

Prayer toolkit

prayer and art

AIM

This material aims to provide some ways of exploring prayer with art or art with prayer. It is suitable for use by individuals or small groups.

INTRODUCTION: Let me tell you

You'll have seen them too, I imagine. There's a particular road I often travel that has, for a stretch, bundles of bedraggled flowers forlornly tied to the roadside signs and fences. Occasionally they evolve into small shrines with, amidst the freshly-placed blooms, a photo of a face. They say that death has visited this place; that this road killed. A bad part of me, observing my own careful driving of course, wonders about what sort of speed or risk combined to cause the accident these flowers remember. But as I drive past the silent witnesses to grief I also find myself praying; praying for those who have died so suddenly doing something as seemingly ordinary as sitting in a car, praying for those who cared for them by this roadside and those who have returned to tie flowers to a tree.

Not just words

The tangible becomes the prayerful. We are a Christian tradition in love with words, maybe even at risk of idolising what can be said, preached or written. We love the ability of words to communicate great things and to gather us up into the heartbeat of God. I'm a teacher and preacher and words are part of my trade. I love them for their irrepressibly elusive magic. At times they drive me mad because I can't find the best ones when I need them most. And then the flowers break into my journey and I'm praying. A bunch of flowers speaks of so much more than what it is.

Things we see and touch and create can both be prayers and become prayers. Laying the flower can be an act of remembrance and a committal of a loved one into the care of Christ every bit as much as the funeral eulogy and the words we speak in the crematorium. So we come to Vision for Life Prayer Year and to the possibilities of art; of both using the stuff we can see and make to feed and ignite our praying and actually letting prayer flow in our own acts of creativity. I want to think with you a little about why art might be a wonderful companion in our praying, and how you might let art enrich this year of prayer.

1. ART AND THE ORTHODOX TRADITION

Our sisters and brothers in the Orthodox tradition, after their own battles about the risks of images contaminating worship with idolatry, settled upon the use of icons as an essential part of their praying. Rowan Williams, in a beautiful little book that I would gladly give to anyone who wanted to explore art and prayer, says this:

"An icon is a surface: you can't walk round it but only look at it, and, hopefully, through it. It insists that you don't treat it as an object with which you share a bit of space. In the icon, what you see is human beings and situations as they are in the light of God's action. When you draw a diagram or even a map, you have to pick out the elements of the view that you need in order to convey what this drawing is for; it is a bit like that with an icon. It doesn't seek for photographic realism; like the lines of a diagram, the lines of an icon tell you what it is in the subject matter that is significant, that conveys God's working. And you need to look and pray with that in mind, to look patiently and not analytically, and allow yourself to be 'worked on' – perhaps we should say, allow yourself to be looked at by God, rather than just looking at something yourself. That's why the use of icons is not some kind of image worship. Certainly icons are treated with reverence – people bow to them, kiss them, light candles in front of them and so on. Some people may

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approach this in a superstitious spirit, as with any practice performed in church. But the reverence – as any Eastern Christian will tell you – is not because the icons are seen as magical objects but because in their presence you become aware that you are present to God and that God is working on you by his grace, as he does in the lives and words of holy people, supremely in the words of Scripture and the person of Jesus .” (pages xviii-xix)

Rowan Williams goes on to explore what it means for him, as someone outside the Orthodox tradition as we are, to find in a variety of icons the possibilities of prayer. You may well want to explore icons with him.

Moving on

I want to move in a slightly different direction. I'm struck by his comment about being 'worked on.' I think that can be very real when we're around all sorts of art, not just icons intended as gateways into praying. Art works well when we let it evoke things within us rather than when we try to hard to analyse it. Art tends to have a bit of extra meaning that hangs around waiting to click with something deep inside us. The painter may well have wanted to paint milk being poured from a jug by a woman at a window, but on the particular day I find myself standing in front of the picture I'm drawn in partly by the sheer skill that makes oil paint on canvas look like running milk but even more by a sense of time unfolding, of a task being done with care, even (as happened to one person I know of looking at Vermeer's painting entitled *The Milkmaid*) of a sense of our own life running out and ending. None of that, as far as I know, was in the artist's head when the work was being done; but the seeds for all sorts of responses and emotions are there from the moment the painting is seen by others. Art is elusive and ambiguous. It is less about pinning down an argument into a conclusion and more about opening a new set of horizons and inviting us to contemplate; and contemplation for me can lead to God and become prayer. I wouldn't pretend that every piece of art will lead every person who looks at it to a profound knowledge of Christ as Saviour. But I do believe that people looking at art can discover in the looking a whole load of things about themselves and their world. And that, for me, means discovering also something of the presence of God. Flowers by the road can do that for me. So can pictures.

