

**May—August 2018**

# Quiet Spaces

**A creative response to God's love**

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Being mindful • Lost in translation • Finding God where you are

# Quiet Spaces

Edited by Sally Smith

May–August 2018

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# Sally Smith writes...

Welcome to *Quiet Spaces*!

I have a quote above my desk from Ann Lamott: 'God loves you exactly as you are, and far too much to leave you as you are.'

It's been there for a few years, but I still keep going back to it. God loves me, warts and all. He knows all those warts, but still loves me. Yet, because he loves me so much, he also sees a better way for me to be me. He isn't going to suddenly change me into that perfect person he knows I can become, but he is longing to work with me to help me on that path.

Fortunately, it isn't dependent on me working hard to become the person God intends me to be. But I do have a part to play in this process. I need to put myself into a situation where I enable God to work within me and I need to allow him to do that work. This means putting myself into God's presence and spending time with him. Like many of you, I know from experience that the better quality the time I offer to God, the better the encounter and the more he is able to work in and with me. As I spend time being his beloved creation, so I become his beloved creation, and that means I become more like the beloved woman he knows I can become.

The closer I get to God, the more I am drawn closer still, and the more I am able to live a life that reflects God's presence with me. It sounds easy, but we know it isn't always straightforward. My prayer is that you are able to use this issue of *Quiet Spaces* to find ways of being with God and encountering him, and that this will lead you closer to becoming the person he longs for you to be. Time spent with God is never wasted, even when it feels like that to us, as he is constantly moulding us more into his likeness, which sounds exciting and awesome.

So allow yourself to be moulded by our creator God and enjoy being in his presence this summer.

## Writers in this issue

**Janet Fletcher** is a priest in the Bro Ystumanner Ministry Area and the Bangor Diocesan Spirituality Officer. She facilitates and offers spiritual direction in the diocese, and enjoys teaching and writing about prayer and spirituality. She has written *Pathway to God* (SPCK, 2006) and has contributed to BRF's *Guidelines* Bible reading notes.

**Claire Musters** is a freelance writer and editor, mother of two, pastor's wife and school governor. Claire's desire is to help others draw closer to God through her writing, which focuses on marriage, parenting, worship and issues facing women today. To find out more, visit [www.clairemusters.com](http://www.clairemusters.com) and @CMusters on Twitter.

**Richard Palmer** worked previously in HR and training, where he acquired his keen interest in human and spiritual development and vocations. He is Secretary to Derby Diocese Spirituality Group, a spiritual accompanier, writer and runs various courses on the spiritual journey. His passions are family, creative writing and playing the drum kit.

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**Joy McCormick**, poet and New Zealand Anglican priest, has special concern for those who struggle to reconcile their experience of Holy Mystery with traditional church doctrine and teaching. Now retired from parish ministry, she continues to offer spiritual direction and supervision and to write. She is author of *Moments of Grace* (BRF, 2013).

**Sally Smith** enjoys creating spaces that enable encounters with God through leading Quiet Days and creating prayer corners and stations. She has led prayer groups in her local church, works as a spiritual director and writes and produces educational materials.

Having recently retired as a Careers Adviser, **Eirene Palmer** is now enjoying her voluntary work as Diocesan Spiritual Adviser for the Diocese of Derby. She is also a spiritual accompanier and runs courses on aspects of spirituality. Her other passions are writing, family and music, especially singing.

# Lost in translation

*Joy McCormick*

## Different languages

### Introduction

Anyone who has learned a second language knows the frustration which often arises in trying to make an accurate translation. Choices must be made between possible alternative meanings of a word, significant ambiguities, word plays, cultural nuances, poetic rhythm and rhyme. These are just some features lost in translation. The richness of the original language often fails to survive. How much, then, has been lost to us as our scriptures have passed from oral Aramaic to written Greek, then through scholarly Latin to English?

