**Lichfield Clergy Conference**  Lord, teach us how to pray/ Psalms.

**Session 1**

I often equate walking into an art gallery with entering a church. It’s a different kind of sacred space, but where most people naturally enter it understanding that they step into a distinctive and unspoken change of culture. We often become quieter and more focused people in an art gallery, just like we do in a church or cathedral. There is often a sort of recognised hush, an atmosphere of contemplation, not always but often.

Sometimes too, art galleries can be quite loud and vibrant places just like our church spaces. But what there always is, is the expectant invitation to engage with something beyond ourselves, architecture, objects and artwork which make us look, things which invite us to lose ourselves within them just for a little while.

That experience can energise us, it can take us back through our own histories, it can help us to reflect on the world and our place in it, it can challenge us about what is not right. The things we look at can bring us to tears, can heal us a little bit and more than anything, they can enable us to look at the world from a different perspective. Approached contemplatively, looking can help us to pause. And all those things I have described are also what prayer potentially does as well. Art and church often make very good partnerships too – visual things help people to reflect on theological as well as biblical themes and to make links with our own lives. I rediscovered my own faith by walking round that powerful juxtaposition which makes up the old and the new cathedrals in the city of Coventry, as well as the carefully commissioned art which the new building is full of.

I studied Art History in my early twenties and using different forms of the visual in ministry has always been something I have really enjoyed doing in all of the contexts where I have worked. Currently I am a parish priest – grounded I hope with all the delights and stresses that this brings. I worked for many years in vocation discernment and the visual is also a wonderful tool to use in this area too. Art can bring the Bible to life, it can enhance our personal prayer lives, and also aid the ministry of spiritual guiding/direction. And the practice of its interpretation can be approached spiritually as well. Maria Balshaw, Director of the Tate Foundation, asks us to approach art like prayer in the sense that we do not always have to explain it away. Trust others’ curiosity and intelligence, she says. If we explain everything, we are in danger of stripping away the complexities within the life that we live, we rob and drain the mystery from the art or the ritual. And we send out messages too that certain things are not worth working at or working for – creativity, faith, truth, language are some of those.

More than anything, art and the visual can connect peoples lived out life with the life of faith. Using art in this way need not be scary or naff. Neither is it something it is sometimes accused of – just a medium and occupation for the middle-class elite. Think Banksy and Grayson Perry for example. I was at Tate Modern in the early summer last year and looked around at the demographic of people milling around the different exhibitions and there really was a beautiful variety of people.

These days we are bombarded by images; we have a wealth of visual resources to draw on, coming at us thick and fast on social media and beyond. I am a member of the **Cloud Appreciation Society**, for example and receive often stunning aerial images of different cloud formations. I could look at this image for quite a long time **(1)** or this one **(2);** They are spectacular and dramatic, they speak to me of the power of the divine, of mystery of how science cannot completely explain the makeup and impact of such a phenomenon. They seem to proclaim transcendence.

And what I would like to do this morning is to provide some reassurance and encouragement about the use of the visual – that actually it is easy to build it into ministry if you don’t do this already but it sometimes just takes a bit of a seed change in how we do things. It might also be about approaching how we pray from a different perspective – to use less words and more of the visual. But really this is age-old. The world of iconography has always understood images as enabling people into faith to enter a different reality through the visual representations of the saints and of Christ himself. My mother was an icon writer – I have inherited from her the experience of attending Orthodox services where the visual is sensual, revered and understood as an entry into another realm.

This morning, I would like to invite you to think more deeply and expansively about the tools you have available to you and to use these imaginatively in order to bring divine life alive both within ourselves as well as in the lives of those you care for and minister to. And using images in worship too can also develop a less busy, more contemplative feel to a service. We often stuff our services with words, with not much opportunity to sit and gaze, to fall into silence. Taizé would be a classic example of doing this. One of my churches is dedicated to St Mary. At our Patronal Festival I used 4 very different images of Mary to explore the spirituality surrounding her.

So, we will be thinking also about the Psalms (which I know is also a theme for this conference) and connecting art with some ancient and contemporary monastic practices – reverence, awe, solitude and silence, developing a sense of loving service to others, honesty and humility.

