

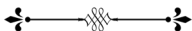
Luke helping us to listen in Prayer



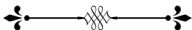
Malachy Hanratty scc

Luke helping us to listen in Prayer

Malachy Hanratty



‘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.’



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BRIEF EXPLANATION OF 'PRAYING SCRIPTURE'.

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

Introduction.

The Church's Vatican 2 General Council's object was to rejuvenate the Pilgrim Church on its journeying through the Modern World. It reemphasised the fundamental truths that 'God Loves us First', that each one is called into a deepening, conscious relationship with Jesus Christ, and into responding to the guidance of God's Spirit. This leads us all into Unity. Emphasising that what we see God doing in Scripture makes us more aware of what He is doing, here and now, among us. So the council encouraged that the practice of prayerful '*listening*' to the Spirit in the Scriptures (*Lectio Divina*) be developed! It made me aware that I had spent 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 be moved inwardly. So '*Praying Scripture*' is 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 FOUND in my EXPERIENCE. So, allowing movements in my heart and mind influence me and become my ‘listening’! Later I reflect further on them. Yes, the Holy Spirit is at work! It deepens *awareness* of God. In this, *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*’. They are examples of what can happen in a ‘praying Scripture’ period. But remember much is based on MY experience. Please be careful to understand that these are only *examples* of what one might meet. But it is a reassurance that, if you find them coming into your pondering, you are not being distracted by memories or imaginations but being led on to recognise God acting in YOUR OWN life. So take out of your ponderings what vibes with YOUR experience and build on that. Think of this explanation as ‘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. 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, ‘*Was my heart moved in a new way?*’ or ‘*Did I see anything in a new way?*’ might help.. Sharing experiences with another also helps. Repeating pondering the same text gives added fruit – or going to one before. But you will learn more by doing. Just ‘try and see’ – with a certain perseverance! I hope you in chosen, attentive praying-times and in sharing – may be helped further to respond to promptings of God’s Spirit.

Vatican 2. helped this practice of ‘*Praying Scripture*’ – (*Lectio Divina*) flow out from mostly only Religious Communities to all convinced Christians. A great teacher of Spirituality helped us missionaries develop it further. In developing and sharing with groups of mostly new Christians in our missionary work in Japan I found it very fruitful. I am also finding it fruitful here in Ireland.

ZECHARIAH AND ELIZABETH

LUKE 1.5-25

Preparation.

In your decided time, slowly read the text fully through once. Then allow the Spirit to lead you into pondering and praying what strikes you at different places in next readings. Allow the Spirit to help you notice new awareness about different things. Thank. Ask for further noticing and generosity to act well.

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!”

‘Childless’.

Gazing at the text, the words, **‘obeyed fully all the Lord’s commandments and rules’** hold my attention. I am in awe at his full reply to the Lord’s promptings! He must have had a deep openness to *TRUST*. The next words enlarge this. The words **‘no children’** take over. They lead me to even more probable feelings of Zechariah and Elizabeth. Firstly I ponder a couples’ natural longing for a child. Also I believe that in that Jewish culture children were so central for family existence – a necessary provision for old age. So to be called **‘barren’** is a terrible stigma.’ In popular belief, not having children was a sign of being ‘out of favour with God!’ – unnerving, frightening! I imagine their married life till now – praying expectantly – more doggedly – now into a crushing sadness! Yet, I see Zechariah and Elizabeth perseveringly continuing to **‘obey fully all the Lord’s commandments and rules!** Yes, Feeling *CRUSHED* yet *OBSERVING FAITHFULLY!* I am envious!

(‘Lord, strengthen my trust and response to what you are calling ME to do.)

Chosen!

(There were 20,000 priests living throughout Israel, taking turns in groups of about 800 to serve in the Temple in Jerusalem. Now it is the turn of Zechariah's group. He has come to fulfill this present two weeks.) But now is a very special moment – he has been chosen – by lot – out of the 800! – for the unexpected – chosen to offer the daily sacrificial prayer of incense – a prayer of THANKS and PETITION – for all the Nation! We also see spiritual, prayerful followers praying outside the Inner Sanctuary. Israel is giving thanks for being chosen, for knowing better the Creator God, for being gifted, cherished, forgiven, rescued at times in the past! But it 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 – and time-testing! And he, Zachariah, has been chosen! To thank and beg!! As I picture Zachariah entering that majestic, incense-filled Inner-Temple building, what conflicting emotions must have been eddying inside him? He a seemingly 'rejected' one, is now chosen! by God! – to enter into this sacred, most awesome place – to represent all Israel at prayer!

God's presence 'breaks through'.

The Message is startling.