Of course, language is not the only form of translation which must be considered. There is also translation from the culture of origin to another with quite different values and world view. To offer a simple example from my New Zealand culture – the Maori word *whenua* is usually translated ‘land’ (as in *Tangata whenua* – ‘people of the land’). However, *whenua* is also the word for the placenta, and knowing this explains the Maori attitude to their tribal land which continues to nourish and shape them as the placenta did before birth. Far from being valued according to what can be extracted from it (whether produce or minerals), or as a commodity to be traded or sold, it is their very identity. All this is lost in the purely verbal translation – ‘land’.

Then there is the issue of translation across time – from the prescientific era to the 21st century; from a three-tier, earth-centred universe to modern understandings of the cosmos.

I am no scholar of ancient biblical languages, so must rely on the work of others such as Neil Douglas-Klotz (*The Hidden Gospel* et al.) and the Guild for Psychological Studies in California, USA, whose seminars on the life and early records of Jesus opened my mind and led to a fascination with alternative ways of thinking about and reflecting on familiar biblical passages.

We are going to look at other ways of thinking about some well-known scripture passages based in part on how they might have been heard and received by the original listeners to the Aramaic language or in their culture of origin.

Jesus repeatedly challenged the common understandings of his day. ‘You have heard that it was said... But I tell you...’ (Matthew 5:21–43).

In the presence of holy mystery, reflect on your readiness or reluctance to explore understandings different from those you have been taught, and ask for open eyes and heart.

## Good tree, bad tree

### Bible study

Read Matthew 7:15–20.

*Every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit... you will know them by their fruits.*

vv. 17–18, 20

The word here rendered as ‘good’ is, in Aramaic (the language Jesus would have spoken), *taba*. The roots of this word carry the sense of maintaining integrity and health – in tune, in time, in harmony, with everything – thus fit for purpose. The Aramaic word *bisha*, here translated as ‘bad’, implies that which is out of this

harmony. It might mean something not yet ready for its purpose (immature or unripe) or that which has outlived its purpose – is over-ripe or rotten.

As an orchardist I learned that a young apple tree, in its first fruiting, bears just a few big, beautiful-looking apples which promise much but are dry and lacking in flavour. Only when it is mature is the tree able to produce mature, flavoursome fruit – in harmony with, and in fulfilment of, its purpose.

Thus a translation which more accurately reflects the original language might be something like: ‘a mature tree bears mature fruit and an immature tree bears immature fruit’. Rather than being concerned with morals, this teaching is about times and seasons and appropriate expectations; about being fit for purpose and so in harmony with God’s will.

Treat yourself to a piece of your favourite fruit, ideally fresh picked from the tree or the garden. Let it feed your senses of sight, touch and smell as you enjoy the anticipation of biting into it. As you take your first bite, do the taste and texture live up to your expectations?

What do the fruits of your life reveal about your ripeness or maturity in fulfilling God’s purposes; your fitness or readiness to do so?

## The paralytic and his friends

### Imaginative

Carefully read Mark 2:1–12.

Try imagining the story as if you are the man on the mat. Where in you is the paralysed or palsied part (unable or unwilling to move, despairing, shaky, imprisoned, rejected or despised)? Who might be four companions you can, or need to, call upon to bring this part for healing? (These might be real people, heroic or biblical figures,

qualities in yourself or lacking in yourself.) How might you call upon them for help? Imagine them struggling to place you in front of Jesus. How do you feel when they start digging through the roof? What does Jesus actually say to you? What do the scribes hear him say? (Does he claim to forgive sin himself?) How do you feel when he says, ‘Stand up and take your mat and walk’ or, perhaps more accurately, ‘That which has carried [supported] you, you must now carry’?

What is it that you have depended on and must now carry? (Maybe an attitude of unforgiveness or resentment that you have justified by retelling and reliving the hurt you experienced.) How willing are you to do this? Find something (maybe a stone) to symbolise this, and carry it in your hand for a day. Notice how it hampers your ability to do other things. Ask God to help you let go of it.

## A wedding at Cana

### Reflective

Imagine yourself in someone’s house, relaxing with a group of colleagues or friends. During a lull in the conversation, your host invites everyone to find a seat as you are about to hear a story. People settle down and an expectant hush falls on the room. The story teller begins, ‘Once upon a time...’ What is your immediate reaction to those words? What kind of story do you expect?

