

The Land of Walking Trees

MEDITATIONS FOR
THE SERIOUSLY ILL

MICHAEL HANSEN SJ

*The human spirit is the lamp of the Lord,
searching every innermost part.*

Proverbs 20:27



John Garratt Publishing

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My thanks to Fr Brendan Kelly SJ
for his insights and help in preparing
the manuscript.

SAMPLE

CONTENTS

Dedication

Introduction 1

Prologue 11

Barrenness 13

Poverty 19

Analysis 25

Power 31

Anger 37

Grief 44

Illness 50

Words 56

Relapse 62

Chains 68

Anxiety 73

Despair 79

Panic 85

Death 91

Time	97
Prayer	103
Compassion	108
Surprise	116
Giving	122
Mystery	128
Being	134
Forgiveness	140
Liberation	147
Ordinariness	155
Healing	161
Epilogue	167
References	168

SAMPLE

INTRODUCTION

JESUS CAME TO BETHSAIDA. Some people brought a blind man to him and begged him to touch him. He took the blind man by the hand and led him out of the village; and when he had put saliva on his eyes and laid hands on him, he asked him, 'Can you see anything?' And the man looked up and said, 'I can see people, but they look like trees, walking.' Then Jesus laid his hands on his eyes again; and he looked intently and his sight was restored, and he saw everything clearly.

Mark 8:22-25

The land of walking trees

Why is the blind man not immediately healed? Did Jesus fail? Or does this unusual story point to something deeper about healing? After the first touch by Jesus, the blind man finds himself in a half-way place. Neither fully blind nor fully healed, he is living in a land of walking trees. This little book is for those of us who find ourselves half-alive in such a half-way place. We have been stuck here for a long, hard time and we want to move.

How did we get here? Fifteen years of chronic illness, chronic fatigue syndrome, brought me to this half-way place. Perhaps a major life adjusting experience has brought you to this place too – a heart operation, a broken marriage, a death in your family, psychological illness, betrayal, disability, or that mysterious constellation of

feelings and desires that some call the mid-life crisis. For others it can simply be an inner impelling voice that says 'enough!' about our lifestyle and relationships, a true voice that demands a radical change in us. The experiences that brought us to our personal 'land of walking trees' will differ but the feelings and desires we have in this place are surprisingly similar.

Each of us has felt the rug pulled from under our feet. Each of us has been dismayed at the disappearance of our old supports and the unfairness of being thrown into an alien landscape. Like the blind man we are taken out of our familiar surroundings. Feelings of anxiety and fear, of humiliation and of loneliness are no stranger to us. We live, waiting, stripped bare in the land of walking trees.

Yet, paradoxically it is here, and nowhere else, that we will be offered life, strength, wisdom and some very good company.

'Is this book for me?' you ask. If you recognise your own experience below, then this book may support you.

Exile – the birth of inner journey

For me it all began with suffering, alienation and a sense of profound exile. Suffering creates its own space. The walls close in. Suffering can alienate us. Feeling alienated is one of the hardest things we have to live with. We become the 'sick' person, the 'one who is not coping' and modern society alienates us. We are no longer 'normal'. Life-changing experiences or chronic illness exile us. We are vulnerable in ways we never expected. Try as we might, we cannot go back to where we were before.

We become keenly aware that our own journey, our unique and precious story, has two sides to it: the outer journey of the physical course of the illness or the life changing event, and the inner journey of the spirit. This inner journey takes us into new territory. It is a dark birth, but a birth none the less. It is a deeply unsettling experience. We live it daily and it changes us and those who are close to us.

Paralysis – the father of movement

The reality of the outer journey is inescapable. After many struggles and some little acceptance we find ourselves in a place of no return. It feels like we are stuck and likely to be stuck forever. Yet here the spirit of the inner journey addresses us. We can ignore it and remain paralysed, fight it and lose, or look for a companion and choose to walk it.

The outer journey just happens; the inner journey invites choice, faith and movement. Experience shows us that, even though our feelings often demand it, there is no need to run or to push our way forward. The only way forward for us is to walk, be gentle with ourselves and rest a lot. Our heart and its lover, Jesus, are well able to chart their way. We can trust them both.

