

A Guide to
Encountering
Christ in
the Gospels

AT THE FEET OF JESUS

BRUCE AND CAROLYN HINDMARSH



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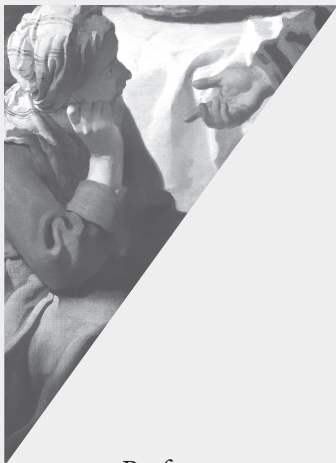
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Introduction

THE DISCIPLES AT HOME

WHEN WE THINK OF JESUS AND HIS DISCIPLES, we usually think of the twelve who traveled with him in his public ministry and who were uniquely called by him and designated his apostles (Luke 6:13-16). However, we might also think of the three who were his friends and whose home he visited on at least three occasions.

When we first encounter them, we learn that “Martha opened her home to him” (Luke 10:38). We meet Martha and her sister Mary and (later) their brother Lazarus. We might think of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus, therefore, as the domestic disciples. Indeed, Jesus refers to Lazarus as “our friend Lazarus” (John 11:11), and the three are together described as uniquely beloved by him: “Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus” (John 11:5).

In this small book, we would like to help you, like Martha, to open your home to the Lord Jesus Christ and to consider what it might mean to invite him into this most intimate space. What does it mean to be befriended by Jesus Christ and beloved by him in such an interior way? We are certainly called to follow him in the world as disciples and to share in his public mission. But we are also called to receive him and allow him to enter in and make his home with us.

Jesus is still saying, as he did to the church at Laodicea, “Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the



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door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me” (Revelation 3:20). Is there any invitation more wonderful or more sacred? How remarkable to have table fellowship with Jesus Christ, to be permitted to be his host, to welcome him, and have him for our guest!

It is at home, behind closed doors, that we dare to voice our greatest hopes and fears, that we experience our deepest joys and sorrows. It is at home that we are known most intimately and fully. In the Gospels, the Lord Jesus chose to visit Martha, Mary, and Lazarus in their ordinary home and to enter fully into their messy lives. On each occasion, his presence made all the difference.

We will consider all three domestic disciples at home in the village of Bethany, but we will focus the spotlight especially on Mary and invite you to follow her in her response to Jesus. By placing yourself there with Mary at the feet of Jesus, you can pray with Mary of Bethany and make her wholehearted response your own.

MAKING A RETREAT

We have designed this book as a prayer retreat. It can be used as a group retreat or as a personal retreat, or can simply be read through as a devotional book, but it is meant above all as an invitation to prayer and to encountering Jesus intimately for yourself. (Suggestions for how to use this book are provided in chapter one.)

It is said of the *Spiritual Exercises* of Ignatius of Loyola that you do not so much read the *Exercises* as you *make* them. So also with this retreat. In this sense, you might think of the chapters that follow like a recipe for a meal. You are meant to make the recipe, and it is in the hands-on sifting, mixing, kneading, baking, and, above all, eating that the beauty of the recipe is experienced. In a way, the recipe should fade away and eventually disappear. There is something much more than the recipe to discover. The words on the page are to be transformed into something felt, handled, touched, and experienced personally.



ENCOUNTERING JESUS

John said of Jesus Christ: “We have seen his glory” (John 1:14). He wrote of a Word “which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which have looked at and our hands have touched” (1 John 1:1). This is meant to be your experience too. The invitation is to a genuine *koinonia* or fellowship “with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ” (1 John 1:3).

Our hope is that this small retreat might help you to deepen your personal response to Jesus. As you follow Mary of Bethany in prayer, you can encounter, with her, the presence of Christ in the midst of your real life and experience today. He comes to you in your home too.

We witness in Jesus Christ the eternal Son of God, begotten of the Father from all eternity. As he “became flesh and made his dwelling among us,” so we are privileged to see in his every word and action the very heart of God (John 1:14). The disciple Philip said, “Lord, show us the Father and that will be enough for us,” and Jesus replied, “Don’t you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14:8-9).