Just as the phrase ‘Once upon a time’ signals to many of us a particular kind of story, so does ‘On the third day...’ to a Judaic audience. It indicates a salvation story.

Remember the story of Abraham preparing to sacrifice Isaac (Genesis 22:1–19). Verse 4 begins, ‘On the third day Abraham looked up...’ At this point, the story is revealed as one of salvation. What difference does knowing this make to the way you hear the rest of the story?

John 2:1–11 begins, ‘On the third day there was a wedding in Cana...’ It is the only Gospel to include this story. What is going on here? Was the event unknown to the other Gospel writers or did they choose to omit it? If so, why?

If this is a salvation story, where do you see salvation in it? Why do you think the writer includes this story and why is it placed where it is within the Gospel? With what else does it resonate?

Recall some time in your life when what seemed to be a disastrous situation proved to be a time of salvation, growth or healing. Offer a prayer of thanksgiving for this experience.

## Bethesda pool

### Poetry

Some stories become so familiar that we always hear them in the same old way. We forget that, in the process of translation, we have lost any indication of the intonation, emphasis or emotion which might have been present. Read aloud the sentence, ‘That man did not steal my purse’ emphasising the word ‘that’. Now repeat it with emphasis on ‘man’. Continue reading with the emphasis on a different word each time. Note how the meaning changes.

Read John 5:1–14. Is this just about a physical healing or might there be a challenge to deeper wholeness hidden within it? (See also v. 14.)

*He strolled in through the gate  
and looked around;  
noted each one of us,  
and seemed to know each story.*

*He knew how long I'd been there,  
how comfortable I'd become,  
ambivalent – in my dependency –  
about the possibility of change.*

*His eyes, searching my very depths,  
discovered all I'd sought to hide  
from myself, from others,  
now from him.*

*Not one for wasting words,  
he asked straight out:  
'Friend, do you want  
to be made well?'*

*I did not answer 'Yes.'  
I sought, as usual, to escape  
by blaming others  
for my situation.*

*He would have none of it!  
His voice stern and commanding  
cut through my complacency,  
His finger pointed at me.*

*'You,' he said, 'stand up.  
Pick up your mat,  
and walk!'  
He pointed to the gate.*

Imagine yourself as the man in this story. What might be the significance of Jesus' comment in verse 14 if addressed to you? Journal your response as a prayer.

# Only through me

## Bible study

*I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.*

JOHN 14:6

Like many others, and for many years, I struggled with this text which seems to stand in stark contrast to the inclusive nature of Jesus' teaching and ministry whereby tax collectors and sinners, prostitutes and the unclean, even Gentiles are welcome in God's kingdom. Here he seems to endorse the exclusion of all but a select few.

Is this really Jesus' intention or has something been lost in translation? Is it possible that the way in which the text has been presented and used by the church to justify exclusivity has overlooked a deeper and a different message?

Much prayer and reflection over many years led me to wonder about a possible alternative meaning but, not being a biblical language scholar, I was unable to confirm its validity. The opportunity to do so arrived in the form of a young Anglican priest whose father is Maori and whose mother is Jewish. He had recently completed his doctoral thesis on biblical languages.

I asked him about this passage and whether the early texts would bear the translation, 'No one comes to the Father but by the work that I have accomplished' – namely, reconciling all things to God. (See 2 Corinthians 5:19, 'in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself'; and John 19:30, the triumphant cry from the cross, 'It is finished.' That is – completed, accomplished.)

My young colleague's eyes lit up as he replied, 'Actually, that is a much more accurate translation.'

What is your heart response to this understanding?

# Do you love me?

## Imaginative

Read John 21:15–17.

Shakespeare, in Sonnet 43, wrote ‘How do I love thee? Let me count the ways.’ Unlike some other languages, English has only one word (love) to describe a variety of relationships and this has had a profound effect on our reading of this text. It appears that Jesus repeatedly asks the same question and doesn’t listen to Peter’s repeated reply – uncharacteristic though that may be – but, once again, something significant has been lost in translation.

