

JOYCE HUGGETT

*A personal selection of prayers
new and old*

Embracing
GOD'S WORLD

Prayers for the yearning heart



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INTRODUCTION

*Compassionate caring is the acid test of the authentic Christ-following life... the Christlike person formed gradually by the Spirit will be characterised by an ever-growing responsiveness and sensitivity to the pain of others... Compassion, in the way of Jesus, places our lives beside those in turmoil, seeks understanding of their anguish and labours with them for the sake of their greater wholeness.*¹

Over the years, those far-reaching claims have been woven into the very fibre of my being. The process began in a life-changing way shortly after the publication of my book *Listening to God*. That book describes how I found myself being drawn into experiences of prayer that I had not previously explored—namely, contemplative prayer and charismatic prayer. To mark the publication of the book, my local radio station, BBC Radio Nottingham, broadcast an interview with me during which Jeremy, the interviewer, invited me to tell listeners a little more of my story. Jeremy was obviously intrigued so, when the interview was over, as we sat chatting over a cup of coffee, he asked his most dynamic question of the morning: ‘Joyce! I’m interested that there’s no reference to social justice in *Listening to God*. Yet surely, prayer and social justice go together? Maybe that will be the subject of your next book?’

The subject of my next book was not social justice, though it was about compassion for others. Several years were to elapse before I was to write with conviction: ‘The closer we come to the compassionate Christ, the more we will catch his compassion for his world—particularly the world of the poor and the marginalized.’ Several more years passed before I heard and responded to God’s call to leave the comparative comfort of my familiar small corner of the world and consent to being catapulted into the great unknown of living and working among Christian overseas workers.

One of the ways in which God jolted me out of my com-

placency into an awareness that he wanted to send me to far-flung corners of the world was through a meditation popularized by St Ignatius of Loyola. In this meditation, we are invited to step back in time to the pre-Christian era—those days before the birth of Christ when the voice of God seemed strangely silent. We are invited, too, to imagine ourselves sitting in the heavenly places with the Holy Trinity: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. As the three members of the Holy Trinity look down on a world hurtling to destruction, we gaze at the world also. As I recorded in my journal after I had embarked on this meditation:

I found it awesome to sit with the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit to take a peep at today's world. Tanzania, where I once encountered children begging for pencils so that they could attend school. Kenya, where the standard of living is comparatively high and yet pathetically low compared to the lifestyle we take for granted in the West. Poland, where Christians still struggle to survive. Eastern Europe, where thousands are turning to Christ but where most people live below the poverty line. The town where I live, where good, generous people live alongside drunkards, those who overeat, those who exploit girls from the east as well as the west, those who are greedy for gain.

As now, so then. The Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit watched the world hurtle to disaster, and the Holy Trinity did not remain unmoved. The moment had clearly come to put 'Operation Rescue' into motion. So the angel Gabriel was sent to the little town of Nazareth to inform Mary that she was to become the mother of the Messiah. Mary, a woman dear to God's heart, 'blessed among women', not because she could boast rank or reputation but because she was as soft clay in the Creator's hands. Mary, whose heart had already been turned to her Saviour and who, by her ready 'yes' and by God's grace, made possible the impossible. Mary, who, now pregnant with Christ, carried the Saviour of the world wherever she went—to family and friends, to the village well or the bazaar on the hillside.

As I pondered these mysteries, God seemed to read my struggles and speak into them. I wanted to be like Mary, ready to say ‘yes’ to whatever God would ask of me. The week before, I had rededicated my life to God and his service. But to be like Mary! Was such readiness possible? My mind focused only on those treasures I might be asked to renounce: family, friends, the familiarity of home, country and culture.

‘Nothing is impossible with me,’ God implored. ‘You don’t have to renounce anything, but rather receive Someone. The Holy Spirit will fill you just as he overshadowed Mary. Remember that Mary was not asked to renounce anything but rather to receive an incredible gift—the privilege of becoming the mother of the Messiah.’

