

Responding to God Through Religious Art

by

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“Great art has dreadful manners. The hushed reverence of the gallery can fool you into believing masterpieces are polite thing, visions that soothe, charm and beguile, but actually they are thugs. Merciless and wily, the greatest paintings grab you in a headlock, rough up your composure and then proceed in short order to rearrange your sense of reality.

Simon Schama, *Power of Art*, BBC Books, 2006, p. 6.

**A Research Project submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the
Spiritual Directors' Training Programme of Spiritual Growth Ministries**

This paper will explore the use of religious art as a means of deepening
our relationship with God.

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Acknowledgement

In the writing of this paper I would like to acknowledge the influence and personal encouragement of Juliet Benner, spiritual director and retreat leader. Although I had studied and enjoyed art history for many years, I did not connect the use of historically great art works as tools to deeply experience God until Juliet graciously modelled this at a seminar in 2004. My desire to further explore this kind of reflection, and facilitate it with others, was kindled. It was wonderful to also attend Juliet's *Art and Soul Care* in February 2008 as part of the NZCCA conference where Juliet's husband, David, was the main speaker. David Benner's books have also nourished my soul.

The *Conversations* journal has featured many art meditations by Juliet Benner. I highly recommend this magazine for further reading and inspiration, not only for Juliet's contributions but for the stimulating and honest dialogues from many authors seeking spiritual transformation in Christ.¹

¹ *Conversations* – a Forum for Authentic Transformation. www.conversationsjournal.com

Why *Religious Art*?

I hesitate to use the word *religious* in this paper as it often arouses a plethora of definitions and a jumble of emotions. *Spiritual, sacred* or *Christian* are words also open to diverse interpretation and misunderstanding. Yet when these terms are put with the word *art*, all point to an enormous body of work throughout history - a body of work that has explored 'spiritual' themes from the most elaborate, expensive and pious achievements commissioned by ecclesiastical authorities, to simple rustic themes painted by poor artists. From gaudy to plain, grotesque to breathtakingly beautiful, they are all 'creations' that invite response to the divine, "For art associated with faith also has a practical purpose – which is to enable the viewer, and often the maker, to draw closer to God."²

Drawing closer to God, then, is the emphasis of this paper, not the analysis of art. Whether a work of art is 'religious' or not may be as much in the eye of the beholder as in the artist's intent. Art does not need to depict religious and Christian themes or symbols for it to deepen our relationship with God, nor does it even need to be 'art' which is itself difficult, if not impossible, to define. Christianity is very much grounded in the ordinary material world and to limit the experience of God to only 'religious' subjects is equivalent to saying one can *only* experience God in a church building. There is no separation of sacred and secular with God and deepening our relationship with him³ may occur as we ponder a dew-dropped rosebud, a rusty old tractor, or Michelangelo's magnificent *Pieta*.

If God reveals himself to us in a myriad of ways, and if it is possible to experience God in all things, then we may include *art* as one of those 'things'. The *arts*, of course, include film, drama, photography, music, poetry, prose, etc., however for the purposes of this paper the 'religious art' I have chosen for consideration are historically famous works of *fine* or *high* art which centre on a Christian theme.

Painting, sculpture, mosaics and other fine art forms have depicted Christian themes and Biblical stories for thousands of years. Some religious art work emerged out of

² Michelle P. Brown, *The Lion Companion to Christian Art*, Lion Oxford, 2008 p.11.

³ I have chosen to use the words 'he/his/him' when referring to God, simply for practical purposes. I recognise that God is spirit and is neither male nor female.

compulsion - the need for artists to express themselves, their understandings, their convictions, their struggles and passion for God.

“It was, therefore, quite natural for the early Christians to use the art forms of the classical world in the service of the gospel; to express their passionate inner convictions, as visual aids to a deeper understanding of the faith, and to transform them into places of worship.”⁴

Many other art works, from simple frescoes to great and glorious altar pieces, were commissioned with the express purpose of providing aid to private prayer and contemplation. Sometimes paintings and stained glass windows were the only way for the illiterate to ‘read’ Biblical stories.