And it is into this situation that God makes His presence felt in this startling, awe-inspiring way! (I reflect, 'God, your

answer to prayer, when it comes, is not how we expect!') Zechariah is being startled as God now 'breaks into' his present 'world'! The messenger's presence first frightens him, – before it turns to awe! He is given 'good news' and it is part of a *greater* gift! for the whole Nation!!! But it is coupled with such a demanding request! It is so beyond his 'common sense', he cannot readily acquiesce. 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! it touches 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!*** It is easy to 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?' 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 a Help!

I interpret the enforced time of silence not as a punishment but as a help! This 'silent prayerful time', this so often turning mindful to God, will be a preparation for accepting and responding to this 'unbelievable' invitation. It is to participate in God's 'Saving Plan' in a special way.

Next I imagine Zachariah returned home, and in his 'silent time' struggling through alternating currents of doubt and resolutions

to trust. Elizabeth's pregnancy causes a huge jump forward in wonder, gratitude and trust but now for fuller participation in God's 'Saving Plan' more 'silent time' is still needed!

REFLECTION – *Our Silent 'listening' prayer*

Here I am led into praying time for inner change and for my fuller participation in what God wants me to do. I am realizing more how 'listening' or openness in silence – even feeling helpless and hopeless – gives God a chance to change us, even down to deep, unknown parts of us. 'Silent time' is a foundation for the spiritual journey!

Centrality of Family life

Pondering this reminds me that the '*family*' is the unit of all communities! By '*family*' I include the extended-family and how important it is for us all, especially in our upbringing. I also realize God could have sent a Saviour among us in many ways but He has chosen to do so through family members and family living!

This is what this Scripture said to me.

But what is it saying to you?

(As I move through Luke I will notice more the contributions of family life in God's 'Saving plan'. I hope that sharing examples of this in the following Scripture texts will help readers to discover God's promptings and gifts in their own lives.)

MARY SAYS 'YES'

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 angels 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)

**Surprises:- ‘To Nazareth’! ‘To a still unmarried girl’!
Asking will she agree to give birth to the Saviour?**

Pondering this I realise this is not a message to a Religious-Family member of the Temple in Jerusalem, but to a young girl in *‘Nazareth in Galilee’!* In Israel Galilee is considered ‘second-rate’ territory and in it Nazareth village very poorly regarded! Yet here *‘to Nazareth to an unmarried virgin!’* we see God sending His messenger! She is in her early teens betrothed to be married the next year. That shows little importance! Yet it is to this Mary that God is sending a world-shaking, everlasting, priceless message!

Her upbringing, living in that farming community, would be learning to participate in the house-work of cleaning, washing, gardening, vegetables, drawing water, tending fowl, cooking, spinning, helping neighbours and of course going to the Synagogue with the family – an ordinary young woman’s Israelite village-life. However, I do believe that ‘ordinary’ family as probably belonging to a small, deeply spiritual, group in Israel who especially yearned and prayed for a Messiah.. for a Leader.. not of political or temporal glory.. but of spiritual life and strength. I picture her praying in the family – and in the Synagogue. I picture her listening to, remembering and pondering Scriptural readings of God calling Abraham, Moses, David and others – all to participate in His Plan. I also imagine her while working alone at indoor or outdoor tasks, reciting in her ‘silent time’ memorised Psalms as she faced the ‘ups and downs’ of daily life. Indeed

she just would have been described as a young, likeable, growing up member of that hard toiling, rather poor, village community.

The Message Awes.

But into this life, comes this overwhelming experience of a messenger from God! This intense awareness of God's messenger must have been so 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 invitation is so far beyond anything anyone could even imagine! 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!

She 'Asks Herself"- She Ponders, she Prays.

(The Story Telescoped??)

How she must have struggled trying to accept the magnitude of this message! '*She asks herself.*' I wonder how much silent time did she need for that? I try to picture Mary in her prayer time as she wrestles alone with this secret heavenly invitation! Yes, she has to do so all alone; she, just a young village-woman! Did Biblical events, or lines of Psalms come to mind to help her? (In deep 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 listens and hears: '*The Spirit will come upon you, the power of the Most High will overshadow you!*' She lets that sink into her mind .. her heart .. and her soul. Meanwhile, GOD IS WAITING! And then **Mary** says, '**YES**'.... '*let what you have said be done to me*' !!

Fruit of my pondering time

With these words. I see her opening herself to the action of the SPIRIT of God. *It will mean the Saviour Child being conceived in her.* She does not understand how it will happen .. nor into what situations it will lead her .. but she opens herself in TRUST to the mystery! I see the message about Elizabeth as a support, and a deepening reminder, '**nothing is impossible to God**'. (*Here calls for quite a time repeating these words to myself.*)

'And the angel left her'.

