

Study Guide

for the DVD

Prophet & Loss

'Prophet and Loss' is a documentary about a theatre project exploring the grief journeys of families bereaved by work-related death.

*This study guide was prepared by Rev. Peter Burnham
for the Creative Ministries Network*

Published by
CREATIVE MINISTRIES NETWORK
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Web page: www.cmn.unitingcare.org.au

Published 2011

Study Guide for the DVD 'Prophet and Loss'

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Peter Burnham asserts his moral right to be identified as the author of this work.

ISBN 978-0-9806434-8-0

Printed in Australia by Wesley College Melbourne

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The Creative Ministries Network gratefully acknowledges the funding provided by the Commission for Mission, Synod of Victoria and Tasmania, Uniting Church in Australia for making the copies of the DVD 'Prophet and Loss', and to Wesley College in Melbourne for printing this study guide.

Foreword

The Commission for Mission is pleased to provide this study guide and the DVD of the documentary film, 'Prophet and Loss'. It is a small step towards encouraging our Synod's prayerful engagement with the challenge of developing the Uniting Church's mission and ministry at work.

Few words can adequately describe the great gnawing emptiness that comes with the experience of grief. An emptiness that threatens to engulf and consume all possibility of joy and every glimpse of light. However, sometimes words mixed with other forms of media get very close. And in this we are grateful to the artists of every generation and of our own, who are sensitive enough to their own feelings and to the feelings of others that they can create experiences that speak for us and to us. Like interpreters, artists listen into and observe life. They have a way of hearing what we cannot say, then speaking to us in ways that we can understand.

And this dramatic quest of the artistic interpreter and translator continues. Here, within this DVD we are presented with something very special and very different. Real people speak and their stories are quite beautifully respected and re-presented. This is no pastiche. Through dramatisation the uniqueness of their stories is honoured yet rendered sublimely universal.

Some, if not many moments in this film will touch you deeply, as their stories become our story. Other moments will distract you as you re-connect for a little while with some distant but ever present memory of loss. Some moments will remind you of just how fragile life is and in the background sits the story of how the thoughtlessness and

carelessness of people responsible for the safety of the workplace, kills people.

I have lost several friends, family and colleagues through workplace accidents, and I appreciate the value and the integrity of the stories honoured through this DVD. To the individuals and families who honoured their loved ones and themselves by telling their stories I want to say thank you. To all the artists who brought this piece of work to life I want to say, God has blessed you. For it is indeed a blessed piece of work.

To Rev. Peter Burnham and Wesley College for their generous support for the production of this study guide, the Commission and I are profoundly grateful.

As we seek to strengthen our Synod's commitment to this new arena of mission, the Commission understands the vital role of congregations and congregational ministers. Your feedback on this study and especially your thoughts on how the Commission may support you engage with the world of work are invited. Please contact Rev. John Bottomley, who is consultant to this project, with your feedback and suggestions. John may be contacted at Creative Ministries Network, (03) 9827 8322, P. O. Box 362, St. Kilda 3182, or email, john.bottomley@cmn.unitingcare.org.au



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Some background notes on work-related death, grief and loss

On work-related death

Perhaps you know the saying 'hard work never killed anyone'. This belief hides a disturbing fact. According to an ACTU report (2004), each year around 2,000 Australians die from work-related traumatic incidents, industrial cancers such as asbestosis and mesothelioma, and occupational diseases such as work-stress related heart disease and suicide. This is more than die on our roads.

Paid work has also been causally linked to mental illness, long-term physical disability, discrimination, and a range of inequalities involving pay, promotion, and educational opportunity. Yet it seems the harm and injustices resulting from paid work can be hidden behind the promise that hard work is the means to a successful life. Perhaps it is time that we in the church thought more deeply about where we place our trust for purposeful and fruitful lives.

On grief and loss

Kenneth Mitchell and Herbert Anderson in *All Our Losses, All Our Grievs* (1983) provide one of the best theological texts on loss and bereavement. They stress the importance of viewing grief from a new perspective. They state that grief is not a disease. 'Grief is a part of life in a way that measles are not; to be wounded is not to be sick.' A prevalent view that grief is to be overcome, with its implicit notion of cure, is rejected. As an essential component of life, grief is "lived through," neither overcome nor cured.