“Scenes from the life of Christ were painted on one wall in each of the forty monks’ cells in the Convent of San Marco, where Fra Angelico lived. Dominating their austere surroundings the frescoes were designed as aids to meditation; contemplating a devotional picture kept the mystery of faith in the forefront of the monk’s mind.”⁵

“What a solace such altarpieces must have been. The daily grind was unremitting for simple people. Death was never far away from anyone. The opportunity was there to seek shelter in the church and to pray, in the magical glow of many candles, to a gilded statue of the mother and child; to stand in the presence of God and pray for mercy; to be in awe of the great mystery of faith. And it is still so.”⁶

Is it still so? Perhaps it depends on our motivation. Some art will draw us, some will repel. Some will affirm our beliefs, and some will unashamedly challenge all that we hold dearly. In this paper the emphasis will be not on the art itself but our *response* to it. Insights into the artists’ deliberate choice of colours, symbols, and composition certainly adds to our understanding but ultimately it is our response, in the presence of God, that we must pay attention to.

⁴ Helen de Borchgrave, *A Journey into Christian Art*, Lion, Oxford, 1999, p. 6.

⁵ Ibid, p. 48.

⁶ Ibid. p. 93.

What does it mean to *Respond to God*?

“Do we believe in a God who actually does communicate with his people both corporately and as individuals? Do we believe that he can be met personally and that relationship with him can ground an individual’s life on rock? If we do believe these things, where do people meet this God? Ultimately, we believe, each person meets God in his or her own experience whether that experience occurs with a community at a liturgical or paraliturgical service, or with one or two others, or alone.”⁷

This paper assumes that the reader believes in a relational God who desires to personally communicate with us. I write as a believer in the triune Christian God, my relationship with whom is grounded in a personal faith in Jesus Christ as my Lord and saviour. I will not attempt to address questions of the sociology of knowledge and the validity of the experiences of God in this paper; I simply assume God is in the business of revealing who he is and desires relationship with us. At the same time, I recognise that not all spiritual experiences are from the Lord. Discernment is expected and required, and that is why I choose to link Biblical passages to the artworks I offer for consideration. I agree with Jeanette Bakke’s statement that “Authentic experiences of and with God are congruent with what is revealed about the nature of God in scripture.”⁸

Responding to God, then, assumes a dialogue – mutual communication; God communicates with us and we respond. This dialogue is not merely intellectual, but should ultimately come from our *heart* – “You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart.”⁹ As in all human relationships, good relationship with God involves our mind, emotions, senses and will. We enter into this communication not just to gain knowledge about God, but to personally *encounter* God.

Is it presumptuous or, at the very least, naïve to expect we may encounter the living God by means of a piece of religious art? Not so. In fact God desires that we search for him, notice him, and meet with him, wherever we are and in whatever we do. Relationship is the very heart-beat of the trinity, and God is able to use all things to draw us into deeper relationship and dependency on him.

⁷ Barry and Connolly, *The Practice of Spiritual Direction*, Baker Books, 2000, p. 17.

⁸ Jeanette Bakke, *Holy Invitations*, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2000, p. 171.

⁹ Jeremiah 29:13 NIV

Some art works, I believe, have the potential to facilitate this encounter with God.

As Juliet Benner says,

“These works, beautiful to look at and profound in their spiritual impact, continue to touch us in ways that mere words cannot. They go beyond the visual and material and draw us into an awareness of the reality of God”.¹⁰

If we are open-hearted and open-minded, religious art can invite us to face who we are, our beliefs and values, and even our cherished assumptions about life. As we bring *all* of our self to *all* of God in meaningful and robust dialogue, it may not always be ‘nice’, but it will be authentic. Our responses may also lead to change – changes in our perceptions, changes in our beliefs, and changes which hopefully lead us to become better lovers of God and others. Hopefully our main response will be that which the early Christians intended their art works to achieve... a call to worship.

