the young Columban mission in Japan. Japan has long been a ‘First World’ country, very advanced in commerce, manufacturing, education, medicine, politics, very organised and regulated; – and all of this built on a deep-down, distinct culture. But we were entering a country whose people were strenuously united in effacing the ravages of war and rebuilding. It was 98% non-Christian.

I suppose with my background I felt I was ‘somebody’ but soon, like being hit by freezing water, I found in Japan I was a ‘nobody’. I was in a different world, ‘lost’ – ignorant, illiterate, irrelevant and a politely unnoticed ‘outsider’.

After a very long, gruelling language school, we were sent out to join older Columbans in small recently founded Christian Communities. All our efforts were in getting people interested in what we had come to share. So a first essential task was preparing to be able to explain ‘the Faith’ to the few ‘enquirers’ or ‘searchers’ who showed some interest. We put a mountain of time and effort into preparing for the little classes of two or three adults that we was responsible for. Very few endured till baptism. As I struggled through disappointment, frustration, bewilderment I kept searching for not just how to say things but really *what* to say.

Then Vatican 2 came – like an ‘apparition’. It meant much more study, talks, seminars, discussions and pondering. But it was a blessed leap forward. I remember listening to a tape and the speaker said, ‘after all the No 1 truth of Christianity is NOT that WE MUST LOVE GOD AND OUR NEIGHBOUR! No, that is only No 2. and it is a response to No 1. The No 1 truth is, ‘GOD LOVES US!’ And that is our journey of faith; – to integrate that! It is from this that we get the desire and the strength for No 2. But because so much seems to be continually going wrong it is hard to believe God really loves us. It requires deliberately making an effort and time to notice God working in our lives. This growing awareness of experiencing God’s care leads us on the road to accepting He loves us. And it is out of this growing gratitude and wonder – not out of an imposed service, much less than out of fear – that we get the desire and the strength to love God and neighbour. But this growth requires a growing habit of prayer.

We were helped at that time, – more fruit from Vat 2, – by special people giving us a wider and deeper idea of what prayer is. I learned in my prayer-time to pause and passively wait till even small positive things in my daily experience, or in Nature or in ‘praying Scripture’ would bring themselves to my notice. These strengthened the teaching that God is a gift-giver, a rescuer, compassionate – even if mysterious. And that is a praying habit that grows. And Vatican 2 had brought ‘praying Scripture’ out of the traditional ‘specialists’ praying communities.

Another eye-opening help was hearing, ‘We might think of Faith as a noun but basically FAITH IS A VERB.’ It means

TRUST, a ‘letting go’, a growth of handing one-self over with conviction, a ‘stepping out of the boat’. What we are taught comes ALIVE through experience pondered on! It is like having been taught that electric power flows through electric wires and believing it but after touching a live wire we know it in a different way; we now know it ‘in our bones’. In the same way experience of God’s action reflected on, enlivens taught Faith. It grows into a greater awareness of interaction between God and us. And that develops the deeper personal relationship with God – and neighbour – that all are called to.

Another jarring-awake sentence was hearing, ‘CHRISTIANITY is not a teaching; CHRISTIANITY IS A PERSON!’ I was shocked to realise I never had the sense myself to say that before. That sentence changed my teaching profoundly and more importantly it changed me. It sent me to the Gospels in a new way for myself. And they became the backbone of my teaching. I have explained in the Introduction that ‘Praying Scripture’ is bringing promptings of God through the Scripture event into one’s own present situation.

You can imagine how discoveries and growth like this affected my teaching, talks, sermons and the growing Christian community I was in. (Incidentally we had changed the title of our explanation classes from ‘Teaching of the Catholic Church’ to ‘Introducing Christ’.) Besides these classes of ‘Introducing Christ’ were groups for ‘Discoveries in Prayer’ and ‘Praying Scripture’. In these, after a little input, we had a silent praying time together and then, in small groups, a sharing on noticed insights, struggles or inner changes noticed.

I soon realised that not only were they learning from me and from one another but I was further learning from them! Gradually I also came to realise that the people in these groups were pillars of the growing Christian community.

The last place I worked in was Fujisawa Church. That parish had been about one year old when I was starting language school. Now it was the biggest parish in Yokohama diocese. So many Columbans had served there. Ten years ago we handed it over to three Japanese Diocesan priests. As I looked on the packed congregation for my last time I felt it was a summary of our missionary life in Japan. I was looking at not only groups working for Liturgy, the Sick, Elderly, Youth, Sunday School, Homeless and so on but those spearheading over a dozen weekly classes of 'Introducing Christ', also leading groups in 'Progress in Prayer' and 'Praying Scripture'. These were 'volunteering' lay women and men and the big majority had been baptised as adults! There were outstanding men and women among them but of course the majority were women. I learned so much from them.

I realised and POINTED OUT that they were our successors! They were now the missionaries influencing Japanese society. They considered themselves very 'ordinary'. But they too would discover that even feeling inadequate but praying hard and trying hard allows God's Spirit to work in us and through us. Yes, I thought, a missionary's No 1 task is to help form missionaries. They, by their behaviour, were to 'introduce Christ' in their own surroundings.

If the choice of a mission-field had been mine, the last place I would have picked would have been Japan. With its so very difficult language and deep culture, I would have considered myself very unsuitable. But it was to Japan I was sent. Now I am so grateful to God that I was sent to Japan because of what it did to me. And I now realise that the No 1 convert of any missionary is him/herself and it is a continuous, never ending process.

One day I will find how much I have been helped – in grateful times and in ‘desert’ times – by the prayers of others, living and dead, prayers for me and prayers for foreign missionaries.

I am now back in Ireland. I see here now some of the things we met in Japan fifty years ago. Yet I also see new green shoots above the stubble, above the snow. I noticed it especially in small groups of laity. The Spirit seems to be working ‘behind the scenes.’ We are reminded that Baptism calls all to be disciples and missionaries in our surroundings. May consciousness of this steadily grow. And may it lead to some of them feeling called to ‘go beyond’.

If at the beginning I had been asked why did I come to Japan, I probably would have said something like, ‘I came to help spread the teaching of the Church’. Now I say, ‘God brought me to Japan to discover for myself what God’s Spirit had been doing in Japan – behind the scenes – long before I or any other missionary came to Japan. But in my discovering this I would help Japanese discover it and in our mutual sharing we would both grow in relationship to Jesus, to the Father and to the Spirit working in the world.’

Luke's Gospel has helped me on this journey. I was a 'least qualified' shepherd sent to share 'Good News' with others. I was a John the Baptist in the 'wilderness' called to 'Introduce Christ' and His saving power. I need Luke again. I feel like Zachariah – past the productive stage of my life – yet finding myself called to produce this – a booklet. A co-operator, 'Elizabeth' has appeared. But the heavenly whisper is saying, 'more silent time is needed'. And a 'Mary' is leading me into greater openness to God's Spirit. And that says 'continue to step out'.



THANKS

This booklet is the fruit of so many who pray, ponder and share in communities in Japan and Ireland and have also supported with suggestions and encouragement. This is my 'widow's mite' contribution to those exploring 'Praying Scripture'. May Volume 2 help us further on our journey.

MALACHY HANRATTY
ST. COLUMBAN'S, NAVAN
Co. MEATH, IRELAND C15AY2Y