Here, as I move on to these words I notice I am puzzled and annoyed. I want to protest, 'Why doesn't the angel give Mary more help .. more advice .. more support for such a strange .. unknown .. stupendous undertaking?' Mary seems left alone .. how to tell Joseph .. what to say to her parents .. and so on? What about advice on how to rear this special child? After much more pondering of Luke I look back and realise that this message about her elderly family relation, Elizabeth is the important help for now!

Mary's day-by-day living it TRUST.

I begin to realise .. with new sympathy .. that Mary has accepted 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.

Reflection and prayer.

I am finding in present praying this that I am repeating often
“Mary nourish our surrender to God’s loving, guiding SPIRIT”

**“Mary, help me allow the Spirit to work in me
and through me for others.”**

This is what praying this text said to me.
But what is it saying to you?

MARY visits ELIZABETH

Luke 1: 39-45

Introduction: Mary visits Elizabeth.

I am imagining Mary after the angel's apparition and message. She is praying very much to our Father in Heaven but does not show it to those around any more than before. She is so thankful and in awe at the action of God at now sending the promised and long awaited Saviour among us. In her continually thanking prayer, she asks for continual guidance, strength and perseverance in this unbelievable position and task. But it is so hard to bear all this alone and hidden. And it is at just that time the amazing news of Elizabeth's pregnancy reaches Nazareth!

Mary's Visit

'Mary set out at that time and went as quickly as she could into the hill-country to a town in Judea.'

Mary's parents and Joseph are so pleased that she wants to go to companion and house-help Elizabeth and assist Zachariah. But I also see it corresponding as an answer to Mary's deep praying for what she must do next! To carry her astounding role, alone and silently, in her everyday surroundings was a terribly heavy burden. She has been yearning to talk with someone. She recognises here that the only added information that the Angle Gabriel gave her was of Elizabeth's pregnancy. She would be the only one, because

of her own experience, who might hear and believe her!

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

Now I imagine Mary with these different yearnings approaching the porch of Elizabeth's home. She is expecting to be met with amazement at her having come all this way unexpected and alone! But instead she is overwhelmed by the amazing, joyful greeting she gets from Elizabeth. God has prepared! For *'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.'*

(Here I pause to ponder this welcome).

The Magnificat. (Luke, about sixty years later when writing his Gospel, sums up the pondered 'answer' of Mary by quoting this hymn. It had evolved from the early, spreading new Christians' reflections, thanksgiving and even meeting Mary!) It dramatised the porch 'Greeting' and expresses the emotional and spiritual exchange of the meeting. *(It helps us ask Mary to lead us into that relation to God that she wants us to grow into – even if it is a tiny part of God's saving Plan that He has given each 'lowly' one of us. May we become more aware of*

what we are receiving and more able to generously share it with others.) (*Magnificat* text and reflections in 3b)

The Continued Sharing.

I imagine these basic, deep exchanges of praise and thanks ‘at the front-door’ continuing and expanding through constant sharing all during the three months’ visit. Just imagine these two pregnant women every evening, the housework done, sharing about what they are experiencing God doing in themselves. I also imagine Zachariah at times, silently, gratefully and encouragingly being present. Their sharing makes them even more aware of God’s loving Spirit at work both in themselves and through them for the salvation of all. (*We pause to ask them to encourage and guide us towards our own fruitful sharing.*)

Pondering, reflecting, praying.

Our lives are a journey experiencing ourselves travelling with others and with God! God the Father, Son and Spirit is arranging it! Now, I feel so grateful that early in my mission work in Japan we felt so frustrated and ‘needy’ about how to share our ‘Message’ that we greedily and deeply availed of the ‘spiritual insights’ that were coming out of Vatican 2. One very valuable help was learning to become more *aware* of God working in our daily lives. And we learned that besides talking *to* God we need to *listen* to God! This means choosing time to deliberately hold oneself patiently, docile, open before God. This is to let His Spirit move our insights and will more towards His Will! This is the long journey ahead of us! But

this growth in ‘listening’ prayer is strengthened and accelerated by close companionship. This means honest – and sometimes courageous **‘sharing’!** From a deeply experienced and very helpful priest we were led in *‘Discovering God in our daily lives’*, .. in *‘Praying’ Scripture*, and in *‘Praying Nature’*. By seminars, talks, *‘Directed Retreats,’* coaching, counselling and for four summers he led us in ‘sharing’ about our discoveries in times of open, passive prayer. I among other missionaries received deep coaching in these. In teaching **‘Introducing Christ’** it helped lead us beyond ‘Catechism and Instruction’ into pointing to and deepening our relationship to the Father, Christ and the Holy Spirit. It helped me form in those young parishes Praying Groups where, not just only input, but with silent pondering, praying time, then *sharing*, was the programme!