¹⁰ Juliet Benner, *O Taste and See*, from *Conversations* Volume 4:1 Spring 2006, p.73.

Offering Religious Art in Spiritual Direction

According to Barry and Connolly, spiritual direction “is directly concerned with a person’s actual experiences of his relationship with God.”¹¹ As spiritual directors we “pay attention to God’s personal communication”¹² with the directee and encourage that vital union with God. With traditional one-to-one spiritual direction, to introduce anything other than that which the directee brings is being slightly ‘directive.’ However, the offer of reflection on a religious art work in order to more deeply experience God may have a similar place as an invitation to reflect on a passage of scripture, a book, a poem, or an object of nature. It is an *offering*, another tool that God may use at his prompting, to be used wisely and prayerfully, never presumptuously.

Reflection on religious art is probably best suited for a small group, as part of a retreat, or in a church setting (for example, *The Supper at Emmaus* painting works well as a meditation before communion). As Margaret Guenther says, we “plant seeds”¹³ assuming God is at work, faithfully pursuing directees/participants and bringing them to maturity. As a ‘host’ we are attentive to God’s leading and bring out treasures from our store house, while respectfully honouring the unique journey of each person.

Taking time to reflect on an art work may also be pursued by a spiritual director privately for spiritual refreshment and prayer as part of keeping her own inner “house in order”.¹⁴ She has of course the option to take her personal responses to her own spiritual director later.

¹¹ Barry and Connolly, *The Practice of Spiritual Direction*, p. 7.

¹² Ibid. p. 8.

¹³ Margaret Guenther, *Holy Listening*, Cowley Publications, 1992, p. 98.

¹⁴ Ibid. p. 11-13.

How to Deepen our 'Look' at Art

Look Well:

Initial reactions are important but a *long* look is needed if we are to gain the most from an art work. I agree with John Drury that, "A spectator needs to bring to pictures something like the quality of looking which their painters brought to their making."¹⁵ I find myself returning to familiar and favourite art works and still they 'speak' to me. The painting remains the same; it is the spirit of God who has more to say. What others see is also worthy of our consideration as they invariably bring a perspective or insight of which we are unaware. It is a privilege to look through 'different eyes.'

Silence and Space:

Looking well requires silence and space, as does pondering deeply and attending to God. If an art reflection is being offered in a group situation it is up to the facilitator to judge how much time is needed, however, it must be remembered that this is a time of prayer and attending to God should not be hurried if possible!

Use our Imagination and Senses:

Most classical religious art works were made with the express purpose of reaching the *inner* person. Reflection on a piece of art is much more than an intellectual activity. We must engage our senses and bring our imagination to the task. As Sheila Pritchard says, "Imagination, like any other human capacity, can be used under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Since it is a gift of God, God is surely delighted when we use it prayerfully to bring us into a deeper relationship with him."¹⁶

¹⁵ John Drury, *Painting the Word*, Yale Press, p. 23.

¹⁶ Sheila Pritchard, *The Lost Art of Meditation*, Scripture Union, p. 44.

Good Questions:

As spiritual directors we know the value of a good question. With each art work I have included a list of possible questions, but they are only suggestions. The most basic questions that we may ask ourselves and others are of course:

What do I notice?

What do I feel?

What is God saying to me?

How do I wish to respond?

Introduction to the Art Works

The following reflections on an art work share a similar format -

Themes – these are suggested themes that emerge from the art work and would be suitable for group or retreat work.

The Painting – there is a brief description of the art work and points of interest.

Scripture – these are Biblical passages that may be used as a meditation *before* looking at the art work. It may be a brief time of meditation or a longer soak in the scriptures, depending on time allowance. For wonderful practical suggestions and inspiration on scripture meditation, including *Lectio Divina*, I recommend chapters 2 and 3 of Sheila Pritchard's book, *The Lost Art of Meditation*.

The Artist – there is a *very* brief description of the artist and a suggestion of another painting for further reflection.

