



Out of the ordinary
praying in unexpected places

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“Prayer is not the moment when God and humans are in relationship, for that is always. Prayer is taking initiative to intentionally respond to God’s presence.”

L Robert Keck

About this resource

‘Out of the ordinary’ is a resource for prayer and reflection in everyday places, designed with Lent and Holy Week in mind (though it can be used at any time of the year). The resource consists of this booklet and a set of seven postcards, each focusing on a different kind of place. Additional materials, along with the booklet and postcards in pdf format, can be accessed online at www.contemporarychristianity.org/outoftheordinary.

In the time leading up to Easter, we invite you to choose to go to some of these places and take time out to pray there or just to become aware of that place and its people in a new way as you hold them before God. We explore this idea, what we call ‘prayerful presence’, in more detail on pages 4 and 5.

Consider an everyday situation – one where prayer might be the last thing on your mind, for example, in a supermarket or shopping centre, at the school gates, on public transport, in your workplace, while you’re out enjoying yourself or at home surrounded by the ordinary stuff of life – and in the midst of your usual activities take time out to be present to God and to these places in a new way.

We also encourage you to go out of your way to spend time in places which are out of the ordinary for you. These might be places you feel reluctant to go to or simply never considered spending time in before. Situations which challenge us – unfamiliar and uncomfortable places, those we feel ambivalent about or hostile towards – also need our prayerful presence. We want to suggest that places we have learned to overlook can also be rich places of God’s revelation as we become open and attentive to these situations and the people there.

On the next page we suggest some places you might consider going to, but these really are just ideas to get you started. We encourage you to think carefully and to choose places which resonate with you and which you feel drawn to engage with. This resource seeks to highlight how prayer can renew both the world and the person praying. Therefore be open to the possibility of transformation for yourself as well as for the place you are in.

Be imaginative, but also be wise. Make sure that you are safe and approach each situation with respect.

Picking a place

Here are some ideas for places where you could spend time being prayerfully present. These are intended to spark your imagination rather than be prescriptive. Think creatively, take a look at the postcards and choose a place that is meaningful and real to you. Be open to situations that you would not normally think of.

An everyday place

A supermarket, bank, post office, your workplace or home, public transport, car park, doctor's or dentist's waiting room, school or college, social security office, the cinema, gym or airport – the list is endless.

A place of deprivation or poverty

Somewhere a homeless person is sheltering, a place where young people drink or sniff glue, a 'red light' district, a travellers' halting site, a community centre where migrant workers meet, a neglected housing estate. Be open to other possibilities.

A place of division or conflict

A peace line, mural or memorial, a street where sectarian riots have taken place, an area where signs of racism are emerging, a place you had an argument, a church in which you were part of a division. Consider places which hold a painful memory for you.

A place you avoid

An unfamiliar place, the 'other side' of town, a betting shop, bingo hall or a particular pub or social club, a fast-food restaurant you wouldn't go to, a church of a different denomination. Read a newspaper you would never ordinarily buy, visit a shop or community centre catering for a minority ethnic community, take a journey on public transport if you normally use the car, walk a route you would normally travel by bus. Use your imagination.

A place of loss

Visit the grave of a loved one or spend time in the bedroom of a grown up child who has moved away. Go to a place which signifies a 'wrong' turn in your life, a missed opportunity or a parting of ways with someone. Is there a loss that you may be denying?

An empty space

A piece of wasteland, public building or open space, a spare room, a derelict building, a blank page or canvas, open countryside or sea, an hour of time by yourself somewhere. Be open to unexpected ideas.

A place of celebration or hope

Somewhere you see signs of God's hope in the world – a church or community initiative, a situation where a 'good' is being celebrated. Initiate a celebration in the midst of the ordinary – bake a cake, throw a party, make a meal, give a gift, send a letter, card or email. Be a source of encouragement and hope in the place where you are.



You choose a place, turn up there, what next?

Use the enclosed postcards – and take them with you – each offers a short biblical reflection plus suggestions for your own reflection, prayer and response.