Spiritual Helpers

I had a very close classmate and some others that I could share my spiritual ‘ups-and-downs’ with and even at times with a group. Also, at different times and places, I had a regular meeting-time Spiritual Helper, sometimes a man sometimes a woman, encouraging, challenging and helping me in **‘discovering’** and making decisions.

(Now, home in retirement, all this experience is a major source for these different little booklets I have produced and are now free on the web)

This is what the Scripture led me into
pondering and praying.
But what has it said to YOU?

The MAGNIFICAT

Luke 1: 46-55

'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.'

Having spent much time reciting and praying the **'Magnificat'** quickly, I now turn to spending time *pondering* it more deeply. Mary begins with praise and thanks. So I ask her to lead me into spending more time noticing and becoming more aware of what God has given me! Then I

spend much time asking her help to deepen my thanks and praise! I also ask her to prompt me in praying with an open heart for guidance in what God wants me to do – especially today! May she help me to let His Spirit work through me and continually making me aware of, in my heart, pride and self-centred obstacles to this. May God’s Spirit work more and more through me, changing my heart and mind into action of ‘loving’ others. And may she lead me towards starting with the ‘needy.’ Through both our growing awareness of our own *neediness* and of help of others may we become more and more ‘one’! ***‘Mary, Guide and help me’***

This is what pondering and praying the
‘Magnificat’ lead me to.
But what is it prompting YOU?

JOHN the BAPTIST is BORN

Luke 1:57-80

Preparatory Prayer: ‘Heavenly Father, give me greater TRUST to allow YOU to work in me and through me for others.’

Luke 1: 57-80

Pondering, I imagine the village. I sense the air of nervous prayer and suspense. Not only Zechariah but the whole village and even wider are growing into waiting with awe. And *‘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.’* So now, before the gathering for the Ritual of Circumcision, Mary feels free to quietly leave and return to Nazareth. I now picture her on her journey, her heart full of thanks for all the wonderful happenings to the family and to the community.

(But as she travels I see her prayers are also turning ahead to asking help in successfully informing Joseph of all that has happened to her and her own pregnancy!)

The Circumcision. ‘John is his name’

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. (Luke. 1:59-67) (cf 4b the 'Benedictus')

The Israelite ceremony of "Circumcision" of the firstborn male symbolised the offering of the child back to God. Here Zechariah and Elizabeth are doing it, not only ritually, but from deep in their hearts! Their strong affirmation of '**John is his name**' shows both of their full acceptances of God's message and Plan in full – whatever it will be! But it does mean that after rearing John, they surrender him to participate fully in God's chosen plan! Therefore there will be no son to care for them in their old age! Yet, in trust, Elizabeth and Zechariah surrender to God's plan. Immediately, '**Zechariah was able to speak again.**'! God publicly shows His pleasure at their whole-hearted offering! Zechariah's publicly pouring out praise and thanks to God is the first use of his ability to speak

again; *‘filled with the Holy Spirit, and he spoke God’s message.’!* And so, *‘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.’* (1: 80)

The Community Participation

Next I imagine these friends and neighbours listening in awe to Zachariah! They are becoming even more aware of the *‘hand of the Lord’* at work among themselves. In awe they ask, *‘What will this child become?’* (*Seeing John is to go ahead of Jesus, leading people closer to Him it prompts us to ask God’s Spirit to lead us to recognise His present-day prophets among us! Prophets see to the heart of things and point them out for us.*) Like the ‘Baptist’ John, they will point to Jesus as ‘the Saviour’. And it strongly reminds us that we too, are being called to participate in the ‘pointing out’!

Reflection on ‘The Desert.’ Reflection on Missioners

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.’* In Israel’s history the desert was a place of *PREPARATION* for their entering the Promised Land, for special ‘messengers’ preparing to speak God’s message to the people and as we see in Luke 4:1-2 *Jesus Himself was ‘led by the Spirit into the desert where he was tempted by the Devil for forty days’* in preparation for his Mission. (Our assumption is that, because of its emptiness, cruelty, loneliness the desert is no place to ‘find’ God!) But by

trusting God to bring us (probably struggling) *through* our deserts we grow more aware of our *dependence on Him*, leading to deeper *gratitude* and *trust* in God!