Suggested Format – this takes you through the art reflection step-by-step and is designed for group work. The questions and thoughts may be offered while the participants are silent throughout the *whole* session, or the facilitator may wish to invite discussion along the way so there is a mixture of interaction as well as silent meditation. If the passage of scripture and the painting were being offered in a one-to-one spiritual direction setting then the directee should take as *long* as he/she needs in *silent* reflection before there is any interaction, if any, with the director.

The Supper at Emmaus by Caravaggio.



The Supper at Emmaus, by Caravaggio, 1601.

(Go to www.en.wikipedia.org and search for *caravaggio supper at emmaus*)

Themes:

- Invitation to Relationship
- Coming to Jesus just as you are
- Communion with Jesus
- He's Alive!
- Recognising Jesus
- Noticing the Extraordinary within the Ordinary

The Painting:

The Supper at Emmaus is like a photographic image of an extraordinary moment in time. It is that moment recorded in Luke 24 when two grieving disciples, who were doggedly on their way to Emmaus, recognise that the one seated at the table with them is the risen Christ. John Drury calls it “a fusion of epic theatre and domestic still life.”¹⁷

Although it is the artist's interpretation of this historic event, there is a *timeless* quality about the image. “For this is simultaneously the last supper of Christ on earth and the first celebration of the risen Christ in the eucharist. The golden thread is unbroken. Christ was, and is, and is to come.”¹⁸ Caravaggio's skilful representation of action with body language and facial expression bring the characters to life. The disciples and the innkeeper wear contemporary clothing. The empty place at the table with the bowl of fruit teetering on the edge, and Jesus'

¹⁷ John Drury, *Painting the Word*, p. 125.

¹⁸ Helen de Borchgrave, *A Journey into Christian Art*, p. 136.

hands of blessing and invitation, draw us *in*. All eyes focus on Christ. What would it be like to sit at a meal table with the risen Jesus?

“Caravaggio’s painting of this biblical event itself becomes a means of grace because it makes known to us God’s truth and beauty. More than a means of grace, it is itself a grace, a gift. His painting opens a window for us to experience the presence of the risen Christ.”¹⁹

The servant or innkeeper is not mentioned in the Gospel narrative but is often included in other works of art depicting this event. It is interesting to note the innkeeper’s *lack* of response, compared to the disciples. He doesn’t know who Jesus is, and he doesn’t realise the significance of this event. We may wonder if he stayed that way.

Another point of interest to note is the gesture of the disciple to the right of the painting. It may be read as an imitation of Jesus’ posture on the cross. He also wears a scallop shell around his neck. The shell is a symbol of pilgrimage.²⁰

Scripture:

Although it is useful to read the whole passage in Luke 24:13-35, the painting actually depicts verse 31, “*their eyes were opened and they recognised him.*”

The word ‘opened’ means to ‘open completely’ and is similar to the word used in Acts 16:14, “*The Lord opened her [Lydia’s] heart to respond to Paul’s message.*” The word ‘recognised’ means to know exactly, fully realise, and understand. It is used negatively in the same passage, Luke 24:16, “*they were kept from recognising him.*” There is the implication here that it is the spirit of God who initiates our encounters with him!

Other scriptures which may be helpful in connection with *The Supper at Emmaus* are - John 6:35 “*I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who believes in me will never be thirsty.*”

Psalm 34:8 “*Taste and see that the Lord is good; blessed is the man who takes refuge in him.*”

¹⁹ Juliet Benner, *O Taste and See, Conversations* Volume 4:1 Spring 2006, p. 76.

²⁰ Stefano Zuffi, *Gospel Figures in Art*, Getty Publications, 2003, p. 353.