In a lot of recent literature on grief (Rando 1993) grief is interpreted as a process.

Grief is experienced in four major ways: psychologically (through affects, cognitions, perceptions, attitudes, philosophy/spirituality), behaviourally (through personal action, conduct, or demeanour), socially (through reactions to and interactions with others), and physically (through bodily symptoms and physical health).

Grief is a continuing development. It is not a static state; rather it involves many changes over time.

Grief is a natural, expectable reaction. The absence of grief when warranted by the factors circumscribing the loss is abnormal and indicative of pathology.

Grief is a reaction to all types of loss, not just death. Death is but one example of loss, albeit the most dramatic one.

Grief is dependent upon the individual's unique perception of loss. It is not necessary for the loss to be socially recognized or validated by others for the individual to grieve, although it is most helpful when this can occur.

A Note About Mourning

Traditionally, mourning has been defined as the cultural and/or public display of grief through one's behaviours.

In more recent pastoral care literature, mourning refers to the conscious and unconscious processes and courses of action that focus on three areas.

First, mourning is the transforming of the psychosocial ties binding the mourner to their loved one.

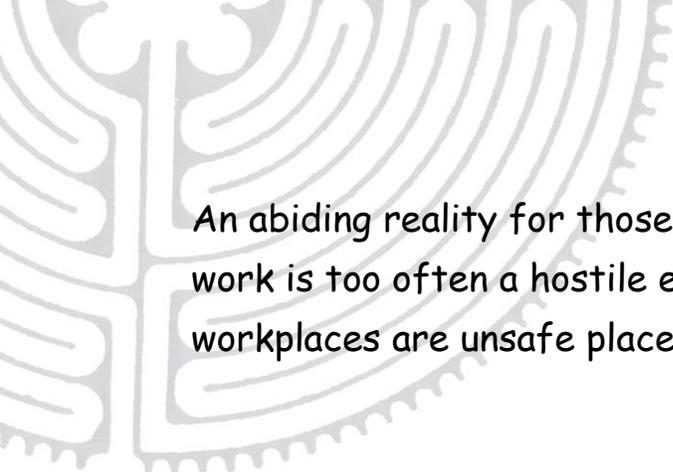
Second, the mourning processes help the survivor accept the physical loss of their loved one while discovering their continuing bond with the person who died.

Third, mourning helps the mourner to live in a healthy way in the new world with a new sense of self that contains the loss of the deceased and the gain of a larger spiritual reality.

Myths and Realities of Mourning

Some myths about mourning include the following:

- Grief and mourning decline in a steadily decreasing fashion over time.
- All losses prompt the same type of mourning.
- Bereaved individuals need only express their feelings in order to resolve their mourning.
- To be healthy after the death of a loved one, the mourner must put that person out of their mind.
- Grief will affect the mourner psychologically but will not interfere in other ways.
- Intensity and length of mourning are a testimony to love for the deceased.
- When one mourns a death, one mourns only the loss of that person and nothing else.
- Losing someone to a sudden, unexpected death is the same as losing someone to an anticipated death.
- Mourning is over in a year.



An abiding reality for those mourning a work-related death is that work is too often a hostile environment for their grief. Many workplaces are unsafe places for expressions of sadness and loss.

Viewing the DVD - 'Prophet and Loss':

The DVD uses the image of the labyrinth as a metaphor for the process of grieving and mourning, and is divided into five sections. The drama performance explores the text of Isaiah and the grief of three families who lost loved ones due to work-place accidents. The drama performance is incorporated throughout the sections of the labyrinth.

The sections are:

The Edge of the Labyrinth

Walking the Labyrinth

The Centre of the Labyrinth

Constructing the Labyrinth

And This is How I am Now

The viewing of the DVD could take place in one session or be divided into a number of sessions: for example I would suggest three study sessions of about one and a half hours each. Take 10-15 minutes to view a portion of the DVD, then a further 15 minutes to reflect on the Bible text using the method of lectio divina described at the end of this guide. Give half an hour to discuss the issues you identify as important, then use a further 20 minutes to integrate your biblical

reflection with the discussion. Make sure you leave adequate time for the group's prayer. So it could be a study over three meetings.