Suffering – the mother of desires

There is a deep connection between creativity and suffering. Survival provokes fertility. We feel a great need for touch, affection, intimacy. Why? Because we seek aliveness in the deadness. Suffering provokes this desire for

greater life. Amid the fractured world of our suffering there is a clearing where this 'desiring for life' seeds itself. It is a small place, but in it we do have room to dream, play and create.

For us, death and loss in its many forms are central. We experience the death of the old person, loss of masks, loss of face, loss of identity and loss of our place in the world. To heal, we need to find new meaning in our life. Wholeness always seeks a new pattern – and it is a powerful drive in us when we feel shattered.

In time we learn that we have to bud from our oldest and deepest parts. An old branches will not take. Like the aftermath of a bush fire, the gum tree buds from the trunk – there is nothing else. We have lost our branches and how dearly we yearn for fruit or flowers in our life! But intuitively we know that we have to grow from trunk and root again. These we can count on, for no suffering can destroy our great and loveable, true essential self. New branches do slowly grow back but they grow in a new pattern because our drive for wholeness takes us on a search for new relationships – ones to hold the meaning of our life now.

Surrender – the brother of healing

One of the shaping truths of our journey is that there is very little control here. When we are ill or hurt we instinctively feel we have lost our old control and we feel its loss keenly. We hunger for control again. In desperation our heart cries out, 'My God, what can I do to make my life better!'

The less control we feel, the more we struggle to find it again, and in doing so, we miss the gift that we have in our powerlessness. This is the gift of intimacy – for Jesus is now more deeply present to us than ever before. This is true whether we bring ourselves to Jesus, or are carried to him by friends or whether he comes directly to us.

Consider the story of the paralytic in Mark's gospel (Mark 2:1-12). His four friends carry him to Jesus. They have to break in through the roof to lower him into Jesus' presence. This 'breaking in' is a startling metaphor for our journey towards vulnerability and intimacy. It is what we must do for ourselves – break through our old memories, fears and anxieties, through old self-images and expectations and lower ourselves through the roof.

What happened after the man was lowered through the roof? Surprisingly Jesus forgives him. He mends the relationship then he heals him again – this time physically. The thing to focus on here is not so much the two kinds of healing but the reality that the man is now in relationship with Jesus and what happens after that is totally out of his friends' hands. As they do for their friend, all we can do is lower ourselves through the roof and leave ourselves in Jesus' presence. Then comes the scary part for us all. At this point we have to let go the ropes.

Vulnerability – the sister of intimacy

Consider this: When vulnerability meets vulnerability you get intimacy. But when vulnerability meets power you get alienation. We often experience this in our relationships.

Remember how it feels when a well-meaning friend says: 'You poor thing – how can I help?' or 'You have been ill so long I hope you soon get back to your usual self.' We just feel further apart from them. This is also true when we compare ourselves with others we suppose to be 'powerful' and 'strong.' We will always feel alienated. Contrast this with how we feel when a friend shares his or her vulnerability with us and we share ours. Intimacy deepens between us.

If this is true in our human relationships then it is true in our relationship with Jesus. If we only meet Jesus in our vulnerability as the powerful God then we will feel alienated. If we meet Jesus in his vulnerability with our vulnerability then we will experience a deep intimacy. This is where he most desires to meet us. But we will have to take the risk of meeting Jesus without any masks – either on him or us. Sooner or later, we are brought before Jesus wounded and powerless on his cross. Fear rises up in us because, strangely, many of us feel Jesus is going to ask us to suffer more! Or to do more! Or to 'offer up' our suffering up to him. Nothing could be more grotesque – Jesus the torturer has no place in our lives.

Peter, no stranger to our journey, says, 'unload all your worries onto him, since he is looking after you' and 'by his wounds we are healed.' (1 Peter 5:6; 2:24) Note that we are healed by his wounds not his power. Jesus refused to heal himself when tempted in the desert and emptied himself of his divinity. Now risen, he comes to us with the wounds still showing in his side and hands and feet and face. Thomas would only recognise Jesus in his wounds –

a smart man. The resulting touching of each other's wounds is the healing braille that we learn on this journey.