If that is true of looking at the art other people create, I believe it can also be true of creating art for ourselves. There can be times when words fail us, or when we need something alongside the words. Not all of us find words the best way to express ourselves. Some of us learn and discover best by doing things rather than being told about things. Creating art in the context of prayerfulness can be incredibly effective as a way of sharing with God. Often when people are given a range of art materials and a good space in which to explore their possibilities I've discovered two things happening: amazing art gets created; profound prayer gets offered. This isn't about doing an art class; it is about allowing our creativity and God's presence to embrace and kindle holy fire.

2. PRAYING WITH PICTURES:

Here are two ways in which you might want to let art lead you into prayer. The first is about looking at other people's art, the second is about creating your own.

1. Get hold of a picture. It could be a painting or sketch or photo. I collect all sorts of postcards as great ways to get cheap and portable art into my life. Or find a picture on the internet, in a magazine or a book from a second hand shop.
2. One very immediate way to use your picture is to simply spend time in a comfortable and quiet place looking at it. Pause in prayerfulness and invite God to open up to you whatever God wills for you. It may be that you come to look at the

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pictures with an issue or encounter already bubbling within you. Does an image spark some sort of response in you as you hold the image and the experience together? What might the picture be saying about your responses to what happened? Why has a particular image, or a part of an image, attracted you? Does an image make you feel negative? Why? Does an image relate to a passage from the Bible and, if so, in what ways might it flesh out the text in your imagination? Remember that part of what you may want to do is to imagine what the artist or photographer was trying to capture. But more importantly looking at a picture is about allowing ourselves to respond to it; the artist has offered the image and can't now control what you see or find within it. Art works through alluding to things, offering hints, touching chords in us. Art isn't unambiguous or straightforward; that's its joy! Let what happens flow into prayer. Ponder the sort of prayer that seems to arise most naturally within you: praise and thanksgiving; intercession; confession?

3. Enjoying looking at an image may give you more than enough to ponder and take into prayer. But you may want more. Having chosen an image sit in stillness with it for some time, allowing yourself to enjoy it and notice as much as you can about it. Get a pen and paper. For 5 minutes do a brainstorm of responses to your image. Don't worry about neat sentences; just let words and phrases come as you respond to such things as: colour; shapes; lines; marks; patterns; tones (light to dark); mood; feeling; subject; content. Stop writing and spend 5 minutes thinking about how you respond to this image: how do you feel about it; what thoughts does it bring to your mind; what associations does the picture have; how does it connect to your life? For a final 5 minutes write down a sentence that sums up what you have done and discovered with this image. Turn that sentence into a prayer.
4. A further way of looking at pictures is a bit more like a visual version of *lectio divina*- [[link here for the bible and Prayer doc that includes this method](#)] the process of simply spending time with a Bible passage allowing a particular word to become the focus of your attention. Having chosen a picture position it so that you can sit comfortably and look at it at eye level in a well lit and peaceful space. Pray as you settle yourself to spend time dwelling upon the image and inviting God to be with you and touch your looking. Satisfy yourself if you need to know the title, artist, dates, etc. If you can't know accept the fact and let it go. Begin to consciously focus upon the picture as a whole. What speaks to you? How does it make you feel? Is it the whole that you want to dwell upon or only a part? Gradually allow a single aspect of the picture to become the focus of your attention and dwell upon it. If you need something to guide you try this...
 - Focus upon colour – are there many different ones or just a few; do they jar or are they soothing; are the colours warm (yellows, oranges, reds); are they cool (blues, purples); are large areas dominated by just a few colours?
 - Focus upon shapes and lines – what are the relationships between horizontals and verticals; does the picture flow upwards or downwards; how is the artist leading your eye; is it very angular or are there many curves; is the focus sharp with hard outlines or soft with fuzzy images?
 - Focus upon tones – does light predominate; does dark predominate; where are there contrasts between light and dark and how do they work?
 - Focus upon pattern and texture – is the picture busy with lots going on or simple and still; are there lots of brush marks or none; where is there space for your eye to rest?

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- Then ask yourself what aspect of this picture you find most compelling. Dwell upon that. Ask yourself what God might be saying here, or what your response to the art might be saying about you.
- Allow yourself to turn this looking into prayerfulness. Offer to God what has emerged.