‘Through the Desert’ Experiences

Like everyone else, in my life I have been in emotional ‘deserts’. Looking back over that very long life I now realise that after emerging from the struggles I would aim to forget them as much as I could. Now I am realising I should have used the memory of them to increase my awareness of and thanks to God’s Spirit for having been brought “*through*” the deserts! I am realising how much this ‘part of my journey’ increased or deepened my ‘listening’ prayer time, opened my heart to acknowledge greater *dependence on*, more conscious *thanks* and *closeness* to God’s inviting Spirit. It greatly reformed my missionary and parish work. So many of the parishioners were new converts, many women and many soon became involved in accompanying Catechumens and new Parishioners. New men Converts were fewer but very involved. The writings in these little booklets (that I have produced and are on the web) are products of praying and sharing classes with mainly new parishioners. I am convinced that this present Synod that is listening onwards from the laity, both women and men, and spending so much time in listening to God’s Spirit will gradually be a deep revival in closeness to the Blessed Trinity.

This is what pondering this Scripture said to me,
But what is it saying to YOU?

Reflections and Sharing on

The 'BENEDICTUS.'

So far we have pondered the Holy Spirit working miraculously in Elizabeth and Mary to conceive. We pondered them joined by Zachariah in their prayerful thankfulness? At the ceremony of gift-baby John's Circumcision, Zachariah pours out his heart in praise and thanksgiving to our caring, saving God. And *'filled with the Holy Spirit'* he leads the *THANKSGIVING* for all who recognise God's gifts and share them!

The 'BENEDICTUS.'

“Let us praise the Lord, the God of Israel! He came to help 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.”

What is the ‘*Benedictus*’ saying to *ME* now? I ponder first God’s Spirit speaking through Zachariah’s grateful heart and the Scripture. I ponder at it reaching countless number of listeners down through the ages. The present generation hear the words of the Spirit speaking to us through Luke as above. Those who are pondering and listening in their prayer-time are being moved in their hearts and souls. In this way we become aware that God is ‘speaking’ to US now, in today’s civilisation in turmoil and war. He is promising ‘*he would rescue us from our enemies*’! That means He would call us into *being guided*, into *trusting*, into acknowledging *weaknesses*, and *failures*, accepting and granting *forgiveness*. Yes. we will have our *sins forgiven* because ‘*Our God is merciful and tender*’. The above Scripture leads to much pondering. It is especially so in to day’s world of wars, *sufferings*, *loss of truth*, *trust*, *compassion* not to mention *forgiveness* and so on. It reminds me that time spent pondering the ‘good things’ in families can give us awareness of **love**. We may be asked someday, ‘where does **love** come from?’ I can find that pondering, praying even the small ‘**Good Things**’ in my day, or in **Scripture**, or in **Nature** would point me in the direction of a growing, personal relation to God that Zachariah was pointing us towards.

JOSEPH, SPOUSE of MARY

I spend time imagining Mary on that home-journey praying so thankfully with God for the miraculous results of Elizabeth's pregnancy and the joyous birth of John. Besides her own miraculous conception, John's birth is another amazing experience of the awesome, saving work of God!

But next I imagine her prayers turning to asking help in successfully informing Joseph of all that has happened to herself and her own pregnancy!

Next I imagine her, after having informed Joseph of her miraculous experience. He has said nothing: just gone off in stunned silence! Now Mary too is just waiting in silence; sad, but trustfully *praying for strength and guidance to carry out this unknown future, 'step by step'!*

Joseph's praying for guidance.

(For more light on Joseph's challenging experience I turn to Matthew's Gospel, 10: 19-21)

"Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly." I try to imagine how deeply needy for guidance was that prayer!. God enlightens! ***"But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream***

and said, 'Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.'"

Married Life begins..

Joseph emerges from this experience in deep gratitude and awe of God for this revelation. I see him at once privately meeting Mary. Apologising at his disbelief, he tells her of God's message and invites her to be his wife! It is a great moment of joy and thankfulness for both! I picture Joseph as a man well recognised in the village as capable, kind, helpful, quiet and a good listener. And I see them beginning their married life and still participating fully in the village life. I see each one spending time at their daily works and time together. And personal and shared prayer time is so important! They are so conscious of their surrender to God's invitation. It will be a journey into an 'unimaginable' future! Yet with deep *TRUST* in the Loving God, they are accepting this '*always into-the-unknown*' journey. It will mean their praying being open to day-by-day guidance and strength! I also picture Mary doing her household chores, helping Joseph in his work where able and also her parents and neighbours when possible. She and Joseph talk about things freely and when uncertain, bring it to prayer for guidance. There they wait for *noticing* new facts and feel drawn to *act together* in trust. They are quietly thinking and planning ahead to the birth of this special baby and how they will begin rearing him in their home village.

The first unexpected factor.