‘Mary was not asked to renounce anything but to receive an incredible gift. God longs to impregnate us with his divine energy and power,’ I wrote in my journal. I was on a five-week retreat at the time. By the end of that retreat, I had indeed been overshadowed afresh by God’s life-changing Spirit. He had injected into me a passion for the world that was new to me, even though it was but a pale reflection of the Holy Trinity’s passion for the universe and its people.

From that moment onwards, embracing God’s world became a passion. That is why, when I first collated the prayers that appear in this book, I chose *Embracing God’s World* as the title. The title was inspired by a small booklet entitled *Embrace the World* that I had stumbled on while I was on another retreat in Singapore. The booklet contains sayings penned by a woman of God whose passion for the world prompted her to write prayers like this:

O Jesus,
You are my life,
my Beloved,
my all.
I offer you my life,
I give you my heart,
I wish what you wish,
nothing but your holy will.²

The booklet also breathed out exhortations and reflections like these: ‘Courage! How many persons will owe their lives to your sacrifices?’³ ‘Remember, all your strength comes from God.’⁴ ‘O! How beautiful is the prayer of a person who in silence listens to God’s voice.’⁵ ‘Only in solitude and silence can God’s voice be heard in our hearts.’⁶

For many years, I used that booklet daily. When I was weary, the exhortations encouraged me in the sense that they poured courage into me. When I found myself drawn into the still, focused place of prayer, the reflections brought a sense of harmony and peace—God’s *shalom*.

The booklet reminds me of one of the places where I used to pray on the retreat in Singapore. In the cottage where I stayed, one of the rooms had been converted into a chapel. I would kneel or lie prostrate on the floor of that chapel and gaze at the map of the world that covered the wall opposite me. A picture of Mary adoring the Christ-child nestled in the corner of the map while, over Cyprus, where I lived at that time, hung an illuminated circle on which was inscribed God’s promise: ‘I shall put my Spirit in you.’ The picture and the promise reminded me of some of the ways God had persuaded me to embrace his world.

‘Do share some of your own prayers,’ the editor of the first edition of this book insisted when I agreed to collate the prayers that fill the pages of *Embracing God’s World*. At first I resisted this request. For me, prayer is intensely personal. Much of it is conducted in silence; most of it is wordless, so I feared there would be little to quote. When I do write prayers, I write them for God, not for publication. It never occurred to me that anyone would want to publish them. My prayers that appear in this book, therefore—prayers that can be identified by the initials LJH—are not polished poetry or prose but words that my pen has whispered to God. Some were written on the retreats I have mentioned, others during equally life-changing moments of my prayer pilgrimage. I share them for one reason only—because there are times in my life when I am stuck for words to pray or when the stream of my own

spontaneous wordless prayer dries up or when I simply sense the rightness of approaching God through words offered by others under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Time and time again, I have found that those who have penned their prayers, whether they lived thousands of years ago or whether they are my contemporaries, have breathed the prayer that my heart yearns to echo. With relief, therefore, I pray them, personalizing them in such a way that I can make of them an offering to God. I quote some of these prayers alongside my own in *Embracing God's World*. If any of my prayers are ever treasured by my readers in the way I treasure some of the prayers I have quoted here, I shall be both humbled and joyful.



Enjoying intimacy with God

The desire to sacrifice for Christ, for some people, is born in the place of intimacy with God. I sense that we see this happening in the life of Mary of Bethany (see Luke 10:38–42). When her gregarious sister, Martha, invited Jesus into their home, Mary found herself drawn by Jesus' magnetism to nestle at his feet. There, doubtless, she found herself on the receiving end of his love for, wherever Jesus went, love flowed from him. John makes it clear in his Gospel that Mary reciprocated the Master's love. One way she expressed her adoration was to anoint Jesus with her most precious possession: the perfume she was probably saving for her wedding day (John 12:3).