3. PAINTING A PRAYER

1. One of the things that can really get in the way of playing with painting is choosing the cheapest possible materials. Thin paper that collapses as soon as paint touches it, watery paint that creates only vague puddles and brushes that throw their bristles everywhere and turn your delicate line or bold swoosh into chaotic dashes are unlikely to make painting feel good. Equally you may not want to go crazy buying art materials. So go for the middle of the range. If you are going to use a water-based paint like water colour or acrylic get a water colour or acrylic paper from an art shop that is fairly thick so that it will hold water well. Buy paints that also come from the middle of the range (if it says "Artist's quality" on the tube it is probably the best quality. Cheaper but perfectly useable paint is often described as "Student's quality"). The same goes for brushes. If you want to try oil paints you'll get some wonderful effects but remember that they will take much longer to dry (often weeks) and will prefer to be put onto canvas, acrylic paper, or board like MDF.
2. Find a good place to work. Bear in mind that things may get messy!
3. Pray as you begin. You may want simply to paint and then reflect, seeing if anything in your painting draws you into prayer. You may want to dwell upon a particular encounter or event in the past and allow that to flow into your painting. You might take a verse or passage from the Bible or a part of a hymn and let that be the starting point for your painting.
4. When you begin to paint you may feel comfortable simply doing your own thing. If so, go for it!
5. But you may be wondering how to begin, or you might feel you want to avoid controlling too early on what it is you are creating. What follows is a way of using painting that may be helpful...
6. Use a sponge (assuming you are using a water-based paint) and wet your paper all over on both sides (otherwise it will curl as it dries).
7. Close your eyes for 2 minutes. Dwell upon whatever it is that comes to mind or that you have chosen as the starting point for this time of prayer.
8. Opening your eyes, choose two different colours and load two brushes or sponges, one with each colour. Take a brush or sponge in each hand.
9. Close your eyes again for 2 minutes and, without looking, paint with both hands. You may be working entirely at random, or you might find yourself painting a mental image of something. The way you make contact with the paper may express something significant about how you feel.
10. Open your eyes and see what you've got.
11. It may be you have finished your painting and can dwell upon it in prayer.

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12. But it may be you now want to add more to your work. You might choose extra colours and work over the top of what is already there, or fill in spaces. You might turn the paper around to see it from various angles. You could tilt it to let colours run and merge. You might print into it by pressing paper or objects or your hands into the wet paint. You might lift out colour by using bunched up kitchen towel. You could flick colour at the paper from a brush or scrape into it using the tip of the brush. If you want to dry your painting before adding more to it using a hair drier speeds things up well. You might want to collage other things on top of the paint. Let the act of creating itself be prayer.
13. When you've finished painting you may want to consider some of what has emerged in more detail. You could try writing a spontaneous stream of words that capture your reactions to your work and the issues surrounding it (focus upon your responses to colour, lines, patterns, mood, etc.). Do you see any discernable images and, if so, what are they and why do you see them? How does your work make you feel (energised, depressed, elated, careful, uncertain, blessed, isolated, etc.)? Does your art have a mood (warm, cool, chaotic, placid, etc.)? Is your painting primarily an outpouring of positive or negative emotion, or a mix?
14. If you imagine your painting is a place: what season of the year are you looking at; what time of day; where would you like to be in it and why; what does it evoke in you?
15. Bear in mind that you might not ever truly know what your picture is about. But draw the time to an end by offering to God what has happened and by thinking about what to do next. Is this a picture to keep and return to, or to discard because the act of creating was the most important and prayerful thing?

BOOKLIST

A few really good books to help you go further:

- Janet Hodgson, 2006, *The Faith we See: working with images of Christ*, Peterborough: Inspire (Wonderful resource book for working with individuals and groups to pray with and reflect upon images of Jesus. Includes a CD with images)
- Michael Sullivan, 2006, *Windows into the Soul: art as spiritual expression*, Harrisburg (Pennsylvania): Morehouse Publishing (Offers an excellent series of guided spiritual exercises and forms of prayer using art. Primarily for individual use but can be adapted for groups)
- Rowan Williams, 2003, *The Dwelling of the Light: praying with icons of Christ*, Norwich: The Canterbury Press (Thought-provoking meditations upon icons of the Transfiguration, Resurrection, Trinity and Christ as Ruler of All)

EVALUATION

Please try to answer these questions for yourself and for others who will use this material:

5. What was the most helpful thing?
6. What was the least helpful thing?
7. What would you like to try now?

THE NEXT STEP

If you want more prayer activity related to art and craft please revisit the website. More seasonal material using art will appear during the year.

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Acknowledgements

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HOW TO FEEDBACK TO VISION4LIFE?

If you wish to offer any feedback – brickbats and bouquets are equally welcome! – you can do so in various ways.

You can email the Vision4Life steering group about general or website V4L issues via the website or at admin@vision4life.org.uk

If you have comments and particularly contributions to the prayer year, you can email the V4L prayer year coordinator via prayer@vision4life.org.uk

If you want to make contributions or ask questions about other V4L years you can email:

Year 2 – Transformed by the Bible: bible@vision4life.org.uk

Year 3 – Transformed for Evangelism: evangelism@vision4life.org.uk