Healing – the child of faith

Where there is no faith, Jesus cannot heal. Each healing story is an invitation to faith. They have an outer and an inner story to tell. The action of the healing miracle always points to a deeper reality. It is wise to note that expecting signs and miracles often renders Jesus impotent. So what is this deeper reality?

It is that Jesus is here now. He offers life in the face of illness, want, brokenness, fragility and even death. Our dignity, uniqueness and lovableness do not depend on our performance or our limitation. Identity is not rooted in 'doing' but in 'who we are.' This much Jesus will teach us again and again. The growth of this living relationship will be different for each of us because it will be a unique and unconditionally loving match with the person we truly are, in fact and in the heart of God.

Jesus – our friend for life

Those of us who have suffered for a long time will often feel that God has abandoned us. In hearing that from a fellow traveller, I used to jump in and say, 'Oh, that is not true.' But now I say, 'If you think your God has abandoned you — then he probably has! We need to make room for the God who never abandoned us.' This journey of ours will radically change our image of God. When we meet this new God we will begin to experience self-acceptance and healing, thanksgiving and offering, and the

freedom to own the whole of our life journey for the first time.

The subheadings in this introduction point to the importance of naming, befriending, and nurturing relationships in this journey; the relationships of self to feelings, of self to others and of self to God. If the feelings and movements above resonate with your experience then I invite you to relax into the mysterious reality of where you are now and talk to Jesus as a friend. Have you ever noticed how much of Jesus' ministry happens in the context of a conversation? In the end, it is the relationship with Jesus that heaves you out of the darkness.

This is cause for true hope – the kind that stands up in the face of life's experience to the contrary. In every sense, the end of the blind man's story will be endings in our story. Imagine the blind man's conversation is yours. You have just told Jesus you are now in a land of walking trees. How does he feel for you when you tell him this? Listen. Now feel him touching your eyes. His hands are warm and gentle. It is dark. As he removes his hands the world around you sharpens. You can see the face of Jesus and the world around you more clearly and distinctly. It is light. A friend is beginning to heal you.

How to use this book

All the scripture texts in this book have been taken from the gospel of Luke, a doctor by profession. He arranged his gospel in such a way that Jesus appears to take one long journey to Jerusalem, from birth to death to resurrection. It is a pilgrim's gospel. It invites us into the life

story of Jesus and the life stories of his disciples. We have much in common with them – all of us find ourselves on a journey that we never expected, and one that we were never prepared for.

This book is intended to be dipped into rather than to be read cover to cover. The aim of the contemplations is to bring you into relationship with God through the simple act of conversation. All the contemplations use the gospel text in a prayer method taught by St Ignatius Loyola called Imaginative Contemplation.

In your prayer choose the image of God that you feel most comfortable with. Throughout this book I speak of the Lord, but you could equally pray to the Spirit, God the Father, God the Son, or with any other image of God. With this in mind, here are three ways to use this book.

1. The first way is to choose one of the contemplations. Read it slowly. Be aware of any phrase or image that resonates with your own experience. Stop at the words or image that move you. This is where the spirit is prompting you. Do not worry about the rest. Put the book down and ask the Lord to come into your presence. Then sit with the image or the words and converse with Jesus.

2. The second way is to choose a contemplation you find yourself returning to over time. Read the scripture text. Put the book down and use all of your senses to imagine the scene in the text. Imagine the place, the setting, the details of the scene. Imagine the people, what they look like, what they are doing. Hear the words spoken. Place yourself in the scene. Take the place of the person you

most identify with. Feel, taste, see, hear and touch what that person experiences. Meet the Lord in the scene. Let your feelings, experience and imagination lead you. Listen to the Lord. Imagine his response. Share your feelings.

3. The third way is to choose a contemplation that is closest to your own experience now. Take a section and use it as a bridge to recapture your own experience. Go back in your imagination to the strongest memory of that experience. Rerun that experience, but, and this is very important, do it standing to one side as an observer. You do not want to relive it as an actor because your feelings will simply lock you emotionally back into past suffering. Have the Lord join you as an observer. Imagine the Lord's response to the events in the scene. Talk to him. Tell him how you really feel. Ask him for what you desire now.

Finish each contemplation with a short prayer of thanks.