So, as we follow Jesus throughout the Gospels—as we see him heal Peter’s mother-in-law, teach the multitudes on the mountain, rebuke the religious leaders in the synagogue, cleanse the temple in Jerusalem, and so on—at each and every point we are seeing heaven on earth. The implications of this are profound for us as we read the Gospels and encounter Jesus with the disciples at Bethany.

With every gesture and every utterance, Jesus mediates God to us. Heaven and earth are uniquely joined right here. This invites our close attention.

AN OPENING IN HEAVEN

This is what Nathanael discovered when he first encountered Jesus. Jesus was not only “the one Moses wrote about in the Law, and about whom the prophets also wrote” (John 1:45). He was the new Bethel, or



house of God, the place where Jacob's ladder eternally rests: "You will see 'heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending on' the Son of Man" (John 1:51; see Genesis 28:12). Here in Jesus Christ, God made flesh, heaven stands open and will remain open forever. Jesus is that opening in heaven even now as we open the Scriptures.

Augustine once described the Scriptures as "the face of God for now," and he urged us to "gaze intently into it." What did he mean?

You and I were each made to see the face of God, and every Christian heart longs to be able someday to look into the face of love itself. Every human being was created in innocence and purity to walk with God as in a garden. The great promise is that someday we shall be washed, cleansed, and restored by grace; we shall be made fully capable of this. Meanwhile, where do we look to find the face of God turned toward us? Again, "Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father," says Jesus (John 14:9).

We must look to Jesus. And where do we find him today? Because "the Word was with God, and the Word was God" and because "through him all things were made," there is nowhere in all creation that God is not speaking, where the Word of God is not articulate (John 1:1-3). "The heavens declare the glory of God" (Psalm 19:1). And God has spoken in the past "at many times and in various ways" (Hebrews 1:1). He continues to speak in nature, in history, in human experience, in all these ways. We should always, everywhere, be listening for what God might be saying to us. All this speech belongs to the one eternal Word who has become human for our sake. But all these modes of speech are still only like whispers that have now been gathered into "the full volume of the divine voice in the world" in Jesus Christ. To listen to Jesus, we turn to the Scriptures where he is decisively revealed. In the union of the word written and the Word made flesh, we encounter God himself today. Here we may still find Jacob's ladder joining heaven and earth.



This means we need to pay attention to everything about Jesus. What Jesus is doing in the Gospels *he is always doing*. Heaven is still open here in Jesus at every moment we encounter him in holy Scripture. The eternal Son of God, the risen and ascended Jesus Christ, is with us *now* as we read the Gospels today.

If he is the incarnate Word of God, the eternal Son, then he can never be simply past tense. He was there in the village of Bethany in the first century. He is here in my room now as I turn the pages of my New Testament.

By the Holy Spirit, the past and present are fused in the burning heat of God's revelation in Scripture. This is what Jesus promised in the sending of his Spirit: "I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you" (John 14:18).

JESUS IS PRESENT NOW

This means that as you read about his visit to the home of Martha, Mary, and Lazarus—at the very moment you are reading—Jesus is as present now, as really and truly present to you, as he was to them. These were real events in time and space, a history as real as the moments we live today. Jesus was there and then. But as the eternal Son of God, he is also here and now.

When we speak a word today, the sound of it rings out for a moment and then quickly dies away and all is silent once more. A spoken word is like a word written on the sand. The wind or the waves come over it, and soon enough it disappears. It is not so with the words of Jesus Christ in the Gospels.

These words once spoken have not decayed or faded away. They have no diminishment or half-life. They continue to ring out with the same volume and intensity as when they were first spoken. There is a vernal freshness and eternal wellspring to the words of Christ in the Gospels. This is what Peter meant when he described our spiritual life



as having its origin “not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God” (1 Peter 1:23).

Imagine ringing a bell, only to find that the sound keeps on ringing and ringing and ringing. The note once sounded just keeps on going. That is what the word of Christ in Scripture is like. No mere past tense. No antiquarian distance. It is all happening now in real time. And it is the communion of persons: Jesus is alive, and he is speaking with you.

This is why you can pray with Mary of Bethany. As you substitute yourself in the place of Mary, you will find in each encounter that the face of Jesus is turned toward you. You are being addressed personally. These words are meant for you.