Ephesians 2:4, 5 “*But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ...*”

The Artist:

Michelangelo Caravaggio (1571-1610) was one of Italy’s greatest painters of the 17th century. Helen de Borchgrave says, “He took painting into the real world – not the classical world of perfect humanity, or the Counter-Reformation world of visions, but the world we live in, the world we look at. He observed every detail of humanity – good and evil - with passion and understanding.”²¹ The characters in Caravaggio’s paintings are certainly very real and the figures in *The Supper at Emmaus* are no exception. They are flesh and blood people in ordinary settings, yet there is always ‘more that meets the eye’. Caravaggio’s skilful use of light and dark and meticulous attention to detail create dramatic scenes. John Drury says of a number of Caravaggio’s paintings that they depict “people caught in a turning point of Christian History.”²² It almost feels as if we have stumbled upon a private event, yet we are lured in and find ourselves asking, “What is really going on here?”

Doubting Thomas, 1602-03, by Caravaggio would be another exceptional painting for use in spiritual reflection. The painting depicts the historic event of John 20:24-29 however, yet again ‘there is more’. In the calm and loving acceptance of our Saviour we are invited to address our own doubts.

²¹ Helen de Borchgrave, *A Journey into Christian Art*, p. 132.

²² John Drury, *Painting the Word*, p. 125.

The Supper at Emmaus by Caravaggio

Suggested Format	
1. A Time of Silence	- to lay aside distractions, relax the body, and be still.
2. Opening Prayer	- to acknowledge the presence of God and surrender ourselves to God's purposes for this time.
3. Reading of Scripture Luke 24:13-35	The facilitator reads aloud <i>slowly</i> and participants follow along - either from their own Bibles (differing versions need to be recognised), or copies of the passage. The passage may be read more than once. Alternatively, participants may take turns to each read aloud a portion.
Reflection of Scripture	How long you spend here in silent reflection depends on time allowance. Some discussion may follow from the passage, or you may move directly to consider the painting.
4. The Painting Read Luke 24:31 <i>"their eyes were opened and they recognised him."</i> Say, "We are now going to look at a painting which captures this exact moment of recognition."	Each participant should have a good quality copy of the painting. It does not need to be large, but at least about A5 size. Alternatively, the image may be projected on to a screen or wall – but ensure all can view the whole painting. Allow at least 5 minutes of silent reflection.
Initial Questions	What do you notice? What feelings do you identify?

The following questions and observations are designed for *deeper* reflection, but no attempt should be made to use all of them! It is important that the facilitator/spiritual director be sensitive to the leading of the Holy Spirit. What does the participant/directee notice? What is God saying to *them*? If this reflection is part of a retreat, you may wish to choose questions along a theme.

1. What do you notice about *Jesus*?

What does the painting reveal about who he is?

- His humanity (an easily recognisable face/flesh and blood body/sitting at a table, etc)
- His divinity (though crucified, he is alive! He really is there!)

What difference does it make to you that Jesus is human? divine? resurrected? alive? has conquered death?

Notice Jesus' clothing compared to the others – Why do you think he is dressed differently?

Notice Jesus' left hand – What is it doing? (blessing the bread/a symbol of his own body – broken, suffered)

Notice Jesus' right hand – What is it doing? What does it say to you personally? (inviting/welcoming/blessing?)

What is your response?

2. What do you notice about the *disciples*?

What does their clothing tell you? (simple, contemporary, torn jacket, ordinary folk)

What do their actions/body language and facial expressions tell you?

How are they different from the innkeeper? Why do you think that is?

What might they be thinking?

What might they be feeling?

What might you do in the same situation?

How do you feel that Jesus was alongside them, yet they did not immediately recognise him?

3. What do you notice about the *table setting*?

How is it just an ordinary meal? How is it extraordinary?

Why do you think the artist painted the fruit spotted and flawed?

How aware are we of Jesus' presence in the 'ordinary' events of life?

Why do you think the artist painted the bowl as if it is about to fall off the table? What does it make you want to do?

4. What do you notice about the *empty space* at the table.

What does it tell you? What is the invitation?