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**Question: Think about a time when a particular image made an impression on you? Give some context. How did that image speak to you and how did it continue to resonate with you?**

**And as an example, I wanted to begin this morning with two extraordinary images which I saw at an exhibition I visited last summer which was on in London. The exhibition was called *A World in* *Common* and it was an exhibition of contemporary African Photography and some sculptures. A set of 4 images completely and utterly captivated me. I stood by them for a very long time and returned to them several times during the few hours I was in the gallery. They made me stop and really look. I felt transported into the world of the photographs. They are by Ethiopian artist Aida Muluneh and were produced in 2018 in conjunction with the charity WaterAid and the H&M Foundation. The subject was water scarcity and the impact this has on women in Africa. (3 & 4) They were taken in the Ethiopian desert. I find them very visually striking but also challenging. They made me want to dwell with them, and to think, then pray about this issue. To think too, about how easy I find it to use (and waste) water, to how we do this in church, to how water is used as an image of life in the Bible. It made connections and enriched my soul. Looking at these images then became a prayerful experience – one which provided contemplation but then led me into action.**

**In the monastic tradition every practical act is understood as a prayer, digging the garden, sweeping the corridor, filling a glass of water. The American theologian and writer Beverley Lanzetta says, “Prayer is not an ideal outside the self; nor is it one more obligation that must be added to the pile of commitments already on your calendar. Prayer is released, uncovered from within. Each person, when given time for silence, or the peace of a retreat, at some point finds prayer flowing from the heart” I think this release, can happen in a myriad of different ways but I have given you an example of how the visual and standing in an art gallery, can do this too.**

**I mentioned previously about how one easy way to use and enjoy the visual, either by yourself or with others is to visit buildings and spaces which contain it. So, to keep up with our theme of water, here is a very different image, but no less powerful. This is a sculpture at** Chester Cathedral – ***Water of Life*** by local artist **Stephen Broadbent** is an image of compassion, it is the artist’s interpretation of the meeting between Jesus and the Samaritan women in that famous and long exchange in John Chapter 4. **(5)** This sculpture is in the cloister garden, particularly beautiful on a hot summer’s day. Here, a piece of art enables those who look at it to think about what it means to be thirsty – physically and spiritually. The theme of water also suggests a link to how the Benedictine monks’ water supply was at the centre of the cloister garden.

Or, if you wanted something in complete contrast the world’s first permanent video altarpiece by American video artist **Bill Viola,** installed at St Paul’s Cathedral is entitled ***Martyrs*** which depicts 4 individuals being exposed to the 4 elements, earth, fire, water and air. The subject centres on martyrdom and suffering, a fitting subject to the international and diverse footfall who walk the aisles of St Paul’s. **(6)** Mark Oakley, former Canon at the Cathedral, said this about the piece at the time (in 2014), “that the work allows visitors to encounter spiritual questions of life and death. Through the work we see the courage and resilience of the human in the face of all that would destroy what is true and good. We each have been given the gift of being. The gift we have to offer in return is who we become and how our lives, and deaths might transform the world.” Oakley is describing this unusual piece of art, but he is inadvertently also describing the dynamic of prayer. When we pray, however we do that, we open ourselves to the Holy Spirit to rinse and transform and strengthen us – it is a journey of who we are becoming in the face of Divine.

We might find this an inevitably challenging image. Potentially it makes all kinds of connections with the world at large, maybe even with our own lives. But then we are also reminded of the rawness of the emotions and the way of praying in the Psalms. **Read the beginning of Psalm 55: 1-7.** We know the Psalms are all about another spiritual practice – honesty and humility, knowing our need of God, railing against the oppression, injustice, unfairness of life and crying out to God, no holes barred to help us, to punish those who persecute us, but also to bring us peace. Art then, like the biblical text, like any verbal prayer, is about bringing our heartfelt humanity into the presence of the divine and asking for redemption, release and transformation.