Check out quietly over tea or coffee that group members who may have been touched by the DVD and the group's sharing are safe to travel after the meeting. Discretely ask any who may need to debrief individually to speak with the group leaders before leaving.



Session 1: 'The Edge of the Labyrinth' and 'Walking the Labyrinth'

Step 1

Read the background material and watch the sections of the DVD 'The Edge of the Labyrinth' and 'Walking the Labyrinth.' As you watch the DVD try to monitor your own reactions to the narratives of work-related grief and the way the drama performance works with the material.

Step 2 Reflect on the Biblical text

"... it will be burned again like an oak whose stump remains standing when it is felled." The holy seed is its stump.' Isaiah 6:13b

"But those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint." Isaiah 40:31

Use the method of 'Lectio Divina' to guide your reflection.

Step 3 Issues for Discussion: You may wish to only deal with a few of these questions, depending on time.

- Share briefly with members of the group some of your feelings/reactions to viewing this part of the DVD.
- Why was the book of Isaiah chosen to bring together the text and contemporary narratives of work-related deaths?

- One of the performers says that 'grief gets repressed in our society.' Is this your experience of grief? If so, what made it difficult for you?
- Discuss what you see as being the difference between work-related deaths and other types of death. For example, does sudden unanticipated death have a greater impact upon us than anticipated death? Can you identify other kinds of death?
- A number of statements were made by the families of the deceased such as: 'It felt like we died the day he died.' And 'I still set a place for him at the table.' In the process of mourning where do you think these parents are? If you were to support them through this experience what would you do next?
- When Brenda and Ian heard of the death of their son, Brenda's reaction was one of 'disbelief' and even though the house subsequently was filled with people she 'wanted to be alone.' What are some of the ways we can care for people at this point of their grief?
- Why do you think that the Labyrinth was a good metaphor to use on the journey of grief?
- One of the performers says about his son, that 'he was thirty this year', and then he changes it to, 'he was going to be thirty this year.' This points out for us the importance of days of remembrance which cluster around birthdays, anniversaries, Christmas and so on. How can we support those who are mourning through these times?
- Ryan's father speaks about 'a black hole'. What helps him get out of the 'black hole'?
- Helen Morse, one of the performers in the drama, speaks about her experience of being at the centre of the labyrinth. 'What you

learn is loss is something you learn to travel with.' What do you think about that statement?

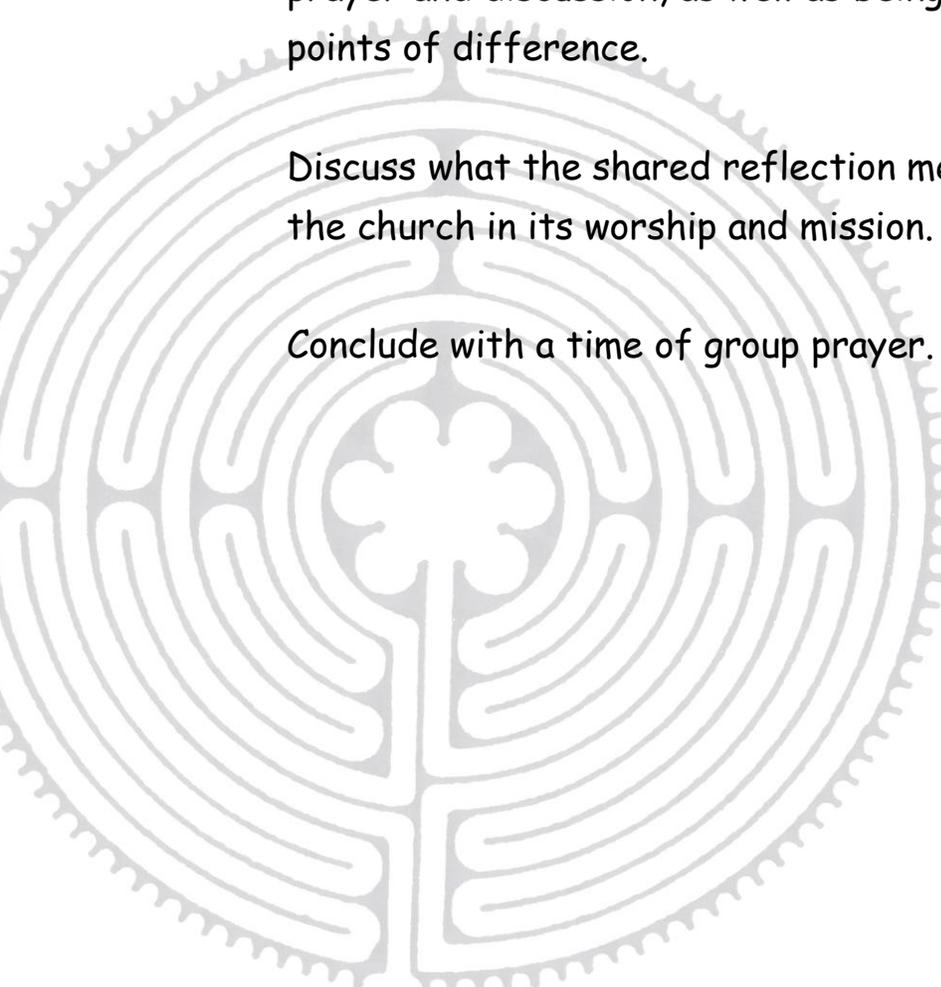
- In supporting those who have lost a loved one in work-related accidents, Bette Philips talks about the importance of listening to the story people tell us. In what ways does your congregation 'listen' to the stories of those who are hurting in your community?

