

JANUARY—APRIL 2017

Quiet Spaces

A creative response to God's love

THEMES IN THIS ISSUE INCLUDE:

Shaping Lent • In the midst of the everyday • The kingdom

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The Editor writes...

Welcome to *Quiet Spaces*.

We are journeying through Lent with Matthew this year, which will give the opportunity for an overview of the whole of Jesus' life up to Easter.

Lent can be a good time for considering our spiritual life and an opportunity to try new things and set ourselves new challenges. This Lent you might like to consider how you prepare for your prayer times. Do you suddenly stop the busyness of life and expect instantly to be still and quiet with God, or do you choose a time when you have slowed down first and so come without a mind and heart full of the day? We don't all have the luxury of taking time to prepare, but we can all take a few moments as we start. Sometimes I find music helps, playing a quiet piece and allowing it to wash over me as I let go of all I've brought with me. Or sometimes I recall the things that are on my mind and likely to distract me, and I offer them to God, asking him to keep them and look after them while I spend time with him. He may put them carefully on a shelf or place them gently in a special box. At the end of the sessions I take back what he has been saving, often leaving one or two things for his longer-term keeping. Psalms or other favourite Bible passages are another good way into prayer, either allowing a whole psalm to wash over me, or reading until one phrase leads me to God, and then staying with that phrase.

Other times I sit and pause, waiting for life to settle and for me to see God in the midst of it, either in a special chair, or looking at a special view; remembering when I have met with God there before and acknowledging his faithfulness to me.

Then, as you settle, ask God to help you be still and able to recognise his presence with you.

Have a good Lent and a joyful Easter.

Sally Smith

Writers in this issue

Sue McCoulough worked for a number of years at the BBC. She was then prayer coordinator at Tearfund. Now a volunteer for the church alliance Restored, which seeks to combat domestic violence against women, Sue enjoys walking, creative writing and leading Quiet Days.

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Jean Marie Dwyer OP is a Dominican nun of the Queen of Peace Monastery, Squamish, British Columbia, Canada. The monastery is dedicated to silence, prayer, study and intercession for all people. She is the author of *The Sacred Place of Prayer* (BRF, 2013) and *The Unfolding Journey: The God Within: Etty Hillesum and Meister Eckhart* (Novalis, 2014).

Lynne Chitty was Deacon at Gloucester Cathedral and now lives in a caravan in the grounds of Mill House Retreats in Devon. She combines leading creative writing courses with times of solitude and has a variety of rescue animals.

Three things remain: faith, hope and love

Sue McCoulough

Three things remain

Introduction

As a church choir member, I often sing at weddings. If I had a pound for every time the bride and groom pick 1 Corinthians 13 as a reading, I'd be pretty rich! Yet it's obvious why many couples feature it in their big day. This section of Paul's letter is both poetically beautiful and full of joyful wisdom, summarising what's important to lasting relationships.

In 1 Corinthians 1—12, which you could read if you have time, Paul offers solutions to division and disorder within the Church. Chapters 1—6 focus on these issues. He goes on to warn against conforming to worldly values (7) and idolatry (8 and 10). Believers are challenged to accept human weaknesses (9:19–23) and natural diversity as part of the united 'body' of the Church (11—12). Christians are encouraged to examine themselves, recommit to the values of Jesus, then 'model' him.

There is a danger, though, of modelling Christ in a head-centred way, as we can end up creating a tick list of achievements or failures. Instead, we're urged to engage with the Spirit, who transforms individual believers and churches holistically.

Take a piece of modelling dough or clay. Alternatively, use a large piece of paper and pencil. Shape or draw a simple outline of a human being: think of it as yourself. Now, looking at your

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creation without judgement, ask yourself the following. Are there:

- any distinctive characteristics?
- any lumps or bumps speaking of problems for 'the body'?
- any things you'd like to add, accentuate or remove?

Jot down what you notice. Then, without trying to make sense of your figure's shape or prime characteristics, place it in the hands of God, the master potter. Imagine him taking loving hold of you. Watch as he holds, looks and begins to remodel.

If your figure feels misshapen, ask God how you might remould things. Wait patiently for a response before making any changes to your figure.

You could try the same exercise and produce a 'figure' that speaks of your church.