But an unexpected factor arises! Joseph receives notification that he must go to Bethlehem (an historical Seat of David, their Religious Leader.). The ruling Roman Emperor has now ordered all males in his vast regions to participate in a census. Joseph is ordered to participate in it in Bethlehem in Judea, near Jerusalem. Of course for Joseph it is unthinkable to leave Mary alone while he is gone. So he makes plans to bring her along with him. (But I just wonder did it also lead him and Mary to decide to live in Bethlehem with its religious history and atmosphere. That would require Joseph selling possessions and moving with a donkey for their few essential belongings and carpenter's tools and for helping Mary, if needed.)

More Pondering and Praying on Joseph's Role.

Pondering this I become aware of how little time I have spent in recognising Joseph's example for deepening my spiritual life! So now I am spending more time pondering his family life with Mary and soon with Jesus. I find myself thinking forward to some of what their life-experience will be. While seeing their praying for greater *TRUST*, guidance and thanks I realise it will be a *day-by-day* journey into the unknown! But they will be continually growing in it, as the Father's Spirit's leads them through even very trying experiences. I imagine their love of God deepening as even in painful times, thankful aspects will gradually appear and strengthen this trust and gratitude. And gratitude urges sharing! And remembering the example of Zachariah and Elizabeth helps prepare me to

imagine Joseph's union with Mary deepening more and more. This will help me imagine their wonderful sharing care of Jesus. Growth in this will support and guide parents in exercising 'paternal care' in to-day's so 'self-centred' world!

***“Holy Spirit, enlighten my Praying,
my Thinking and my Acting”.***

How conscious are we today that: 'The *family* is the unit of *Society* – not the individual'? (Saying “family” I include extended generations and relations.) I now realise better the family's contribution to society comes from the *spiritual life* of the family! This involves the parents' ever-growing *awareness* of their *dependence* on God! And this is deepened by *prayer* and *trusting*. I now thank God for receiving so much in family life that I have been unaware of. I have also neglected noticing Joseph's example for deepening our *dependence, trust* and *contribution* to family life! *Trusting* is deepened by noticing more and more things to be thankful for. And sharing on our discoveries helps our *noticing!* May Joseph and Mary guide families in their praying-together time to also pray for this!

I am now praying more often, ***“Holy Spirit, enlighten my Praying, my Thinking and my Acting”.***

This is what pondering and praying
this Scripture said to me.
But what is it saying to YOU?

THE BIRTH OF JESUS

Luke 2: 1-20

Preparatory Prayer.

Heavenly Father, by pondering the Birth of the Saviour increase our thanks, guidance, courage and especially HOPE and TRUST for our present days.

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. (NRSV)

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

I pause at *'In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered.'* I ponder the implications. Augustus, a peace-leaning Emperor controlled so many, even diverse and distant countries and peoples. Thus communications, travel, interaction, etc were advanced. (For the beginning of a future world-wide spreading Faith this was a big advantage.) But seeing the Israel arrangements of *'All went to their own towns to be registered'* makes me realise it causes hardship for Joseph – and Mary! They *'went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David, called Bethlehem'*. Joseph will not leave

Mary's side while away. But I imagine hardships on that difficult journey, especially for a pregnant woman away from family friends and surroundings. Yet, here we see them – journeying on doggedly in TRUST! Next, finding the shock of *'no place for them in the inn'*, I see them with trustful prayer and stamina searching for a place to stay. And finally they find a stable they are allowed to use! And in it Mary gives birth to Jesus the Saviour of the World! With loving care she, *'wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger.'*

God inviting 'unsuitables' to share the 'Good News'.

I ponder God again doing the unthinkable! He shows special signs of His power and presence. But here, it is to the most unlikely people one could imagine! The chosen messengers of this 'Good News', which all Israel has been waiting for so long, are Shepherds who 'lived rough' – *in the fields*'. In their ragged, smelly, grubby clothes, they were treated with suspicion and unwelcome in towns, – even forbidden to enter Synagogues. However here we see them attentive, reliable workers *'keeping watch over their flock by night'*. But they lacked every other quality of an ideal messenger! However *'an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them' and 'they were terrified.'* The angel gives the message! *'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.'*

MEETING THE BABY

So with trust and courage they step out; *'Let us go – and see!'* *'with haste'* they go searching!

I imagine them quietly looking here and there and then cautiously approaching a possible place, a stable! I hear a shepherd diffidently, politely calling out, 'Excuse us but we have been sent'. Mary and Joseph with awe, gratitude, trust and happiness are prayerfully trying to face the mystery this special Child brings. Now they are surprised by the shepherds' arrival. But they welcome them so warmly. They listen with wonder 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 in their approach to the baby. This also increases the wonder, gratitude and joy in Mary and Joseph! The shepherds' presence is a sign of Gods mysterious working in hearts quietly 'behind the scenes'! 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. I see them gradually filling with excitement, thankfulness and the desire to run out and spread the news.

