

AT THE MEETING

OPENING PRAYER

We begin, as usual, with a short time of stillness, putting ourselves in the presence of God and asking for grace that everything that happens in our mind, heart and imagination may be directed purely to the praise and service of God. *Some communities use the CLC opening prayer, or some other formal prayer, to conclude this brief time of stillness. Others use a minute or two of suitable music.*

GRACE

We ask to be able to recognise the distorted images of God and self that affect us and we ask God's help to change them deep within us.

SCRIPTURE: Luke 7: 36-50 (Ask someone to read this aloud.)

SILENCE

Ten minutes silent prayer remembering my life and prayer since the last meeting. How have I found the prayer this last fortnight? What events in my life and prayer do I wish to share with my community?

SHARING AND LISTENING

- Remember that this is a listening, not a discussion, group.
- Include a second round if there is time.
- It's good to conclude this time of reflection with a short time of silence, praying for each other, and with a formal prayer, such as the *Glory Be* or the *Lord's Prayer*.

INTERCESSORY PRAYER, if wanted.

PRACTICALITIES: This is an opportunity for any reports, eg from members who have attended a CLC event, for questions, for discussion about any concerns, for news about any work or mission in which members might be involved, or for any business the group might need to sort out.

REVIEW OF THE MEETING

What was good for me in this meeting?

What was not so good? What would I have liked to be different?

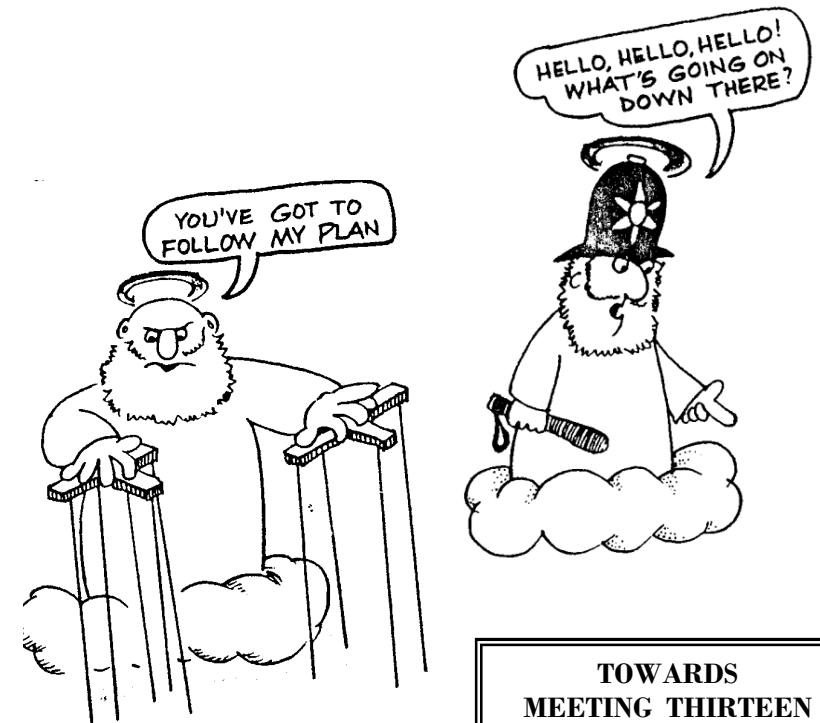
What do I want to take away with me?

CLOSING PRAYER (Many communities use the CLC closing prayer.)



MEETING PLANS FOR ENGLAND AND WALES

IMAGES



PERSONAL PRAYER BEFORE THE MEETING

A reminder of the suggested stages of prayer...

PREPARATORY PRAYER Begin in the usual way.

ASKING FOR WHAT I WANT I ask to be able to recognise the distorted images of God and self that affect me and I ask God's help to change them deep within me.

MATERIAL FOR PRAYER Use the following suggestions, one at a time, staying with each one until you are ready to move on. Don't worry if you don't manage to get through the lot! It is hoped that they will help change your image of God.

* John 8: 1-11 * John 21 * Luke 19: 1-10
* Luke 7: 36-50 * Luke 15:11-24

TALKING WITH THE LORD

Ensure that, at the end of your prayer, you spend some time talking directly with the Lord. You may like to end the prayer with a *Glory Be*.

REVIEW OF PRAYER

Afterwards, look back over your prayer and make some notes.

IMAGES OF GOD, IMAGES OF SELF, IMAGES OF PRAYER

My image of you, how I see you, influences my behaviour. If I see you as threatening, I may approach you either cautiously or aggressively; not at all as I approach someone whom I consider friendly or trustworthy.

For example, fifty years ago many Christians had an image of God as Judge, someone who kept an account of all our actions, big or small, and whose job was to punish us. Threats like *Do that and God will punish you!* helped to promote this sort of image of God. Parents, teachers, priests, and the very culture of the time all helped produce this negative image of God.



It is not only images of God which affect us and our behaviour. The way I see myself has a lot to do with my happiness. If I deem myself unlovable, then it will be very hard for me to believe that God or anyone else loves me. Similarly, my image of prayer can limit the way I pray. If I think of prayer as *saying prayers to God*, then it will be difficult for me to learn to listen to God.

Images are not easily changed. If I grew up with an image of a threatening judge-God, I may want to believe in a loving God, but deep down I may still react with fear and guilt when I commit even minor sins. It is as if there are **head** images, which are fairly easily changed, but also **heart** and **gut** images, which are much more resistant. We need to ask God's help with all our false images.

God is, of course, a mystery which our finite minds can never grasp. The words and concepts we use for God are always inadequate. When we say God loves, we mean a love so great that it is beyond our comprehension.

The most salutary remedy for our false images of God is to meet Jesus in the Gospels. To have seen Jesus is to have seen the Father (John 14: 9). It is hard to continue being afraid of God after we have seen Jesus with the woman taken in adultery (John 8: 1-11) or at the lakeside after Peter had denied him (John 21: especially 13-17).

The more we spend time with Jesus, the truer our image of him and of the Father becomes. It is important to keep reminding ourselves that what we learn about Jesus is also true of the Father. Imagine yourself as the prodigal child returning to the Father who rushes out and welcomes without recrimination. Try to experience the warmth of that meeting (Luke 15: 11-24). Encountering Jesus face to face, we experience his love for us and learn, as the sinful woman and Zacchaeus did, that we are not only worthwhile but loved (Luke 7:

36-50; 19: 1-10), and so our images of self begin to change.



Much of this prayer has nothing to do with words. We are full of wonder and gratitude just to be with Jesus. At other times we are moved to a healthy shame. We learn to be quieter at prayer and less active; our image of prayer changes.

When we are praying the Examen (see the leaflet *towards meeting six*), it is good to notice the roots of our behaviour and reactions. It would not be surprising if our gut reactions sprang from earlier negative images of God or self, which we thought we had outgrown. We come to realise that the roots of our behaviour lie in ourselves, not in other people, so we can begin to act against them. Discovering our false images encourages us to seek God's help.

Tony Horan sj and Jenny Bond