I’ve also recently come across the work of artist **Bruno Catalano**. Every statue this artist constructs is missing a significant part. ***The Travellers*** represents emigrants. Catalano himself is a Moroccan who emigrated to France. He believes that emigrants and travellers leave a part of themselves behind that they need to forget in order to emotionally survive in a new place, yet their homeland is always connected to them. There is also a sculpture on the banks of the Thames opposite the MI6 or SIS (Secret Intelligence Service) building that you can visit for yourselves – it was only installed in February last year. **(7)** Each of Catalano’s sculptures also always carry a bag, as they walk towards the hope of a better future. The section of ‘space’ within each work is a symbol of being uprooted and of suffering (according to the artist). They become a visual representation of loss. They are often placed in coastal towns, such as in Marseilles and on the Amalfi coast or places where there are seas and rivers. In 2019, 30 of them were situated around Venice, for the Biennale art exhibition but appropriate for a city with huge sea faring and transient associations. For me these become a solid example of how art can become a prayer, connecting with a universal theme of migration, homelessness and hospitality and how Christian communities can play a part in easing all of that. These images could be used in a meditation to pray for displaced people, those trafficked and in transience in personal prayer as well as in a public worship service.

So, to **recap**, all kinds of art and the visual can be used as a way of helping us and others to step into God’s presence and as an aid to prayer. Art and much of the visual is already a kind of prayer. We have already established that this does not have to be specifically religious in content in order to be something which helps us to pray. We have also established that it can help us into stillness (Aida Muluneh), it can expand our individual concerns to pray for the world (as in Bruno Catalano’s sculptures or Viola’s altarpiece). Buildings can hold a sense of sacredness, both in their architecture as well as in the works they house (Tate Britain/Coventry). And art **outside** is also powerful and can help us into larger and more universal themes. Think *Angel of the North i*s one such example, interesting as it is a traditional religious image but made as a symbol of resilience, defiance and protection for the collective experience of the people of the Northeast.

I thought I would finish this session with beginning to think about the kind of spaces we might use images and I am aware that many of you might do this already. If you do, fantastic but maybe there will be some fresh ideas as well.

The following images I have used to **Bereavement Ministry**. These are stills from the book *The Boy, the Mole, the Fox and the Horse* by Charlie Mackesy. We have just started what we call some drop in bereavement cafes and have used images like these as a simple way into both encourage people into talking about grief as well as to still the room afterwards (The Empty Chair) – Blue Christmas. This is a great example of actually how images sometimes speak more powerfully than words. Van Gogh – ephemeral – image suggests times when we feel someone’s presence with us who we have lost through a broken relationship perhaps or because they have died.

Practical things we can do are as follows:

* Over the years I have collected quite a large **collection of images** – things which have connected with me and which I like or find interesting. Creating a collection of postcards/visiting art and taking others there too. Free images are available at www.unsplash.com
* You can draw together images **around a theme** – my example of using images for our Patronal Festival used these different images. Pick a theme – like Mary – find images and use them. You can always give people a bit of background. But the powerful thing about art is the reader response. The dynamic is in the here and now. Images speak to people’s depth and to what is going on in their lives right now. **Stations of the Cross** classic example of how we use image.
* Visual Commentary on Scripture – [www.vcs](http://www.vcs)
* Take a photo each day or each week. Write a blog about it. Sit with it, pray with it. How and why does it speak to you? **Martin’s images (8)**

Next session will be a little more practical. I will be asking you to respond with 6 different sets of images which are all related to monastic practices or values. The idea will be to think together about how these could be used in the different contexts you reside and work in. So there will be a bit more talking from me and then we will spend about half an hour with these and maybe do some brief feedback.

To finish this morning I wanted us to look at an image I have used over many years. Someone gave me this postcard – I can’t remember who – but I have used it so many times in spiritual accompaniment, and in my own prayer life, perhaps especially when I have been feeling a bit unloved and broken, sometimes when faith feels weak. People see different things in it. It is a powerful image.

**Peter Wever (10).** Is this an utter cherishing or a suffocating possessiveness, a sense of the heady and heightened love of one person for another, through protection, loyalty and ultimately hope. This idea of embrace is powerful in every way. Theologically we sometimes hold onto our own interpretations of how things should be too tightly, squeezing the life out of other ways of seeing things and squashing other peoples’ perspectives.

I once led a retreat on the different sculptures on the 4th Plinth in Trafalgar Square, a space where new art is showcased. I linked this to four aspects of priesthood, proclaim, presence, prophet and pastor. But I have also used this image – Eco Homo by the sculptor Mark Wallinger in spiritual guiding and with someone who was at the time extrememly broken. I wrote a poem for them to go alongside the image. I will leave this with you as we go for coffee.