- Could Jesus be saying, "There is room for you! Pull up a chair and join me. You are welcome/invited. I want relationship with you. See, I have conquered death and there is nothing to fear. Taste me/eat me, I am the Bread of Life (John 6:35) – he who comes to me will never be hungry and he who believes in me will never be thirsty. Taste and see that I am good (Psalm 34:8)."

What does this tell you about grace?

How do you wish to respond to this personal invitation?

What would it be like for you to join Jesus at the table today?

(Allow time for private response in prayer)

Jesus as Spiritual Director

Luke 24:13-35 may be also used as an example of *Jesus as spiritual director*.

Jeannette Bakke mentions this in the section in her book on 'spiritual direction in scripture'.

"Jesus reveals himself when he chooses – then and now... He is behaving like a spiritual director when he is listening to their [the disciples] story and responding by using scripture – pointing them toward scripture to read, listen to, and meditate on. But it is not until they sit down with him for companionship rather than discussion that they recognise who he is. So it is quite often with directees."²³

The painting of *The Supper at Emmaus*, along with the Luke 24 passage then, may be a useful tool for spiritual directors to reflect upon the process of spiritual direction.

²³ Jeannette Bakke, *Holy Invitations*, p. 182.

Possible questions for reflection for spiritual directors:

How did Jesus behave as a spiritual director?

What does this story tell us about the way Jesus chooses to reveal who he is?

If you were one of the disciples thinking back over the day (using *The Examen*?) what might be the 'high point/low point' of the day? Or 'when did I most feel alive?'

How do you as a spiritual director personally connect with this story?

Christ in the Storm on the Lake of Galilee by Rembrandt.



Christ in the Storm on the Lake of Galilee, by Rembrandt, 1633.

(Go to www.commonswikimedia.org and search for *rembrandt christ in the storm* – or go to www.wikimedia.org and then access ‘commons’ and then ‘Rembrandt’.)

Themes: Responding to Stormy Seas
 Does God Care?
 God is in My Boat
 Chaos to Calmness/Storms to Stillness

The Painting:

This grand painting by Rembrandt depicts the gospel account of the disciples and Jesus caught in a sudden storm on the Lake of Galilee. The little boat rides high in a raging sea as light floods in with a huge wave from the left. Darkness seems to engulf the right hand side of the painting. There are thirteen figures in the small boat, plus Jesus. Twelve of the men would be the disciples and the thirteenth may be the owner of the boat – possibly the figure straining on the tiller. Jesus is, or was, asleep on a cushion in the stern of the vessel.

The figures in the boat *react* to the storm. Most are in various states of fear or panic. The group on the left frantically attempt to control the ropes and tattered sails while the furious sea crashes upon them. To the right, one man throws up over the side, one gazes out to sea in total despair, and another sits huddled and facing away from

Jesus. The two who seem to have just woken Jesus seem angry and agitated while another prays, or pleads, at Jesus' feet. One young man stares straight at us. We can only imagine what he is saying. The symbol of the cross in the mast of the boat almost carves the scene in two. It is a picture of struggle and emotion, a life and death situation just before Jesus commands the waves and wind to be at peace.

The Scripture:

The gospel of Mark, chapter 4, verses 35 to 41 gives the fullest account of this event. The story can also be found in Matthew 8:23-26 and Luke 8:22-25

The Artist:

Rembrandt van Rijn (1606-69)

“Rembrandt experienced passion and pain, wealth and poverty, success and rejection. And he transformed these feelings into the strokes of his brush with such potency that few people can look at his paintings and remain unmoved. For part of their power is that they reach us where we are at, scratching around in the farmyard of life.”²⁴

‘Scratching around in the farmyard of life’ is also where God meets us, accepts us, and loves us. As we embrace our humanity and bring our whole self to God in prayer our relationship with him deepens. Rembrandt, possibly the most famous 17th century Dutch painter and master of portraits, paints humanity well.

