

St Ignatius and the Catholic spiritual tradition

Of all the things I could say about Ignatius of Loyola's attitude to prayer the one that strikes me most is his belief that God is alive and active in the world and in our lives, in every corner of them. God can be found in all things: prayer is just the aspect of our life where we consciously practice at our relationship with the God we also find in our work and our play. Or maybe it's better to say where God finds us.

Now Ignatius is a very practical mystic so he doesn't theorise about God very much. Ignatius didn't write treatises on prayer or on anything for that matter. He wrote practical things: letters, thousands of them, and a terse manual for someone helping another to deepen their experience of God and make practical decisions out of that reality. That's the manual for the retreat we call the Spiritual Exercises.

I want to be practical too and pick out three simple practices from the Spiritual Exercises that work together to help a person deepen their prayer. Ignatius applies them to every single prayer exercise in the retreat: they stay the same however much the main content of the exercise changes. What they have in common is a conviction that God is real.

They are simple: the first is to be aware of how God looks at me; second, to be aware of my own desires; and third, to talk to God and let God talk back.

Ignatius begins every prayer in the Spiritual Exercises with an invitation to ask a question — how as I come to prayer is God looking at me? And he doesn't mean us to guess, or argue from theology — he means us to have a look at God looking at us — the way I would have to look at the face of a friend to see how, in this moment, he is looking at me. You might object that God doesn't have a face. Never mind. Close your eyes and give it a try anyway; it only takes a moment to imaginatively 'look' in

God's direction and 'see'. What is your hunch? How is God looking at you?

Ignatius believes that all prayer begins like this with God already present and taking the initiative and he is confident we all can tell how God is intent on us, here and now.

That's the first of the three practices. The second one is to become aware of our own desires. In the face of God's gaze, what do I want; what do I want from life, from God, from this time of prayer? Desire uncovers what is closest to our heart and it challenges our honesty — often we discover that what we want and what we wish we wanted are very different things. That's the gap between what we can achieve and what frustrates us. So Ignatius invites us to be real and vulnerable, asking this God who was here already waiting for us, to do for us what we know we cannot do ourselves.

Those are two of the practices Ignatius offers to help prayer be a meeting place with the real God. They are preludes to prayer — though sometimes they stretch to be more — the third activity forms a kind of postlude. Ignatius asks us to conclude every prayer with some time spent in conversation with God — some time talking face to face — most often with Jesus — 'speaking as one friend speaks to another' is how Ignatius puts it. Talking about what? About anything that struck us in the prayer, what we saw, what we desired, what we feared, how we felt. And he wants a real conversation — not a monologue. He wants us to let God talk back, to be as real as a friend.

So there, in quick outline, is what strikes me as characteristic of Ignatian prayer. It believes God is real and readily accessible. It promotes the experience of God's reality by a practice of awareness, awareness of how God is present and looking at us, awareness of all the complexity of who we desire to be and what we want God to do for us, and awareness of how, when we talk to God, God talks back.

Something to Do

Two suggestions:

1) Carry around those three practices for a week. This is Holy Week and the story of Jesus' Passion is all around us. Let yourself enter into the story in a way that lets God be more real by asking those questions from time to time: how is God looking at me? What am I desiring? What do I want to say to God and what does God want to say to me? See when they pop into your mind. See which you are drawn to most. See what your God is like. You might want to take a note or two about what you find.

1b) It isn't always Holy Week but our time is always full of stories. You can use those questions in your normal time of prayer. Gospel stories fit well with them. Or you can use them as you muse over your life story. Or you can ask them whenever something moves you — a tree, a storm, a person, a dream, a book or a film or a piece of music, etc.

2) Give the following exercise in conversational prayer a try.

Make yourself comfortable. Let this consciously be a time of prayer...

As you sit there now, how is God looking at you? Not so much how do you *think* God looks at people in general but, when you 'look' at God how does God actually seem to look back? Give it a moment...

What does that look stir in you? Maybe you want to pull back in some way or maybe you find yourself desiring something, or wanting to make some response? What do you want now that you have glimpsed the gaze of God? *Feel* that even if it is hard to articulate...

Maybe you want to ask for whatever it is you desire. Then ask. Maybe you want to respond in some other way? Give it a try. Maybe you feel doubtful or otherwise ambivalent? Try saying *that* to the God who has looked at you...

Does God want to say anything to you. Give some space to listening. Don't be afraid to find words in God's mouth. If you are stuck ask yourself what God *might* want to say. Test it out by asking God.

Go back to any of the previous parts of this exercise. Let a conversation develop. Follow your nose...

And when the time is right bring the prayer to a close with a sign of the cross or in some other way.