



The special place where you meditate need not necessarily be in your home. Some people find it easier to reach stillness in the corner of a quiet church or chapel, or in an art gallery. These buildings sometimes offer profound inspiration to prayer in the form of statues, stained-glass windows or religious paintings.

Some years ago, on a visit to the National Gallery of Art in Washington, I was privileged to be able to sit quietly and contemplate the poignant Crucifixion, a small painting by Matthias Grunewald, dating from 1510. My gaze was first drawn to the figure of Christ, torn and beaten to a grotesque mass, hanging from a cross-beam that seemed ready to snap under the weight - the head crowned and the body torn by long thorns. Then on to the grieving Virgin Mary and Apostle John standing on either side, and the kneeling Magdalen at Christ's feet. Behind the cross, blackness - black sun, black sky, black greenish-brown landscape. I found myself staying on, in a paradox of fascinated revulsion, picking out additional details in the painting; for example, the unnatural bluish-green colour of Christ's skin. I observed how the heads of the four people in the painting marked the angles of a square, balanced on one of its corners; and how Christ's twisted arms seemed to be extensions of the two upper-most sides of the square. I asked myself what kind of God could allow himself to be shown in such an absurd light - in fact be in the absurd position that I could see before me. The words of Isaiah 52.14 came to my mind: 'Many people were shocked when they saw him; he was so disfigured that he hardly looked human.' And having finished with my thinking, I was still there unconscious of the time, unconcerned about the hundreds of other great works in that collection that I would not now even glimpse because of my time spent with Grunewald's Christ.

When finally I did leave the National Gallery, I brought with me a bought copy of this crucifixion. It has been a valuable help in my prayer, although the colouring of Christ's body in it does not have the same quality as the original.

In fine weather you may prefer to meditate out of doors. Perhaps you are fortunate enough to

have a quiet garden near at hand. If not, then you might have to regard outdoor meditation as a luxury to be enjoyed during holiday time or on a day off.

Even in winter it is no harm to dream of sun-drenched beaches, spectacular mountains or tranquil lake-sides even a desert island - all as places suitable for meditation. Whether you are planning to meditate indoors or out of doors, the one essential requirement is that the place chosen should allow you enough freedom to become aware of what is happening inside you. Wherever you find yourself, you do carry within you a kind of psychological space, an alone-ness where the deepest 'you' lives.