The Greek language uses different words for different kinds of love – *agape* (unconditional love), *philia* (love of a friend), *philadelphia* (brotherly love), *philanthropia* (love of humanity) among others.

According to the Greek text Jesus asks Peter (v. 15), ‘Simon, son of John, do you *agape* [unconditionally love] me more than these?’ and Peter replies, ‘Yes, Lord, you know that I *phileo* you [love you as a friend].’

In the next exchange, Jesus asks the same question and Peter gives the same reply. Then Jesus asks ‘Simon, son of John, do you [really] *phileo* me [love me as a friend]?’ And Peter, no doubt with relief that Jesus has met him at the point where he is able to respond wholeheartedly, replies, ‘You know that I am your friend.’

This is not the boastful, overconfident Peter who believes in his own invincibility, who claimed that he was willing to lay down his life for Jesus (John 13:37), followed by that infamous three-fold denial of acquaintance to save his own skin. Now, even Jesus’ repeated invitation to over-reach himself is resisted with unaccustomed self-awareness and humility.

Walk and talk with Jesus, sharing the things that are important in your life right now. At some point he asks you, ‘Do you love me

unconditionally?' How do you want to reply? How can you, with integrity and honesty, reply?

## God is...

### Prayer

*God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.*

JOHN 4:24

The Aramaic word *ruha* (Hebrew *ruach*) can be rendered in English as spirit, wind, air or breath. While European Christianity assumes only one of these is appropriate in any given context, to the Eastern mind all are present simultaneously and interchangeably.

Read Genesis 2:7: 'Then the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being.' Try replacing the word 'breath' with air, wind, spirit. Notice the shift in feeling and understanding with each change. The same can be done with other texts such as Genesis 1:2, John 20:22 and Acts 2:1-4.

What might it be like to understand God as air and to worship in breath and truth? In a quiet space, relax and become aware of your body. Feel the rhythm of your breath flowing in and out. After a while, silently repeat 'You in me' on each inward breath and as you breathe out, 'And I in you'. 'You in me – and I in you'; breathing in God as air, and breathing out your breath into God. Gradually let the words fall away until simply breathing carries your prayer. God is indeed closer than the air we breathe. Maybe it is not impossible to 'pray without ceasing' as Paul instructs (1 Thessalonians 5:17).

# The dishonest manager

## Intercession

Read Luke 16:1-9.

Christians have often struggled with this story as, from our cultural perspective, it seems that Jesus is endorsing dishonesty and exploitation – and how do we reconcile that with the rest of his teaching? The confusion (it seems to me) is based in the translation from one culture to another very different one. We have to let go of our own cultural spectacles and expectations, and adopt those of the culture and time into which the story was spoken – that of an Eastern country some 2,000 years ago where it was common for officials (think of the tax collectors) to add their own cut to any debt they were collecting. While this may have been a generally accepted practice, it was, of course, open to abuse.

It seems this manager may have become a bit too greedy in the amounts he added to the original debts, and, since he is accused of squandering his master's property, he might have been dipping his fingers into that as well. When caught out, he goes to those from whom he has demanded exorbitant amounts and reduces them to something closer to the original debt.

Thus, though still motivated by self-interest he might be, he begins moving towards restoration of justice – a move which benefits all concerned. The debtor is relieved of the burden of exploitation; the master receives his due amount; the manager, while losing the profit he had hoped for, gains friends and support for his anticipated time of need. A win for everyone!

Yes – Jesus makes the point that there is a need to take as much care about preparation and provision for our spiritual wellbeing as we do for our material comfort, but there is also a redemption message in this story. God can turn all to good.

Make a list of situations (international, national or local) where exploitation or abuse of power cause you concern. Is there anything you can do to help address these? If so, make a commitment to become actively involved. Prayerfully invite God to begin the process of transformation and redemption – even if you cannot see the way ahead. Dare you pray, ‘O God, work your perfect will in this – whatever the cost may be’?

## In Jesus’ name

### Going out

What does it mean to act in the name of another?

Ambassadors are authorised to act in the name of their country’s government. So long as their actions are in accord with the will of those they represent, they will be supported by the power and authority of their government. If, however, they choose to ‘do their own thing’ and claim to be doing it in the name of their country, there will be no support forthcoming and they will soon be seen to be fraudulent.