What strikes you? How do you feel? If it helps, use a notebook, sketchbook or camera to record your thoughts and insights. Suspend judgement, awaken your curiosity, engage in humility and see what happens. Bring both the place and your experience of that place to God in prayer or quiet reflection. To explore prayer further, turn to the next page.

And afterwards...

Finally, whether you are using this resource as an individual or with the support of a larger group, you may find the following questions useful as a debriefing exercise:

- 1 How did you find this experience?
- 2 How did you feel before going, while you were there and afterwards?
Have you talked about your experience with anyone else?
- 3 Why did you choose this particular place?
- 4 How did praying 'in' the situation make a difference to your understanding of prayer and to your understanding of the situation where you have been praying?
- 5 What did you 'notice' (see, hear or realise) for the first time?

So how was it for you? If you would like to share a message, reflection or a prayer go to our website where you can add it to our message board. Find out what others have done with this resource and share your own 'out of the ordinary' experiences online at www.contemporarychristianity.org/outoftheordinary

“Prayer is thinking, in which we ask to be open to strange answers.”

Risto Nivari

“Being present to God we learn to be truly present to the world.”

Anon

Reflections on praying: prayers of petition

We have rightly been taught to prayerfully make our requests and needs known to God and to enter into a dialogue with scripture, the church and our hearts expecting the Spirit of God to breathe life, love and meaning through these means of grace. In this form of prayer our essential guide is the Lord’s Prayer. As you seek to engage prayerfully with the places you visit, the Lord’s Prayer could be used as a way of praying for the people you encounter or as a way of ending your time of reflection in that place. For example, you could:

Prayerfully ask for God’s name to be honoured and his kingdom to be realised in this place

Consider what would be different in this situation if God’s will was fulfilled here

Prayerfully ask for God to provide all that is needed for the people here to live dignified and fulfilled lives

Consider and confess our failings as individuals and as a church in addressing these issues

Prayerfully ask for the forgiveness of past wrongs here and for the restoration of broken relationships and lives

Consider how the work and witness of the church might help make this prayer a reality

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name,
Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.
Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.
And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours, for ever and ever.

Amen



Contemplative prayer: practising prayerful presence

Within the Christian tradition we also find the practice of contemplative prayer. This is an equally important way to pray. In this discipline the focus is on a ‘prayerful presence’ and not the prayer of petition. Rather than asking God to do something, we seek to enter into the realities of the space and place which we prayerfully hold before God and make room in our hearts for what we see and hear there. Being prayerfully present to a situation is a radical way of being attentive to places and people we have learned to ignore. Consequently, prayerful presence is not, as is perhaps commonly thought, a silent, passive, disengaged way of praying. It is an active, spiritual work in which we:

- Affirm** that God’s redeeming presence is in this place
- Listen** to hear what God is saying to you in and through this situation
- Discern** how and where God is at work in this situation
- Reflect** on whatever meaning, empathy, invitation or insight comes to you
- Respond** to God’s call to action
- Give thanks** that the God of life and love has not abandoned the world

We invite you to use this as a guide to prayerful presence in the places you visit:

affirm . listen . discern . reflect . respond . give thanks

“Our prayers are not answered when we are given what we ask, but when we are challenged to be what we can be.”

Morris Adler

Scripture passages

John 4:1-30

Now when Jesus learned that the Pharisees had heard, ‘Jesus is making and baptizing more disciples than John’— although it was not Jesus himself but his disciples who baptized— he left Judea and started back to Galilee. But he had to go through Samaria. So he came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Jacob’s well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon.

A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, ‘Give me a drink’. (His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) The Samaritan woman said to him, ‘How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?’ (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.) Jesus answered her, ‘If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, “Give me a drink”, you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water.’ The woman said to him, ‘Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?’ Jesus said to her, ‘Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.’ The woman said to him, ‘Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water.’

Jesus said to her, ‘Go, call your husband, and come back.’ The woman answered him, ‘I have no husband.’ Jesus said to her, ‘You are right in saying, “I have no husband”; for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!’ The woman said to him, ‘Sir, I see that you are a prophet. Our ancestors worshipped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem.’ Jesus said to her, ‘Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.’ The woman said to him, ‘I know that Messiah is coming’ (who is called Christ). ‘When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us.’ Jesus said to her, ‘I am he, the one who is speaking to you.’