(I have found myself drawn into this scene)

Reflections.

This reminds me of a memorable experience. In Japan I had a 'praying-Scripture' group of mostly newly baptised

Christians. Basically for fifteen minutes I would tell of awareness I got from pondering and praying a section of Scripture. Then we would all, in silence ponder and reflect on it for another fifteen minutes. Then in groups of about three they would share for fifteen minutes on ‘discoveries’ each had experienced. Finally the whole group were invited for anyone to recount an unusually impressive experience or discovery that pondering this Scripture had generated. I remember so strongly one rather shy and quiet lady excitedly bursting out, ‘But He had to be born in a stable!’ I distinctly remember judging inside myself, ‘don’t exaggerate’ but she repeated more strongly, ‘He had to be born in a stable!’ adding ‘How else could the shepherds visit Him; they would not have been allowed into the Inn!’ It shocked me! I had never myself thought or even heard it expressed before! Pondering and sharing with others always helps so much! And It helped me better realise that the Lord came to save us starting with needy shepherds!

This is what this Scripture said to me
But what is it saying to you?

THE 'PRESENTATION'

Luke 2: 21-40

Preparation.

“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.’” I imagine Joseph and Mary carrying the child from Bethlehem to Jerusalem and up into the imposing, bustling, noisy Temple. The Temple was the awesome symbol to the Israelite people of God’s presence among them. Its role was to foster in their daily living their awareness of interaction with God. (But over-human activity connected with sacrifice-offering was helping smothering this.) I picture them, so insignificant in that noisy, jostling crowd, yet prayerfully entering and solemnly *‘to present’* the new baby-Jesus *‘to the Lord’*.

The Praise and Revelation of Simeon.

“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.'”

Simeon appears – out of nowhere. It seems his life has been especially a preparation for this meeting. He is -‘**righteous**’ a man of great integrity, ‘**devout**’ and so prayerful! His habit of prayer 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 approaches Mary and Joseph! He is so grateful to God for now sending the long-awaited Saviour into the world! And secondly, for his receiving this astounding gift of personally meeting the promised Saviour! He reverently extends his arms to hold the baby. Mary glances at Joseph. He gives a small nod. She graciously gives the child ‘**into his arms**’. Simeon’s joy, thankfulness and awe deeply move the hearts of Mary and Joseph. But he has been inspired beyond even what Mary and Joseph were realising. He points out that this Saviour was not only the Promised One for the Chosen People of Israel but ‘**for all the nations**’! No wonder Joseph and Mary ‘stood there wondering!’ Here is much more for

them to ponder! *‘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.’*

Next 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! Today’s PRESENTATION (handing over) will become a more conscious reality, when Jesus leaves *“to do his Fathers’ business”*. () That will demand a huge ‘letting go’. And 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 cruelly 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.’* Yet Mary still trusts the Father’s love.

Anna’s Praise and beginning Spreading ‘Good News’.
‘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’. Anna had experienced

married life and then a very long widowhood. Widows in Israel were in a very marginalised role. Being eighty-four years old (in those days - amazing!) made it even worse. Yet *'She never left the temple but worshipped there with fasting and prayer night and day.* 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'*. Here she is an agent of support and comfort for Mary and Joseph. *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) Here she is playing such a significant role! And she is the first spreader of the 'Good News'!!.

Reflection

After much reflection on this scene, the awareness suddenly struck me:- In that crowded Temple there were men and women religious-followers from all levels of life. There were so many Religious-leaders , teachers, preachers and family members, as well as many important foreign pilgrims, But it was to these two 'un-noticeables' that the Sovereign God reveals Himself! And it was for more than just a life of following religious rules and offering sacrifice that prepared them. It was by their hearts being opened through *listening* prayer! From all those gathered there:- local or pilgrim, ordinary believer or priestly, scholar or official, youthful or elderly, the Saving God is only revealed to two 'ordinary', local, very elderly, but habitually deeply praying, listening and responding in TRUST believers!.

Pondering this amazing realisation much *awareness* emerged. One took command! ‘Vinny’ came to mind! He had been my classmate and best friend. And we were both sent to Japan and after language school we were luckily never too far distant from one another. We did many special silent, sharing retreats together. We formed small groups of missionaries for praying and sharing together. We gradually were able to build up such small groups in our parishes. But after thirty years we were sorry when he was asked to go to another mission. It was a ‘world-distant’ away, difficult and different type of mission with ‘neediness’ and lawlessness – so different to Japan. One early morning while praying in his little church, from behind he was struck on the head, badly wounded, hands and feet bound and robbed of his house-key. Alone he bled to death before discovery near Mass-time. The house had been ram-sacked. He was both a deep prayer and a helper of many ‘needy’ people. He literally ‘poured-out’ his life. (We all aspire to ‘Widow’s Mite’ entrances into Heaven.) I asked Vinny’s heavenly help for pondering and praying this scripture.