Finish with this prayer:

Lord Jesus, I want to model you.

*Help me focus on things that count eternally,
be faithful to your love,*

hopeful, like treasure in clay jars, yet to be revealed.

And finally, vitally, help me abide in your love,

then grow in love for you and all creation. Amen

Faith and doubt

Creative

Recently, a relation of mine read my writing and commented wistfully, 'I wish I could have faith.' But we all have faith in something, such as 'I believe in my children', 'I believe in my right to vote', even 'I don't believe in a God!'

Gerald Priestland spent years working in religious broadcasting but struggled with faith. He pointed out that ‘trusting’ and ‘believing’ are not the same thing, saying, ‘I know that I trust; I hope I believe.’ I sense he felt trust intuitively, while belief, for him, was something to be worked out or developed.

Christians often have the opposite problem: we may believe (in theory) but struggle (in practice) to trust that God’s loving purposes will finally prevail.

Read John 20:24–29 thoughtfully. Notice how Thomas expresses doubt, then how Jesus handles Thomas’ honest dilemma.

If you can, read other writings about ‘Doubting Thomas’. A powerful poem is Malcolm Guite’s ‘St Thomas the Apostle’ (on his website, and also available in print in *Sounding the Seasons: Seventy Sonnets for the Christian Year*, Canterbury Press, 2012). Guite praises Thomas for asking courageous questions when other disciples stay silent. He highlights the importance of human touch, arguing it can connect our wounded selves to a wounded God.

Find a picture of Christ on the cross, or appearing to the disciples after the resurrection. Now read through the Apostles’ Creed as you look at the image of Christ. Are there any beliefs listed there that you struggle to affirm? If so, you might want to ‘touch’ Jesus in your picture.

Ask Jesus courageous questions, as Thomas did. Sense Christ’s compassion flooding out to you. Let ‘touching’ his wounds heal your spirit, gradually helping you address any doubts.

Touching faith

Creative

Touching Jesus grew Thomas’ faith; indeed, touch is a strong healing agent in the Gospels. As a doctor, Luke had special

Three things remain: faith, hope and love

empathy with people considered 'untouchable'. He refers often to illnesses and afflictions, stressing that faith can cure them.

In Luke 8:40–48 we read of a woman who recognised that if she could just touch Jesus she would be healed.

I didn't want to make a fuss. I suppose I should be used to it after twelve years. Doctors all saying they couldn't help. 'Women's problems,' they muttered, as if that made it all right. All my money was gone on failed treatments. My last resort was Jesus.

By the time I saw him, everyone was crowding in. I was being crushed out by people with bigger problems, shouting for help. I saw a rich man from the synagogue bend down, begging Jesus. 'Please save my daughter. She's dying!' What was my trouble compared to that?

Suddenly I was jolted forward from behind, to within an arm's length of Jesus! A little voice inside me begged, 'Just take a deep breath and inch nearer. Reach out, touch him. You'll be healed!'

With my arm outstretched, I stooped down, managing to reach the hem of his cloak. I held it for a moment between thumb and forefinger. Touching a thick, coarse weave of grey, ordinary material. Yet this touch sent a shiver down my spine.

Everything stopped. A moment's freeze-frame. Jesus stood still, shouting out, 'Who touched me?' One of the disciples said, 'Master, how should we know? The world and his wife are out today! You expect us to know who brushed against you?'

Terrified, I became rooted to the spot. Meanwhile, Jesus' eyes fixed on mine. Stumbling to my knees I cried out, 'Forgive me, master. I just knew you could heal me.'

How did those words come to me? Who told me I was healed? I just sensed it deep inside, so mumbled, 'Thank you, thank you.'

His smiled reply was brief but intense. 'Your faith has healed you. Go in peace.'

So I went and now I feel whole again.

Notice the woman's humble, yet courageous faith. You don't have to be a woman to empathise with her plight. If you were in her shoes, would you seek Jesus' healing touch in a similar way?