Just then his disciples came. They were astonished that he was speaking with a woman, but no one said, ‘What do you want?’ or, ‘Why are you speaking with her?’ Then the woman left her water-jar and went back to the city. She said to the people, ‘Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?’ They left the city and were on their way to him.

Mark 5:25-34

Now there was a woman who had been suffering from haemorrhages for twelve years. She had endured much under many physicians, and had spent all that she had; and she was no better, but rather grew worse. She had heard about Jesus, and came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak, for she said, 'If I but touch his clothes, I will be made well.' Immediately her haemorrhage stopped; and she felt in her body that she was healed of her disease. Immediately aware that power had gone forth from him, Jesus turned about in the crowd and said, 'Who touched my clothes?' And his disciples said to him, 'You see the crowd pressing in on you; how can you say, "Who touched me?" ' He looked all round to see who had done it. But the woman, knowing what had happened to her, came in fear and trembling, fell down before him, and told him the whole truth. He said to her, 'Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease.'

Luke 9:51-56

When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem. And he sent messengers ahead of him. On their way they entered a village of the Samaritans to make ready for him; but they did not receive him, because his face was set towards Jerusalem. When his disciples James and John saw it, they said, 'Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?''* But he turned and rebuked them. Then* they went on to another village.

[*Other ancient authorities read: rebuked them, and said, 'You do not know what spirit you are of, for the Son of Man has not come to destroy the lives of human beings but to save them.' Then]

Matthew 26:6-13

Now while Jesus was at Bethany in the house of Simon the leper, a woman came to him with an alabaster jar of very costly ointment, and she poured it on his head as he sat at the table. But when the disciples saw it, they were angry and said, 'Why this waste? For this ointment could have been sold for a large sum, and the money given to the poor.' But Jesus, aware of this, said to them, 'Why do you trouble the woman? She has performed a good service for me. For you always have the poor with you, but you will not always have me. By pouring this ointment on my body she has prepared me for burial. Truly I tell you, wherever this good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her.'

Luke 23.44-46

It was now about noon, and darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon, while the sun's light failed; and the curtain of the temple was torn in two. Then Jesus, crying with a loud voice, said, 'Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.' Having said this, he breathed his last.

Luke 23:50-56

Now there was a good and righteous man named Joseph, who, though a member of the council, had not agreed to their plan and action. He came from the Jewish town of Arimathea, and he was waiting expectantly for the kingdom of God. This man went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. Then he took it down, wrapped it in a linen cloth, and laid it in a rock-hewn tomb where no one had ever been laid. It was the day of Preparation, and the sabbath was beginning. The women who had come with him from Galilee followed, and they saw the tomb and how his body was laid. Then they returned, and prepared spices and ointments.

On the sabbath they rested according to the commandment.

Mark 16:1-8

When the sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him. And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. They had been saying to one another, 'Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?' When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back. As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed. But he said to them, 'Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you.' So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.

The Centre for Contemporary Christianity

The Centre for Contemporary Christianity in Ireland offers biblical resources and practical support for the development of biblical faith for a changing world.

Working alongside churches and other faith-based groups and organisations, we want to contribute to a serving community of Christians that will be good news for the people of Ireland – a community that is both radical and faithful in its life and witness.

Thank you to all who have helped to shape this resource. We would especially like to acknowledge the contribution of Youthcom, the Down and Connor Youth Commission.

Additional copies of 'Out of the ordinary' are available from the Centre. Electronic versions can be accessed via the website. This resource has been produced and distributed free of charge. Gifts towards the ongoing work of the Centre are always welcome.

For further details of our programmes, events and publications, to make a donation or to invite us to explore ways in which we can be a resource to your congregation, group or organisation, phone 028 9032 5258 send an email to info@contemporarychristianity.org or visit our website at www.contemporarychristianity.org

'Out of the Ordinary' is a devotional resource for use by individuals, groups and leaders during Lent, Holy Week or at other times.

This booklet, and the seven postcards which accompany it, encourages you to go and spend time in a range of places, both familiar and unfamiliar, and offers readings and guidance for reflection and prayer there.