Jesus taught his followers to pray and act in his name (John 14:13–14; 15:16; 16:23–24). Clearly this means more than simply adding the words ‘in Jesus’ name’ to any petition.

The word translated here as ‘name’ is the Aramaic *shem*, which also carries the meanings of light, sound or atmosphere – all of these are present. Each is an expression of the cosmic energy, vibrating in every subatomic particle, which burst forth at the moment of creation and is expressed in everything that is – seen and unseen. It found expression in the person of Jesus – as it does in you. To pray or act in the name of Jesus means, therefore, to open oneself to the flow of that life-giving energy and to use it as Jesus would. Only when our prayer accords with what Jesus would pray can we, with integrity, claim to be acting in his name.

Visit some favourite spot where you feel in touch with creation and take time to explore it with all your senses. What can you see (for example, how many shades of green?), hear, smell, feel? Recognise that all of it is, like you, an expression of God's creative, life-giving energy. Take time to relax into this. Breathe slowly and sense being one with all that is, being one with Christ in all creation. Offer your prayer from this space.

## Be perfect

### Creative

*Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.*

MATTHEW 5:48

In Western Christianity, this verse has usually been understood as a call, or even a demand, to attain a state of flawless, sinless perfection. It has often contributed to a sense of inevitable failure, helplessness and even condemnation.

The word rendered here as 'perfect' is the Greek word *teleios*. One of the root meanings of this is a sense of 'moving towards fulfilment of purpose' or 'being in the process of becoming' – constantly moving towards or becoming something more than we are at present. It is a call to growth and change rather than to a static finite condition. It calls to mind Jeremiah's vision of the potter working clay – 'Just like the clay in the potter's hands, so are you in my hand' (Jeremiah 18:6).

I see the potter enjoying the feel of the soft clay, responsive and pliable; delighting in shaping and reshaping it; no final shape envisaged, no perfect product planned; the delight is in the moulding of the clay within the hand.

It seems, therefore, that the call to 'be perfect' is actually a call to growth and change from what we are to who and what we might

yet become; a call to be open to whatever God may choose to do in and with us.

Take some modelling clay, plasticine, play dough or similar substance and work it in your hands until it becomes soft and malleable. Enjoy the freedom of shaping and reshaping it, playing without the need to make any particular product. Now, offer yourself as clay for God to play with and continually reshape.

## Naming God

### Creative

How can words describe that which is beyond all words? How can one define what is indefinable; name the un-nameable?

Language both reflects and shapes our thinking, so the words we use for God both reflect and shape the way we think about God.

How do you address God? What names do you use in prayer or in conversation? Make a list of all the names for God that you can think of and underline those which you actually use. What do you notice about this smaller group? How representative is it of the larger assortment?

The English word 'God' comes from an old word meaning 'good' – and this, over generations, has coloured our concept of God as removed from all evil. Much Eastern Christianity understands God as embracing evil, which is reflected in the name which Jesus would have used for God (apart from the intimate 'Abba'), which means variously 'the all', 'ultimate power/potential', 'sacred unity', 'the one with no opposite' or simply 'oneness'. It is the Aramaic word *Alaha*, clearly the source of the Arabic *Allah* but also of the Hebrew *Elohim*. The root of the word is *El* or *Al*, which is the definite article in Aramaic, Hebrew and Arabic, implying that every 'the', every unique thing, expresses something of God.

How does this challenge or reinforce your concept of God?

It has been said that the invitation of the Spirit is always to a larger space; the invitation to a smaller space usually comes from fear.



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# Experience a deeper relationship with God by praying the *Quiet Spaces* way

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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:** Lynne Chitty, Jean Marie Dwyer OP, Janet Fletcher, Karen Herrick, Joy McCormick, Claire Musters, Eirene Palmer, Richard Palmer, Sally Smith

'There seems to be something for everyone and I look forward to what each section has to offer.'

**Mary Taylor, subscriber**

**Quiet Spaces**  
is edited by  
Sally Smith



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