Find a piece of cloth, preferably something rough and homespun, as Jesus would have worn. Take the cloth between thumb and forefinger and hold it as if holding Jesus' cloak. As you hold the cloak, try pouring out your heart to Jesus, without fear of what he, or others, might think. Don't worry if you can't put things into words. Aim to visualise touching him, then be aware of any response. Remember, Jesus wants you to both recognise and own up to your need. Stick your cloth to a larger piece of paper, perhaps the one containing your shape from the first exercise. Next to the cloth, write all the ways in which you want to touch Jesus. Offer these to him, slowly. Put the paper in front of you so that as you pray you can touch the cloth as the woman touched Jesus' cloak.

Finish by savouring Jesus' words 'Your faith has healed you. Go in peace.' Write these prominently on your paper. Gratefully absorb Jesus' promise.

Emerging faith

Going out

Jesus taught his disciples that after his death, his Father would send the Holy Spirit who would remain with them (John 14:15–31). Christians today still need awareness of the Spirit being in all times and places. This helps us lovingly proclaim Jesus in our attitudes, actions or words.

Read 1 Corinthians 13. Then go outside, into an area of noise, mess or disturbing upheaval. If you can't find one, go to a shop selling newspapers and study the headlines. If you're kept inside, find a picture, photograph or news story that seemingly

Three things remain: faith, hope and love

challenges faith in God as ultimately having the last, loving say in our world.

Sit or stand for a while, noting anything that ‘hits’ your senses. If you react negatively, hand over any abhorrence or prejudice to God. Close your eyes. Inwardly say ‘Love your neighbour’, ‘God’s presence is with us’ or any affirmation that helps you believe in Christ indwelling in all creation. Let the Spirit move you. Pray for God’s understanding and compassion. If you are given any mental picture or literal symbol, hold on to it.

Move away from the area or picture. Has anything in your perspective changed? Perhaps you’ve glimpsed something attractive within the mess, or seen it through new eyes.

Thank God for any insights. Draw or write up your experiences. Is yours a ‘bad news’ story with potential for positive change? Ask God to help you share new faith in that area.

Filled with hope

Creative

In 1 Corinthians 13:13 Paul sandwiches hope between faith and love. Perhaps there’s an analogy to be found between the qualities *faith*, *hope* and *love*, and the contents of a real sandwich.

Maybe faith can be likened to the base slice of bread on which hope and love are built up.

Hope is the in-between bit—the filling usually holding faith and love together. But, crucially, hope is often hidden from view by... a slice of love on top, definitely a gracious gift from God. This crowns faith and hope.

The writer of the letter to the Hebrews expands on this hidden aspect of hope in Hebrews 11. Faith is defined first as confidence in hopes about things yet unseen (vv. 1–2). Then he lists Old

Testament characters, living in a 'middle time' in Israel's history. They die before God's promises are fulfilled (v. 13). But even though God changes everything, at the right time, by sending his Son, Jesus, Christ's promises are yet to be seen fully worked out.

Why not make a 'hope' sandwich? As you butter the bread, remember the three parts of Paul's sandwich. As you choose your filling, think about your hopes and dreams for yourself, the world, perhaps family and friends. Has God given you a sign that 'things hoped for' will be fulfilled? Maybe disappointments or losses have dashed your hope of things holding together—the hope of 'a new heaven and a new earth' (Revelation 21:1).

As you place the three parts together, hold together the faith, hope and love you have experienced.

Before eating your hope sandwich, say this liturgy, inserting your longings in the gaps:

How long, Lord, before your promises are fulfilled?

I lack understanding why...

I need patience to wait, to trust great things you've planned.

Help me believe you will fulfil...

I will savour memories—of things worked out in your time.

I relish your task—to build heaven on earth right now.

I will devour your promise—you will show me the next step.

I joyfully anticipate a time when ... is overcome and when all the faithful can feast lovingly in your kingdom. Amen

As you eat your sandwich, ask to be filled and satisfied with God's hope.

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Lord of all hopefulness

Intercession

After a church day entitled 'A Certain Hope', I left with this saying:

God works in his way, whether we like it or not.

God is here, whether we realise it or not.

God has a wonderful plan, whether we know it or not.

Source unknown

Spend time praising God for 'being in charge'; there in our past, present and future, as promised in Psalm 139. Pray for people who are always there for you, or who exude hope even in difficult circumstances.