Be assured, that on your journey, little by little you will be strengthened in your inner being with power through the Father's spirit. Christ will dwell in your heart through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love (Eph3:14-21).

PROLOGUE

FOR THIS REASON I BOW MY KNEES before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name.

I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love.

I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we could ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations forever and ever. Amen.

Ephesians 3:14-21

Barrenness

· Luke 1:36-37

THE ANGEL GABRIEL SAID TO MARY, 'And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God.'

SAMPLE

SAID TO BE BARREN

Nothing will be impossible with God



The Pilgrim

Lord, I remember vividly the day the doctor told me I had a chronic illness. My feelings were like chained logs suddenly let free. Relief bolted first. I was not going crazy. It was not in my mind. I had a real disease and it had a name. Elation followed relief. All the confusion, the deep down anxiety, the years of rushing on were over. I had a disease. I told the doctor it was wonderful news.

Then came the grieving, the dark dreams, the sense of loss and emptiness. This illness was not going to be over in a few days, or next week, or even next year. I was not going to be able to take a little break and return to normal life. What was I to do? What would my friends think? How would I cope?

As the disease took hold of me I found even the smallest things were beyond me. Then, one night, panic paid a noisy visit and sent all my other feelings running for cover. It stayed for weeks. It paralysed me. Finally, having had its way, panic left me in the hands of barrenness.

Lord, I feel so useless and empty. Is there anything

more useless than one who is chronically ill? I am unproductive. I am unfruitful. I am barren of energy, action, movement – even the will to see things differently. What is left when a disease takes so much from one? I cannot call myself a provider, a helper, or a worker. It is so hard to drop the labels. I cannot call myself a nurturer, a listener or a supporter. I do not have the energy. What can I call myself?

I am confused, Lord. All the roles in my family have changed. Yet I do not want to change and neither do they. I am a husk, an empty thing, a barren life. Lord, I pray for acceptance. I am chronically ill and I can change nothing. This is impossible. I want to be otherwise. Help me accept this.

The Lord

Why should I? Nothing will be impossible with God. The Lord God created life from emptiness. What makes you think our Creator would abandon you now? Know this: I am the God of the living not the dead. I am the Lord of life. I have walked the same path of helplessness. In Gethsemane I cried out in panic. On a cross I died helpless and powerless. I know your panic and your grief. I too was stripped of everything. My life was a seed that had to die. So is yours.

I created you. In you is the seed of life and fruitfulness. Who told you that such life rested in your ability to perform? Who told you your fruitfulness came from being a provider, a helper, a listener or any other label you cling to so hard?

I love you. You are much more than any of these labels. Drop them. Your dignity is always within you. Drop them and relish what is left – yourself.

In the end you are fragile, weak, confused, but not useless. I did not create you barren. As you let go of the labels, you will begin to come into the true fruitfulness of your being. I will grace your life a hundredfold. Our Creator is nothing but extravagant. He is a God of surprises and you are already pregnant with new life. Your illness will give birth to many new possibilities. Nothing will be impossible with God.

I promise you this much. I will be with you for the

term. I will breathe with you. I will rub your back during the pain of giving birth. I will celebrate when you hold the fragile, new-born child. I will be gladdened as you draw this part of yourself close to your heart.

Rejoice! You who people call barren are with child.

SAMPLE

Prayer

Lord help me to let go of all the labels in my life. I cannot be the performer I was before. I cannot be the provider, the worker, the helper I was before. You are leading me to a new freedom. Help me to cherish this freedom, a freedom so painfully won.

Thank you for the new possibilities of my life. I do not know what I shall give birth to. I do know I have a new life growing within me. Help me to be patient. Help me to let go of the past and rest peacefully in the present.

I cannot offer you anything other than my presence and my prayer. Do not abandon me now. I know you will not do so, but in the darkest times I need you to remind me of your love.

I do not know how I will be tomorrow or next week. I cannot plan for the future, but I can live fully now and by your grace keep hoping. I can be certain that this illness is revealing the true wonder of my being.

I am afraid of dying within myself and yet I ponder what shall be born anew. Nothing will be impossible with you. Tell me again, Lord, that I am not barren. Tell me again.