Step 4 Integration

Recall your prayer from the time of Lectio Divina, and consider how *God's* presence speaks into your study group's faith sharing conversation. Pay attention to points of congruence between prayer and discussion, as well as being aware when there are points of difference.

Discuss what the shared reflection means for each person and the church in its worship and mission.

Conclude with a time of group prayer.



Session Two: 'The Centre of the Labyrinth' and 'Constructing the Labyrinth'

Step 1

In this session view the next two sections of the DVD. 'The Centre of the Labyrinth' and 'Constructing the Labyrinth.'

Again you may wish to only deal with questions that are pertinent to your situation.

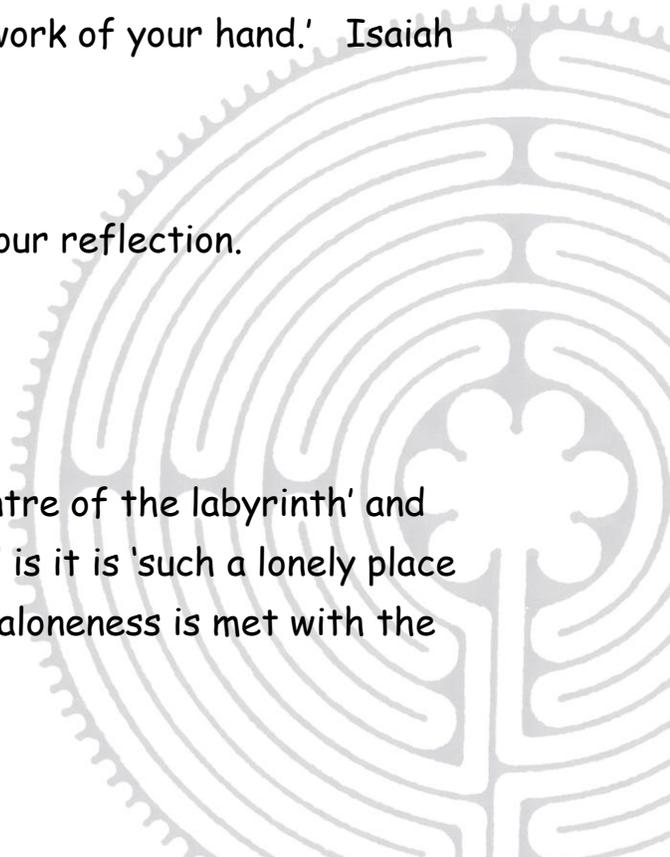
Step 2 Reflect on the Biblical text

'We all fade like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away. There is no one who calls on your name, or attempts to take hold of you; for you have hidden your face from us, and have delivered us into the hand of our iniquity. Yet, O LORD, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand.' Isaiah 64: 6b-8

Use the method of 'Lectio Divina' to guide your reflection.