By becoming prayerfully present to God in these ordinary and yet often quite challenging settings we can discover God's transformative presence and connect with the needs of our world in new and meaningful ways.



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Read: John 4:1-30

A Samaritan woman comes to a well to draw water and leaves having met with the Christ.

At first it is not the promised Messiah she encounters, just a Jewish man, who asks for a drink from the well. He is the one out of place here, upsetting social conventions, speaking in riddles, addressing her as though he knows her deepest thoughts, things she herself isn't even aware of. Startled at first, she is filled with wonder as she hears God's word to her. The household can wait for their water – she has seen the Messiah!

God is present in our world. We can meet God in our daily lives, even in the midst of the most mundane tasks. Everyday places can become opportunities for 'sacred' experiences. It is in the ordinariness of life that we least expect to encounter God, yet this is the very place where the power and presence of God can transform us.

Suggestion: Spend some time in prayerful reflection in a place that is part of your daily life such as your workplace or home, the bus, supermarket or community centre, school or college, a doctor's waiting room. Take time to reflect on the people and situations you see around you.

Pray: What is your prayer in this ordinary place?

Reflect: What have you noticed for the first time in this place?

Act: How does this experience change your attitude to the ordinary?



Read: Mark 5:25-34

Jesus restores the dignity of a person who has become invisible to everyone else.

Jesus the teacher and miracle worker attracted crowds wherever he went. On this day he is stopped in his tracks by someone touching him. We are not told her name; only what she has suffered. This woman has been made an outcast because of her condition and has been reduced to a life of poverty and despair. Called out from the crowd by Jesus, she can no longer hide. All eyes are on her as she publicly tells her story. Significantly, Jesus affirms her as a daughter of God. Her shame is lifted from her: she can finally go in peace.

Every human being is created in the image and likeness of God. No one is 'just a statistic' in God's eyes. There are many people or groups whom we exclude or have no contact with, whether unwittingly or intentionally. Often we only acknowledge them when talking about 'them'. Although we don't really know them, our judgments may be based on little more than myth, gossip or stereotypes.

Suggestion: Prayerfully spend some time in a place which speaks to you of poverty and deprivation. If possible, spend time with someone who is socially excluded or stigmatised, someone who is disadvantaged because of their social, economic or ethnic 'difference'.

Pray: What is your prayer in this place of deprivation and poverty?

Reflect: What depresses you and inspires you in this place?

Act: Can you do anything practical to deal with deprivation and poverty?



Read: Luke 9:51-56

In a conflict rooted in cultural and religious difference the disciples believe God is on their side.

The hostility between Jews and Samaritans was so 'traditional'. Their shared history of hurt had hardened into uncompromising enmity. Given this legacy, the disciples and villagers behave in totally predictable ways. Each community stands defiant in the conviction that it is 'right and good' while the other is 'wrong and bad'.

In our conflicts we can share with the disciples a 'self-righteousness' that is convinced that God is on our side. With religious sincerity we can even invoke the flames of God's judgment on our enemies. Jesus challenges us to think about the 'spirit' behind this attitude.

Suggestion: Go to a place that symbolises personal or community conflict and prayerfully hold the hurt of that brokenness before God and listen. Reflect on the broken relationships that touch your life. Consider how the hurt you have experienced or the fear of difference has created division for you. What hurt or divisions might you have had a hand in creating?

Pray: What is your prayer in this place of division and conflict?

Reflect: What has challenged you most deeply in this place?

Act: Is there something you can bring to a situation of division and conflict?



OPEN

A neon sign with the word "OPEN" in red, outlined in blue, hanging in a restaurant. The sign is rectangular with rounded corners and is illuminated. The background shows a dark interior with a table and chairs visible through a doorway.

Read: Matthew 26:6-13

Jesus is at home with a social outcast and receives a blessing from an unacceptable person.

This is a place Jesus should have avoided. For a host of religious reasons it was unlawful for a 'rabbi' to be eating at the 'unclean' table of a leper. Equally scandalous, Jesus allows a woman to anoint him with oil defying, as he often did, the rituals and codes of restriction between men and women. The woman anticipates Christ's death in a way the disciples do not.