I also recognised that the Lord has also sent me different earthly ‘soul-friends’ (“anam-caras”) as helpers on my spiritual-journey. I am finding in my *listening* prayer that ‘thankfulness’ springs up more quickly and deeper.

This is what this Scripture said to me
But what is it saying to you?

Post Presentation Reflections

I now picture Josph and Mary with the baby Jesus, in a thoughtful and prayerful mood, returning to their Bethlehem “lodgings”. But before they can organise themselves for the next stop, they are interrupted by the visit of three foreign, influential, prayerful “Wise men”. These have come from countries very foreign to Israel. (*“Obviously prompted by the spirit”*.) But it also results in the holy family having to flee at once into the safety of, but difficult living, in Egypt! It will be a lonely, testing experience. It will demand much trusting to the guidance of God’s *Spirit*. It will be some time before they can safely return to Israel and to Nazareth, where, they are led to greater safety, and to the rich experience of wider-family and community living.

I try to imagine some of the emotional cost of this fleeing and their day by day TRUST In God’s invisible care. I imagine it ever-deepening their TRUST and awareness of God. I also imagine that, in spite of experiencing times of neediness or danger, their prayers so quickly return to thanking and TRUST. Early in my frustrating and challenging missionary life a great leader of spirituality gave us much help. One thing was his stressing that we develop a definite period in our prayers each day for recognising “good things”. It was to be a definite chosen length of time period. In it we asked to be

made more aware of “good things” that God had given us in our day. (These were probably noticed at the time and happily acknowledged but were quickly smothered by incoming “negatives”). Now in this special time we were to ask to be shown “good things”, to wait, and when noticed stay with each, as long as held, then waiting for another “good” to present itself. (At the beginning of this habit much time can involve promptly dismissing encroaching “negative” feelings to be faced after this exercise ended.) This growing habit of noticing and discovering leads to a more constant and deeper attitude of thanks and TRUST and a deepening awareness of God’s action in our lives. The more aware I become of God’s presence in my daily life, the more He can also work through me for others.

The Synod

I pray that your experience of listening and praying in the SPIRIT discovered in this booklet may be helpful to others. I am also praying for deep spiritual graces coming out of the “Synod” that will be gathering in Rome long and often. For the first time in the history of the Church lay-women and lay-men will be full participants. Also it will be beyond discussions and voting leading to decisions. It will consist of each participant facing each question, praying and listening to the Spirit for guidance and thus sharing on each question. This exchange of expressions must continue until there is full unanimity. It will be a very spiritual and “Spirit Trusting” experience. The fruit of it will be well shared throughout the whole praying church.

Gradually this should spread more and more throughout the ‘People of God’. That will greatly help awareness to, and being influence by, the world-wide Church. Continuing my pondering and praying I am delighted with memories coming to mind. I have suddenly remembered occasions in my ministry of leading new Christians in praying and sharing. There have been occasions when one would make an observation that humbled me. My reaction, while being delighted, was regretful for not realising it earlier. Now I am thanking God for reminding me that the working of the

SPIRIT is not confined to the work of the church. And it also stimulates my “Praying Pentecost” and the going out of the Disciples and spreading the Church. I’m reminded also of the role of the laity in the Church. I think of Elizabeth (Zachariah), Mary, Joseph, John the Baptist, Simeon and Anna – those we have just met in early Luke. These key persons were not ‘officials’ in the birth of the Church. We pray that the role of the laity will be more deeply recognised.

Let us pray...

‘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.’

HINTS FOR A 'PRAYING SCRIPTURE' GROUP

**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 for beginners.)*

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 you can 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?’*

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.

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.

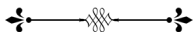
We will notice that we gradually begin to share more about

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.

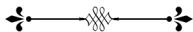
Remember! In troubling times, in this kind of ‘sharing’ we just don’t share about our troubles but about how we *talk with God* about our troubles!

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.

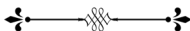


*'Make me a channel of Your peace
Where there is hatred,
let me bring Your love,
Where there is injury,
Your pardon, Lord
And where there is doubt,
true faith in you.'*



May praying **Luke helping us to Listen in Prayer** enliven our awareness of the Spirit working in our communities and in the Synod.

May it also enliven a missionary spirit in communities and prayers for our missionary work.



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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.'