Step 3 Points for Discussion

- The grief process has arrived at the 'centre of the labyrinth' and the predominant feeling being expressed is it is 'such a lonely place to be.' This experience of loneliness and aloneness is met with the



invitation to be involved in an art therapy group. What were some of the reactions that people had to this invitation, and what did they learn from the art therapy sessions?

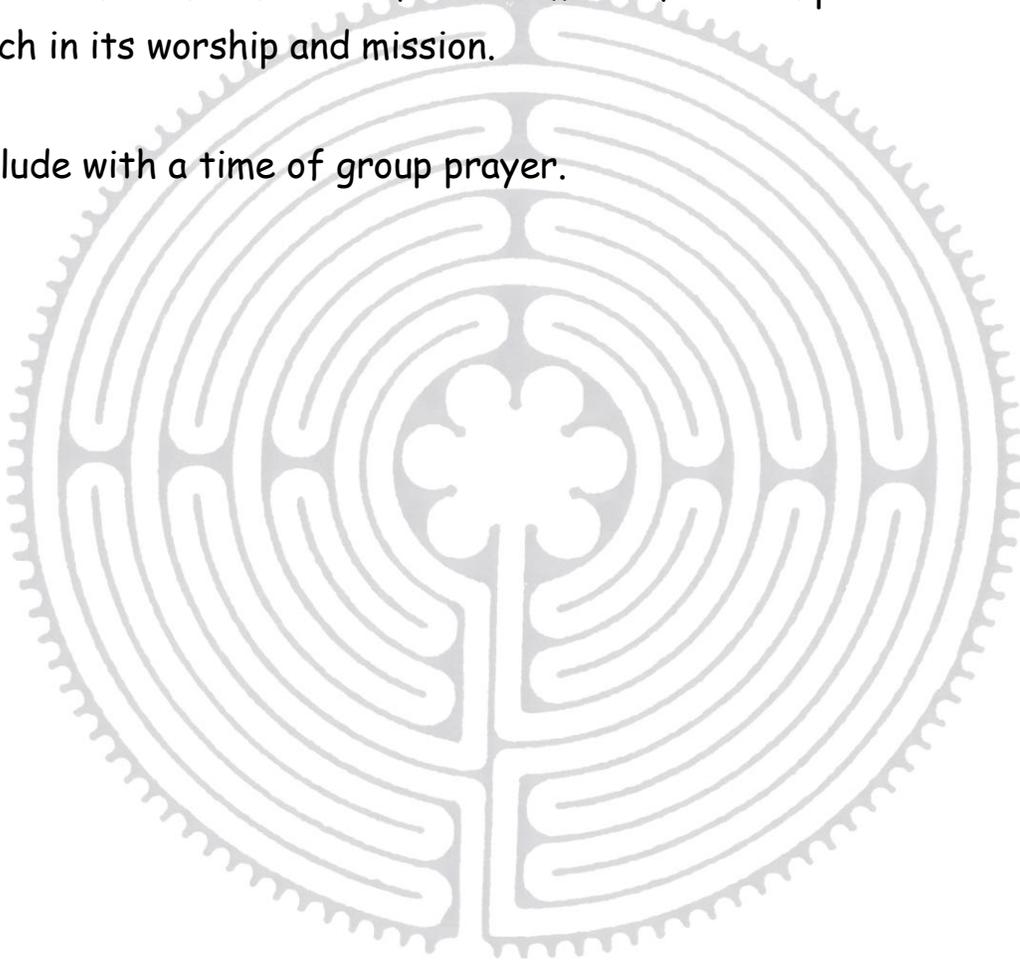
- Brenda chose not to be part of the art therapy group, she says that she had to 'be strong' otherwise other members of the family would fall apart. Do you think that being strong stopped her from dealing with her own grief?
- What was the symbolism behind painting the gumboot?
- Ian laments the fine imposed on the company where his son was killed. Do you think that is justice? Does the plea for justice for work-related injustice seem to be silenced today?
- Deborah (the singer) suggested that the music in the drama performance provided 'a container for the spiritual atmosphere' that was vital for the performance, for it integrated the contemporary and ancient worlds' yearning for justice when injustice seemed to reign. Did you think that the music helped in creating that atmosphere?
- Professor Howard Wallace makes the point that the role of lament is proclaiming the way God feels about our suffering. Do you think that lamenting is a lost experience in Christianity? The book of Lamentations in the Hebrew Scriptures encourages completeness in the expression of grief, the confession of sin and the instilling of hope. Read chapter 3:1-18 of Lamentations which expresses a figurative description of suffering and an affirmation that God will answer their plea. Is this the experience of those in the DVD?