Or boldly offer God anything where feelings of hopelessness prevail, either in your own life or in someone else's. Add specific concerns about the world to your petitions. Don't be afraid to 'moan' to God; be honest about any desire for vengeance on others! Such lamentation can bridge a sense of powerlessness with new hopeful vision.

Finish by finding a copy of the popular hymn 'Lord of All Hopefulness'. If you can, sing a verse at a time, pausing to offer up the phases of the day to Jesus.

Resurrection hope

Reflective

'I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.'

JOHN 16:33

In my late teens, I rebelled against Jesus. Why? Because I didn't feel Jesus offered me the peace he promises to all disciples, as John mentions above. If anything, my non-Christian friends seemed more content and peaceful than me.

My reasoning to give up Christianity went something like this. What happened on the cross was intended to give me a guilt trip. If Jesus died for love of me, I was obliged to love him, even though I'd never seen him. What sort of love was that?

It didn't help that I was missing loved ones who had died: as non-believers, surely the Bible said I wouldn't see them again. What sort of hope was that?

My immature faith couldn't see beyond what happened on the cross. Later, I realised Jesus overcame sin with love at Calvary and beyond. I needed to stop making assumptions about how, when and where God's love and hopeful promises work.

Recall your past and present faith and experiences of resurrection hope. Now spend time meditating on one of the following passages:

- 1 Corinthians 15:13–57
- 2 Corinthians 4:13–16
- Romans 8:18–39

Do Paul's words help you think about death, and life beyond death, in a more hopeful way? If any loss is affecting you or someone you know at present, offer these struggles to Jesus. Whatever your 'feelings', take firm hold of his offer of peace. If you need an external focus, try gazing on a picture that offers hope beyond life as we know it today. Or listen to music that offers words of hope.

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Moved by hope

Creative

A local television news item featured a large ballet school that was teaching movement to sufferers of Parkinson's disease. Their limited mobility was improving and once they were better able to express themselves, they also had greater hope.

Whatever your own physical capabilities, try some movement today to celebrate your earthly life. Think of different 'movements' you can make while praying to God, for example holding your arms together in front of your chest and then opening them out above your head (perhaps symbolising bringing God's kingdom into being).

Here are some hope-filled verses from the Bible that you could move to:

... those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint.

ISAIAH 40:31

'I am with you always, to the very end of the age.'

MATTHEW 28:20

'For I know the plans I have for you,' declares the Lord, '... plans to give you hope and a future.'

JEREMIAH 29:11

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

ROMANS 15:13

... *Christ in you, the hope of glory.*

COLOSSIANS 1:27

Letting God love

Meditative

Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God.

1 JOHN 4:7

In the following verses, John claims that once we acknowledge Jesus as the Son of God, God lives in us and we in God (v. 15). We can be confident on the Day of Judgement because ‘there is no fear in love’ (v. 18).

Beautiful words. But maybe like me, you struggle to live them out. I like to think I love *most* people in the *agape* sense of the word. But then I find myself homing in on specific people I know, and all sorts of ‘if only’ thoughts come into my head. ‘If only he were more tactful!’ ‘If only she didn’t have that annoying laugh.’ After bouts of such fault-finding, I wonder if I’ve ever really loved at all.

Each one of us has a slightly different struggle with the demands of love. But, at some point, most Christians ask, ‘How can I possibly *begin* to love as God loves?’

Part of the answer comes in 1 John 4:19: we *can* love ‘because he first loved us’. Then, as Paul reminds us in 1 Corinthians 13, God’s love remains, whether we accept, ignore or even reject his love.

Try to acquire Edwina Gateley’s poem, ‘Let Your God Love You’ (from her collection *In God’s Womb: A Spiritual Memoir*, Orbis Books, 2009, and available online).

Three things remain: faith, hope and love

Now find a picture of Christ, perhaps as a baby in his mother's arms. Place it in front of you, lighting a candle nearby. Remember that we can only love God and others if we let the truth of God's unconditional love for us sink in first. If you can, read the poem slowly several times. If you don't have the poem, remain silently before the picture in the presence of Jesus.

Recognise any struggle you have to just 'be': silent and still before Love itself. Being active is easier for many people. If you find your mind wandering, be gentle with yourself. As the poem reminds us, he knows and understands. Sense God's enormous love flowing out to you as you continue to gaze at Jesus in the picture. Simply and quietly absorb all that he offers.