SEEING THE PLACE

Sometimes we may form indistinct or hazy images in our minds as we read the Gospels. The narrative hovers in midair somewhere, as something far away and long ago. There are no crisp edges or vivid colors. We are perhaps overfamiliar with the words. Or we read more or less passively, without making the effort to see, hear, and feel what is happening, experiencing the narrative as real.

There is a danger here that we will not sense that what we are reading is *just as real* as what is happening in our day-to-day world right now.

We have both worked for many years mostly in academic contexts. But we have also done some work in the arts. Carolyn has written a play, and Bruce has worked on a film, and we have done a few other creative projects. It has been a real eye-opener, literally. These experiences have changed how we read.

Recently Bruce worked as a historical expert for a documentary film crew in Britain. They consulted him for their reenactments with surprisingly precise questions: Would John Wesley be wearing a wig in 1767? Would it be shoulder-length? What color would William Wilberforce’s frock coat be when he went to meet John Newton? What tune

should be used for the congregation singing “Amazing Grace” in 1773? Would they sing in a call-and-response format? Who would lead? Was there an organ?

All of a sudden, the demands of the medium asked more of his imagination than he had needed to give before, despite years of reading. The demands of the creative, artistic format made him realize that he had not fully seen or heard or felt what he had studied. His images were still gauzy and vague. This experience exposed that even his work as a historian had not gone deep enough if he had not fully imagined his subjects—picturing them vividly to himself in their context.

So, in this retreat, we will be asking you to engage your *imagination* to see, hear, and feel as vividly as possible the Gospel accounts of Mary of Bethany and her encounter with Jesus. It really happened. Everyone would have smelled the food in the kitchen. The light would have come in at an angle through the window and lit up Jesus’ face as he taught. A fly might have crawled along the windowsill. Perhaps Simon Peter cleared his throat, or a cart clattered by on the cobblestones of the street outside.

We sometimes think of imagination today as make-believe or fantasy—just making things up. And this is, of course, one of the remarkable things that we human beings can do. We can imagine fauns and centaurs and aliens with three eyes, and so on. But the imagination is also employed when we close our eyes and try to re-picture to ourselves the face of someone we love, or a room from our childhood. And the better we can imagine (re-picture) these things, the more real it all feels to us.

Modern psychologists and therapists understand this connection between imagination and feeling, but so did the ancients, for whom memory was the faculty of the human mind that did all this work. It was the very deepest part of the soul. From Augustine to the late Middle Ages and beyond, Christians understood that this faculty



needed to be engaged in the reading of Scripture. There were a number of “lives” of Christ during these centuries that encouraged vivid meditation on each episode in the Gospels. Ignatius of Loyola took this up and made it central to the retreats he gave his followers. He described this kind of vivid meditation in the *Spiritual Exercises* as a “composition” or “seeing the place.” Later, English Puritans encouraged a similar practice.

It seems that Christian artists understood this especially well. When Fra Angelico painted simple frescos of Dominic adoring the cross for each cell in the dormitory for the brothers at San Marco in Florence, he meant for them to see themselves in the figure of Dominic and place themselves there at the foot of the cross in meditation. Rembrandt took this even further, painting himself right into the scene of the raising of the cross of Christ.

There are vivid paintings of Christ in the home of Mary and Martha from the Spanish artist Diego Velázquez and the Dutch artist Jan Vermeer. (We used a detail from the latter for the cover of this book.) We can see these painters wrestling to imagine the details and somehow fuse the present and the past; this is a form of contemplation similar to Ignatius’s “seeing the place.”

What about you? Can you see the place as you read the Gospels today? The task for you with this retreat, as you contemplate Mary of Bethany, is to engage your inner senses as vividly as you can. This is not arbitrary invention. It is not so much seeing whatever you will as seeing as much as you can.

We have a friend who is slowly going blind. Each morning he sits in his chair by the living room window, looking out at the gently rising interior mountains in British Columbia. He watches as the sun comes up and the grassy slopes turn to gold against a windswept sky of cerulean blue. He told us that he is memorizing the view, so that when he loses his sight, he will still be able to picture it vividly to himself. He



is really and truly training his inner senses, his memory and imagination, so that he will be able still to see as much as he can.