Step 4 Integration

Recall your prayer from the time of Lectio Divina, and consider how God's presence speaks into your study group's faith sharing conversation. Pay attention to points of congruence between prayer and discussion, as well as being aware when there are points of difference.

Discuss what the shared reflection means for each person and the church in its worship and mission.

Conclude with a time of group prayer.



Session Three: 'This is How I am Now'

Step 1

View the final section of the DVD and discuss how the DVD has affected you thus far. What emotions have you experienced? What new understandings of the grief and mourning process have you become aware of? What new understanding of the harm work causes people have you become aware of?

Step 2 Reflect on the Biblical text

'The spirit of the Lord *GOD* is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn; to provide for those who mourn in Zion-to give them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit. They will be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the LORD, to display his glory.' Isaiah 61:1-3

Use the method of 'Lectio Divina' to guide your reflection.

Step 3 Points for discussion

- Brenda makes the point, 'Why did I have a child for him to be taken?' Grief helps an individual recognize the loss and prepare for the processes of mourning. Without the experiences and learning provided by acute grief, mourning cannot take place. Grief is actually the beginning part of mourning. Is Brenda still in the place of acute grief?
- Following on from the previous question, Brenda is still not certain as to whether she can dispose of her son's belongings. She says she is getting closer and various people give her conflicting advice. In a grief situation should we listen to other people's advice?
- The importance of 'being' with a person on their journey of grief is emphasized. The pastoral care that trusted people can give over a period of time cannot be underestimated. What strategies does your congregation have in place to provide this on-going care for people who are bereaved?
- The mother of Angela and Stuart (who both committed suicide) says that even 7 years on from those events she still grieves. Ian says of the death of his son that he will 'never see a light at the end of the tunnel' and he is 4 years down the track. This indicates that profound grief changes your life forever. Statements like, 'time heals all wounds' are not very helpful. Perhaps a way forward is to reconnect with your loved one through memories, in which case you have a new relationship with the deceased. What does the communion of saints mean in this context? What do you

think? Does 'time heal all wounds'? How does being open to the Spirit's comfort shape our memories of a loved one and help us find healing and peace of heart?

- Share with the members of the group 2 or 3 new understandings that you have come to about work, grief and mourning through watching this DVD.

Step 4 Integration

Recall your prayer from the time of Lectio Divina, and consider how God's presence speaks into your study group's faith sharing conversation. Pay attention to points of congruence between prayer and discussion, as well as being aware when there are points of difference.

Discuss what the shared reflection means for each person and the church in its worship and mission.

Conclude with a time of group prayer.



An introduction to lectio divina ("Divine Reading")

Sit quietly with closed eyes, and place yourself in the loving presence of Jesus.

LECTIO ("reading"):

Read the passage attentively, reverently, slowly. Depending on what happens you might read the passage several times. Pay attention to a word or phrase that sticks out to you or grasps your attention during this moment.

MEDITATIO ("meditation"):

Ponder and ruminate on the phrase or word you have focused upon. Ask yourself, "What does this Word mean for my life?"

ORATIO ("prayer"):

This is prayer of the heart. Allow the word that you have taken in, and on which you are pondering, touch your deepest self. Reflect on what God is saying to touch and change you.

CONTEMPLATIO ("contemplation"):

This stage is God's response to us. God's gaze purifies our hearts, illumines our eyes to see with the eyes of Jesus, and teaches us compassion for our neighbour. Allow the Holy Spirit to shape you into the form of the Son.

This moment is characterized by a simple, loving focus on God. Your heart speaks to God through your contemplation of God. You may wish to write your prayer to God.