Love in action

Bible study

There's a story about a young child who lived next door to an elderly widower. The man wept and the little boy climbed onto his lap. The mother later asked the boy what he'd said to the neighbour. 'Nothing,' he replied. 'I just helped him cry.'

Sometimes we can express love better in actions, rather than words. Spend time now reflecting on the different ways Jesus demonstrated love. Pick one of the following passages. As you read it, recognise how Jesus shows love. Imagine being present in the scene and receiving that love direct from Jesus.

- The death and raising of Lazarus (John 11:1–44)
- Jesus washes the disciples' feet (John 13:1–17)
- Words from the cross (John 19:26–27; Luke 23:40–43)

What prompted Jesus' loving action? How did Jesus reveal love in that instance? What was the effect of his love on his

witnesses? What was the effect of his love on you?

Thank Jesus for showing you love in action. Consider demonstrating love today, perhaps in a situation calling for 'tough love'. Remember to draw on Jesus' wisdom and loving strength before you act.

Love has the last say

Poetry

Paul ends 1 Corinthians 13 by proclaiming, 'And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.'

As you read the following, adapt it to match your own conclusions about love's ultimate power.

*When all's said and done,
Love counts.
Starts with Love that overcomes fear,
looks beyond self's clamouring for reward
by giving all.
This love comes to earth
embracing it till fit for eternity.*

*Can I match such love?
I've lost count of ways I've tried...
I've worked hard to serve others,
given my fair share of hugs or compliments,
even gritted my teeth and said nothing
when ignored or offended.
This love comes wearing a mask
to conceal a smug smile or fearful heart.*

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*In time, the mask slips.
My anger and disappointment, exposed for all to see.
I cry out, 'I can't love!
All **my** love is
empty gesture, hideous noise, a clamouring for attention!'*

*Slowly, I reach out
to find cradling arms surround me.
Love is here, has always been here,
will be here forever.
The softest, quietest voice speaks inside,
'Love counts.
My love growing, regenerating
in you, in all things, could you but see it,
That's what counts.'*

'At the end of the day'

Creative

In 1 Corinthians 13, Paul concludes that whatever personal gifts he presents to Christ, he's nothing without love. Once ruled by the law, he's now ruled by love (Philippians 3:7–11). All is made possible once Paul recognises his chief desire: not to know about Christ, but to personally know Christ. By allowing the Holy Spirit to penetrate all his thoughts, experiences and actions, Paul can abandon himself to Love and then make love visible.

Spend some time now creatively pulling together what you've experienced in this section. Read 1 Corinthians 13 again, then return to the model or drawing you made earlier. Look at it lovingly, trying to see yourself again through God's eyes. Ask to claim a greater sense of God's eternal love in your thoughts,

activities and relationships in the days ahead. Ask to recognise when and where you're growing in love, despite any challenges you face.

It may help to write down prayer requests pertaining to any issues you still have about faith, hope and love. To do this, make three columns on a sheet of paper with the three headings, Faith, Hope, Love. Raise each prayer request to God. Write a reminder to yourself to check for answered prayer in the coming weeks.

Or you could write a love letter to God. This doesn't need to be expressed necessarily with overt emotions: just state simple intentions and desires to grow in the knowledge and love of God as feels right for you. End by thanking Jesus for speaking to you, in love. Take time to absorb the promise—that at the end of the day, however things look on earth right now, love will triumph over all.



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Each theme is explored in twelve prayerful ways using creative activities, your personal faith experience, poetry, liturgy, reflection, imagining and meditation, helping you into a heart encounter with God.

Ideal both for those who have discovered the benefits of reflection, meditation and contemplation and are looking for a resource to guide their periods of quiet, and for people coming to reflection and meditation for the first time.

Contributors in this issue: Lisa Cherrett, Lynne Chitty, Jean Marie Dwyer OP, Janet Fletcher, Helen Julian CSF, Sue McCoulough, Andrea Skevington, Sally Smith, Sally Welch

There seems to be something for everyone and I look forward to what each section has to offer.
Mary Taylor, subscriber

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