He is also remembering: *re-mem-bering* the scene, putting its pieces back together and holding it before his mind's eye. We do this when we want to remember loved ones who are separated by time or distance. So also should we remember Jesus Christ. As Peter wrote, "Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy" (1 Peter 1:8). As Christian believers, we want to remember Christ as vividly as we can.

LOVE'S PICTURE

If you are reading for edification and attentive to the Holy Spirit speaking now through God's Word, then it is love's picture that matters most: love seeking to remember the beloved. In this, commentaries and study notes and historical accounts of first-century Palestine may certainly help, but only as aids to contemplation.

The main thing is to see the place in a way so real, so immediate and sensate, that you feel pulled into the frame and absorbed into the scene. The horizon line dividing the past and present is erased. When Jesus speaks, you are the one he is addressing. You are the one who touches the hem of his garment. It is your grief when Jesus' coming seems delayed. It is your storm that must be calmed. Your bent body that must be raised upright.

We met a dear woman in her eighties who lost her loving husband after more than fifty years of marriage. She spoke of how painful it was to find in certain moments that she could no longer picture or imagine him. But then there were other moments where his presence was profoundly real and vivid. In these moments, she could see him so clearly in her mind's eye and hear his voice so distinctly in her mind's ear that she would almost turn and speak out loud with him. It was like she could reach out and touch him.



This is the experience that we hope you have as you engage your imagination in reading about Mary of Bethany.

One of the best accounts of such loving contemplation comes from the Swiss theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar. In fact, he turns to the relationship between the lover and the beloved to explain contemplation: “Love desires to have the beloved before its eyes. Thus the contemplative will employ the powers of his soul to summon up the image of the Beloved, the powers of his ‘inner senses’ and his imagination to call forth the image of the incarnate Word.”

He continues, describing how the devout Bible reader does this: “He will contemplate Jesus as he dwelt bodily on the earth, the things he said, the sound of his voice, the way he treated people, his appearance when at prayer, at the Last Supper, in his Passion.” But, again, this is not journalism or reportage:

This picture is not meant to be a realistic photograph, but love’s picture, solely concerned with love, the divine love of the Father, which is here manifested in the Son and in the concreteness of his whole earthly life . . . we do so in order to seek for the love of God, to see, hear and touch it in the humble form in which it offers itself to man. In prayer, our love seeks love, divine love, through the earthly image (with which it cannot dispense).

“Love seeks love,” says Balthasar. “Love desires to have the beloved before its eyes.” If this is something that strikes a chord in your own heart, then you are ready to go on retreat.

Throughout this retreat, you are not alone, for the gift of the Holy Spirit makes this contemplation possible. Jesus promised, “When the Advocate comes, whom I will send to you from the Father—the Spirit of truth who goes out from the Father—he will testify about me” (John 15:26). He says again: “The Spirit will receive from me what he will make known to you. . . . In a little while you will see me no more, and then after a little while you will see me” (John 16:15–16).



A PRAYER

As you enter into this guided prayer retreat, prepared to look afresh at the Lord Jesus through the eyes of Mary of Bethany, take a moment to pause and to offer up to God your own desire to draw near to Jesus and encounter him personally.

Begin first with a simple prayer to acknowledge that God is here and to place yourself in his presence. If you are doing this with others, you might use this ancient call and response:

The Lord is here.

His Spirit is with us.

This prayer acts like a reminder. Again, it is like opening the door to your home and welcoming a much-anticipated guest. If you are doing this on your own, you might use the words of Francis de Sales: “O my heart, my heart, God is truly here!”

In these prayers we not only seek to become aware of God, but also to remember that God is aware of us—looking upon us with love.

Secondly, offer up a prayer for the retreat itself. If the Lord is here, then what is your response? What do you hope for from this time in his presence? What do you want? As you take a moment to focus your intention, as you prepare for the retreat as a whole, you might pray slowly several times over these words below. This prayer is ascribed to Bishop Richard of Chichester as his dying prayer in the thirteenth century.

O most merciful Redeemer, friend and brother,

May I know you more clearly,

Love you more dearly,

Follow you more nearly. Amen.

In the first prayer, we open our hearts to the Lord who is present right now by his Spirit. And with this second prayer, we respond and ask for a specific grace from God. We are asking God in his mercy to change our hearts as we meditate on Scripture.



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