The startling truth of the Gospels is that Jesus sits at the table of the world with all its brokenness before he sits at the table of the Church. He is often in the 'wrong' place and in the company of 'dubious' people. His example in this story suggests that by living in the false safety of avoidance we might miss events that have 'eternal' significance.

Suggestion: Consider places and people you know about but don't know. Places and people you have never thought of engaging with. It could be the local betting shop, a pub you pass every day, a housing estate or a community organisation you wouldn't dream of going into. Go to a place you would normally avoid and prayerfully be present and see what happens.

Pray: What is your prayer in this place you have been avoiding?

Reflect: What has surprised you in this place?

Act: Will you change your attitude to the people and places you avoid?



Read: Luke 23:44-46

The darkness of death fills the land and Jesus surrenders his life to God.

Despite the terrible signs of abusive power conveyed in the imagery of the crucifixion, the gospel writer wants us to know that Jesus voluntarily embraced his own death. However, this surrender of Christ's life is not a stoical acceptance of defeat but an act of profound trust in the God of life, 'Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.'

Our culture copes with the reality of death and loss through denial. We deny death because we no longer have the ability to attribute meaning to it. Where there are no eternal perspectives to shape our lives, death makes no sense. But Christ's trust in the eternal God transforms the oblivion of death itself. His resurrection proclaims that death will not have the final word.

Suggestion: Consider how the reality of loss has touched your life. It could be the end of a job, a relationship, a hope or a dream. What place could you go to and be prayerfully present to the grief and disappointment of that ending? Hold it before God. Or it could be a physical death of a loved one or a stranger, someone killed in the 'Troubles' or a recent death in the community. Go to a place that symbolises that loss and listen to the God of life.

Pray: What is your prayer in this place of loss?

Reflect: What hurts and fears have you faced in this place?

Act: Can you support those who live in a place of death?



Read: Luke 23:50-56

A friend of Jesus lays his lifeless body in the garden tomb and the world waits.

In the aftermath of Christ's death the disillusioned disciples have scattered. Their world has become empty of meaning. The promises of their Lord appear to have come to nothing but death. His friends do the only thing they can, they observe the customs of burial and on the Sabbath they rest.

Between Good Friday and Easter Sunday the biblical text is virtually silent. In the silence of that Jewish Sabbath nothing seems to happen. In the empty space there is nothing to do but wait. Some disciples waited in fear and despair, others in grief. Were some, like Joseph of Arimathea, still 'expectantly' waiting for the Kingdom of God? Holy Saturday is a symbol of an empty time and place and an invitation to prayerful anticipation.

Suggestions: Reflect on places that seem empty, situations and people that have had meaning taken away from them, places of hurt and despair. It could be waste ground, a 'peace' wall, a derelict house, a community that has lost hope, a person made numb through grief. With prayerful expectation, go and be physically present and wait to see signs of the Kingdom of God there.

Pray: What is your prayer in this empty space?

Reflect: What previously occupied this place and what might occupy it in the future?

Act: Does your life require more empty space?



Image: Jason Antony

Read: Mark 16:1-8

Three women come to the tomb to grieve the death of Jesus and instead meet him as the risen Lord.

The women arrive at the tomb expecting to anoint a corpse. Instead they meet an angel with a countenance like lightning and encounter the resurrected Christ. From a place of numbness and defeat they are given a new word of life and sent to tell the disciples that the Jesus they saw executed 'has been raised from the dead.'

The place of celebration is a place of faith and doubt. We don't expect life out of death, we don't expect hope to spring from despair and we don't expect the risen Lord to meet us. When it happens we are filled with 'fear and great joy.' Where God acts in the world we are on holy ground and all we can do is celebrate and praise and be filled with humility.

Suggestions: Identify places, people and redemptive work that invoke in you a spirit of praise and thanksgiving. It could be a faith community, an inner city youth programme, a person who serves the poor or a place that holds a salvation memory for you. Go to that place and prayerfully celebrate the sign of the risen Lord in that place.

Pray: What is your prayer in this place of hope and celebration?

Reflect: What is there to amaze and frighten in this place?

Act: What can you say or do to share your experiences in this place of celebration and hope?