Did Jesus share with her, in those moments of delicious intimacy, the reason why he was visiting Bethany at that moment in time? Did he tell her what he had been attempting for months to impress on his disciples: that he was on his way to Jerusalem, where he would be butchered to death? It seems probable that he did divulge these secrets. Is that not the reason why, in John 12, we find Mary sidling alongside Jesus at the supper party? Is that not the reason why she prepared him for his burial with that memorable sacrifice that filled the air with its fragrance?

According to Jesus, Mary had discovered 'the one essential thing' (Luke 10:42)—the value of soaking up, absorbing, personalizing the elixir of the divine love. It was as she drank these draughts of love and later feasted on them by pondering them that her heart was stirred and she conceived the desire to express her devotion in self-sacrificing service—even taking the risk of doing so in public.

As for Mary, so for us. When we create time to assimilate the fact that we are God's cherished children, little by little our hearts

lose their hardness. In the soft centre of our being, the desire to sacrifice self for the Beloved is born. One reason for this is that, where true love exists, it yearns to please and promote the well-being of the loved one. Another reason is that, when we both grasp and digest the love of another, we hear that healing, liberating message: we are accepted, valued, wanted. This message nourishes, nurtures and affirms us in such a way that it generates within us the desire to achieve great things for the loved one—albeit in a hidden, humble way. That is why the first section of this book consists of murmurings written by those who have lingered in the presence of God, relished intimacy with him and yearned for an even deeper relationship with him. Such intimacy can, of course, be sought as an escape from the harsh realities of life, but if the intimacy being enjoyed is truly with Christ, the Saviour of the world, his compassion for a weary world will, in time, rub off on us. His compassion is contagious. The closer we come to him, the closer we shall identify with his heart's longing to rescue the world and those that live in it.

Some of the prayers are simple, ordinary, even domestic. Others are more majestic, even grand. Each of them begs the would-be pray-er to read them as slowly as possible—to savour them and, where appropriate, to echo them or to allow them to trigger a prayer of their own.

AVAILABLE FOR YOU

Lord,
I offer what I am
to what you are.
I stretch up to you in desire
my attention on you alone.
I cannot grasp you,
 explain you,
 describe you,
only cast myself into the depths
 of your mystery,
only let your love pierce the
 cloud of my unknowing.
Let me forget all but you.
You are what I long for.
You are my chiefest good.
You are my eager hope.
You are my allness.

In the glimpses of your eternity.
 your unconditional freedom,
 your unfailing wisdom,
 your perfect love,
I am humble and worshipping,
 warming to love and hope,
 waiting and available
 for your will,
 dear Lord.

GEORGE APPLETON (1902-93)⁷

AT PEACE

You are my peace, O Lord.
From the thousand wearinesses of the day-to-day,
from the disappointments,
from the nervous and senseless haste,
I turn to you
and am at peace.
The clamour dies.
I spring to life in the sunshine of your presence.
Even so, come, Lord Jesus
to this heart of mine.

LJH

THE FOCUS OF GOD'S LOVE

Father,
In this place of prayer
I feel your everlasting arms
enfolding me
caressing me
cradling me
in the embrace of never-ending love.
For your tenderness
I praise you;
that I am the focus of your love
I thank you
and surrender myself to you,
though all too feeble
is my response of love to Love.

LJH



As we draw closer to God, we begin to share his love and compassion for his creation. And as we listen to the yearning of our hearts and begin to linger in God's presence, we find ourselves joining the Holy Spirit's work of intercession for the people and places of our beautiful but broken world.

This revised edition of a collection first published in 1996 brings together Joyce Huggett's personal selection of prayers new and old, some by contemporary writers, others whose gentle power has been proved over many years of use. *Embracing God's World* can be a bedside aid to personal prayer or a book to resource intercessions and worship in both small groups and the wider church community.

Joyce Huggett first trained in counselling and spiritual direction while working alongside her ordained husband in the 1970s; these skills led to her best-selling books on listening to others and to God, as well as on relationships. After a number of years overseas with Interserve, she is now based in the UK, where she continues to write and leads retreats and Quiet Days.



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