Many of Rembrandt's paintings follow a Biblical theme. Another one suitable for reflection would be *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, 1668 - a painting which was pivotal in the life of Henri Nouwen. The scriptural passage can be found in Luke 5:11-32. For Juliet Benner's wonderful meditation on this famous artwork see 'O Taste and See' in *Conversations*.²⁵

²⁴ Helen de Borchgrave, *A Journey into Christian Art*, p. 158.

²⁵ *Conversations*, Volume 1:2 Fall 2003, pp. 59-65.

Christ in the Storm on the Lake of Galilee by Rembrandt

Suggested Format	
1. A Time of Silence	- to lay aside distractions, relax the body, and be still.
2. Opening Prayer	- to acknowledge the presence of God and surrender ourselves to God's purposes for this time.
3. Reading of Scripture Mark 4:35-41	The facilitator reads aloud <i>slowly</i> and participants follow along - either from their own Bibles (differing versions need to be recognised), or copies of the passage. The passage may be read more than once. Alternatively, participants may take turns to each read aloud a portion.
Reflection of Scripture	How long you spend here in silent reflection depends on time allowance. Some discussion may follow from the passage, or you may move directly to consider the painting.
4. The Painting	Each participant should have a good quality copy of the painting, at least A5 size or larger if possible. Alternatively, the image may be projected on to a screen or wall – but ensure all can view the whole painting. Allow at least 5 minutes of silent reflection.
Initial Questions	What do you notice? What feelings do you identify? What is your response?

The following questions and observations are designed for *deeper* reflection, but no attempt should be made to use all of them! It is important that the facilitator/spiritual director be sensitive to the leading of the Holy Spirit. What does the participant/directee notice? What is God saying to *them*? If this reflection is part of a retreat, you may wish to choose questions along a theme.

1. What do you notice about *the storm and the boat*?

How is it a life and death situation?

What 'storms' have you weathered in your life? Are you facing one now?

What effect does the use of light and dark in the painting have on you?

2. What do you notice about the *disciples*?

What do their actions tell you?

What do their faces tell you?

What might they be thinking?

What might they be feeling – physically? emotionally?

Which ones do you most identify with? How do you identify with them? Why?

Use your senses and imagine yourself in the boat? What is your response?

3. What do you notice about *Jesus*?

How do you feel about Jesus being in the boat with you?

How do you feel about Jesus being asleep during the storm?

What might you want to say to him?

4. Imagine yourself in the boat *after* Jesus calms the wind and the sea.

What might you be thinking?

What might you be feeling?

How would you respond to Jesus?

(Allow time for private response in prayer)

The Creative Process as Follow-Up

The Creative Process in spirituality is a huge topic and there are many books and articles available for inspiration and practical ideas. I briefly mention it here as a possible follow-up tool.

Taking time for creative expression can reveal more about our inner self and powerfully deepen our relationship with God. Just as we make room for reflection on a great work of art, so too we can allow space for our own creative process.

Following an art reflection the director or participants may be invited to further express themselves and their response to God by using a media of their choice. Painting, sculpture, drawing, writing/journaling, music, dance, sewing, baking, – the list is endless. *When* and *where* and *how* is also up to them, unless this is offered as part of a retreat and then materials would need to be provided. It should never be a forced exercise for evaluation, but a unique offering of who they are before a loving creator. It is the *process* that is important, not the finished product.

Conclusion

We live in an age of multi-media where ‘art’ may be a medium of self-discovery, a means to access God, or ‘art for art’s sake.’ It really depends on how we approach it. If we approach an art work in order to encounter and respond to God then it may become a very useful tool to deepen our relationship with God, both personally and as part of the spiritual direction process we offer others.

There is always a wide variety of art work to choose from, including contemporary dance, drama, film, photography, music, and literature. Own country, New Zealand, has great variety in the arts to offer for contemplation. However, I hope this paper will encourage you to take time to reflect on some of the *classical religious* art works. I hope you will experience it as a time of prayer, attending to your true inner self in the presence of God. I hope you will approach it as if on ‘holy ground’ and it will lead you to deeper worship of our creative God who lavishes his love upon us.

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