

Revd John Potter is a URC minister serving in a group of churches in Norwich. Before entering ministry, he worked as a professional news photographer, and still makes use of his gifts as part of enhancing his faith and in worship. Here, John offers some ideas for using photography as a tool in your discipleship journey.

Opening thoughts

Photography is now easily accessible to everyone with digital cameras. What used to be an expensive and technical preserve, is now open to anyone with a modern phone. Cameras that produce good results aren't that expensive, but if you want to, you can still spend a fortune on the latest kit. As such, photography can be put to use within our faith by a whole range of people in all sorts of ways, from snaps on a phone, to highly sophisticated works of art. Having skills helps, but it really isn't essential. What matters, as with everything in your discipleship journey, is the 'why' of doing this, not the 'how'. Here are some ideas of how you can 'Walk the Way' visually along with your other senses too.

Being open

God has given us five senses with which we can experience the world about us, and I would like to encourage us to do so as part of exploring our faith. The key is being open, spiritually, to receiving inspiration from God, as is expressed in Ephesians 1:18 *'so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints'*.

As I am a photographer, this is mostly about what can be seen, but I am sure that the same principles apply to all of our senses. For example, in the current lock-down, it has been a joy to hear birdsong once again now that the traffic noise has subsided.

One of the other key Bible passages that guides me is Psalm 36:9 *'For with you is the fountain of life; in your light we see light.'* It is God's light that we see, and, through the process of seeing, we can see beyond what's in front of us to the far greater wonder of the one who created and sustains all that God made (see John 1:3). Thus, learning to see in a spiritual setting, and then recording what we find, is part of the process of exploring and discovering the wonders of our creator.

So, let's pick up a camera and explore!

Matthew 6:28-29 says *'Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these,'* a good starting point for an exercise that can be done either at home or out and about. The key is to take time to slow down and look prayerfully and carefully.

Here is a prayer that may be helpful before you start looking with the eyes of your face, to open up the eyes of your heart;

*Spirit of God, in this moment, in this place, may I be open to your presence.
Help me to be, help me to see. AMEN.*

Be attentive, especially to details and changes in light. Even everyday objects, that are so easily overlooked, have depths of beauty many miss. It's amazing what you can discover in your home and the environment around you – even raindrops are extraordinary, when you look closely.



These are just raindrops on a leaf in the garden, but they looked just like peas in a pod to me.

And don't just reserve your photography for sunny days – here are couple of examples of looking out for how the light can enhance what we see.



I came across this collection of raindrops on a bedroom window just after a storm had passed and the sun light-up a strip of sky.



This is of a tree on a street corner near my home on a foggy night, lit up by a street lamp.

And be on the look-out for something that's a bit different.



One afternoon a shaft of sunlight caught the edge of a mirror in the lounge, it was just a case of thinking how to hold the camera to get a good image of the rainbow effect.

Another approach to faith photography, is to start by meditating on a verse of scripture (the Psalms are a good starting point) and then go to look for a picture, but it may also be that a view suddenly reminds you of a verse, as happened for me recently.

There was a butterfly on some blossom in the local park. I watched it for ages and managed to get a photo with my little 'point and shoot' camera. When I got home and looked at the image on the computer, I noticed that it was feeding and thought of a verse from Psalm 34 – here's the result;



It may be that a Psalm could inspire you to seek a whole series of pictures (or even create them) to illustrate it. The results could be turned into a slide show or short film to share with others. Click [here](#) for an example.

Using photography (or art) as part of Walking the Way

As part of a recent sabbatical study, I thought through some of the imagery which *Walking the Way* brings up, about journeying and pilgrimage. Where do we walk? What types of route or pathways are there? When we come to a junction, how do we decide which way to go? I began to find visual answers, which, in turn led to further reflection. Here are a couple of examples:



This is an idea from a location I saw whilst on a Good Friday walk, and with the help of a friend, created this visual representation of *Walking the Way*.



This image came about as I, with other pilgrims and leaders approached the ancient Celtic chapel at Bradwell. The moody clouds really helped the atmosphere.

Perhaps you or your church could organise a prayer walk in the neighbourhood and produce your own set of pictures, with the intention of looking for paths, junctions, signs and other imagery to do with journeying with Jesus. If anyone in the congregation has specific artistic talents, they could paint or draw their own interpretations. Maybe someone who is skilled at writing could produce some starter thoughts to go with the images, such as 'Where might Jesus be seen travelling where you live?' and 'Where is God on your street?'

Sharing

You may have noticed that I have avoided using the phrase 'taking a photo'. This is because, if you are making use of your photography as part of your faith, you are *receiving* what God gives to you. What you see is a response to being open to the prayerful prompting of the Holy Spirit. You don't 'shoot', you are given a gift.

As with any gift from God, we are encouraged to share, so for me, it's important to find ways that your photography, or any other art form, can be shared to help enhance the faith of others. Even just pointing out something beautiful can be a way to start a conversation about faith.

So, I encourage you, though to use a camera, to record what you discover and then share the images, either as part of worship or via the internet or social media. Photography could be a collaborative project, such as a day out or workshop which, could then be used to create an interactive service of worship to be taken round various churches. If your church includes news or testimonies within worship, then telling the story of the how the images came to be, and their meaning for you, is another good way to share. This can even be done virtually by sharing and collating images, comments and reflections online.

Just remember that, if you take an image involving other people, you must have their permission to use and share the image.

I hope these ideas might spark imaginative possibilities in exploring and sharing your faith, and that you enjoy doing this as much as I do.