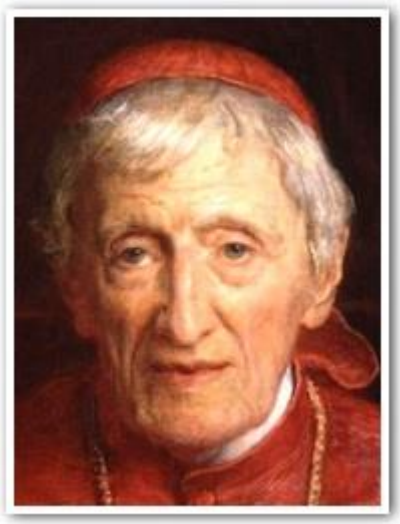
John Henry Newman, the Harmony of Difference – Sr Marie

Opening words: This week, we have a transcript. We have attached some pictures/ resources to help you in your meditation. If you are meditating alone but would like to feel 'with us' we meditate at 7.30pm on Wednesday in Wisdom Centre. The tradition we meditate in is Centring Prayer which is fully inclusive of all traditions of Christian Meditation and welcoming of World Traditions.

Welcome to Christian Meditation in the Centring Prayer Tradition: A very warm welcome from Fiona, Marie, Rob, Hazel and Paul, the leaders of the Christian Meditation group at Wisdom Centre, Romsey. The whole session is about 50 minutes. We meditate beginning with an opening prayer followed by reflections and then 25 minutes of silence. We hope you enjoy your meditation with us.

Opening Prayer: *Eternal God,* through our meditation may the ears of our hearts be attentive to your Word. May we seek and find You. Awakened to Your presence may we be joyful, embodying peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-awareness. May we follow Your teaching, seeking also, the wisdom of the Holy Fathers and Mothers. May we, therefore, commit to community, love of earth, peace and justice making. **Amen**

Introduction:



Whilst preparing this meditation I discovered that in the Anglican church the 11th August, is the feast of **St John Henry Newman** (1801 –1890) but in the Catholic church his feast is on the 9th October. I am really uncomfortable in talking about differences between the Anglican and Catholic Church but now I am deep in it. Since this meditation is entitled the Harmony of Difference, I will dwell on the harmony bit! Newman was an English theologian, scholar and poet, first an Anglican priest and later a Catholic priest and cardinal, who was an important and controversial figure in the religious history of England in the 19th century. He was known nationally by the mid-1830s, and was canonised as a saint in the Catholic Church in 2019.

When Pope Francis canonised Cardinal John Henry Newman in 2019, Prince Charles wrote in an editorial published in the Vatican newspaper, l'Osservatore Romano, the following appreciation of his life: "Tomorrow as the first Briton in over forty years is to be declared a saint, it will be a cause of celebration not merely in the United Kingdom, and not merely for Catholics, but for all who cherish the values by which he was inspired.

In the age when he lived, Newman stood for the life of the spirit against the forces that would debase human dignity and human destiny. In the age in which he attains sainthood, his example is needed more than ever - for the manner in which, at his best, he could advocate without accusation, could disagree without disrespect and, perhaps most of all, could see differences as places of encounter rather than exclusion.

At a time when faith was being questioned as never before, Newman, one of the greatest theologians of the nineteenth century, applied his intellect to one of the most pressing questions of our era: what should be the relationship of faith to a sceptical, secular age? His engagement first with Anglican theology, and then, after his conversion, Catholic theology, impressed even his opponents with its fearless honesty, its unsparing rigour and its originality of thought.

Prince Charles goes on to say 'Whatever our own beliefs, and no matter what our own tradition may be, we can only be grateful to Newman for the gifts, rooted in his Catholic faith, which he shared with wider society: he, Charles, was thinking of his intense and moving spiritual autobiography, the deeply felt poem *The Dream of Gerontius* of 1865, which was set to music thirty five years later by Sir Edward Elgar and which gave the musical world one of its most enduring choral masterpieces. He wrote the popular hymns "Lead, Kindly Light", "Firmly I believe, and truly", and "Praise to the Holiest in the Height" these last two were taken from the Dream of *Gerontius*.

At the climax of 'The Dream of Gerontius' the soul, approaching heaven, perceives something of the divine vision: *A grand mysterious harmony: It floods me, like the deep and solemn sound of many waters.*
Harmony requires difference. The concept rests at the very heart of Christian theology in the concept of the Trinity. In the same poem, Gerontius says: *Firmly I believe and truly God is three, and God is One;*
As such, difference is not to be feared. Newman not only proved this in his theology and illustrated it in his poetry, but he also demonstrated it in his life. Under his leadership, Catholics became fully part of the wider society, which itself thereby became all the richer as a community of communities.

Newman engaged not merely with the church, but with the world. While wholeheartedly committed to the Church to which he came through so many intellectual and spiritual trials, he nonetheless initiated open debate between Catholics and other Christians, paving the way for later ecumenical dialogues. On his elevation to the Cardinalate in 1879, he took as his motto 'heart speaks to heart', and his conversations across confessional, cultural, social and economic divides, were rooted in that intimate friendship with God. His faith was truly catholic in that it embraced all aspects of life. It is in that same spirit that we, whether we are Catholics or not, can, in the tradition of the Christian Church throughout the ages, embrace the unique perspective, the particular wisdom and insight, brought to our universal experience by this one individual soul.

We can draw inspiration from his writings and his life even as we recognise that, like all human lives, it was inevitably flawed. Newman himself was aware of his failings, such as pride and defensiveness which fell short of his own ideals, but which, ultimately, left him only more grateful for the mercy of God.
His influence was immense. As a theologian, his work on the development of doctrine showed that our understanding of God can grow over time, and had a profound impact on later thinkers. Individual Christians have found their personal devotion challenged and strengthened by the importance he attached to the voice of conscience. Those of all traditions who seek to define and defend Christianity have found themselves grateful for the way he reconciled faith and reason. Those who seek the divine in what can seem like an increasingly hostile intellectual environment find in him a powerful ally who championed the individual conscience against an overwhelming relativism.

And perhaps most relevantly of all at this time, when we have witnessed too many grievous assaults by the forces of intolerance on communities and individuals, including many Catholics, because of their beliefs, he is a figure who stood for his convictions despite the disadvantages of belonging to a religion whose adherents were denied full participation in public life. Through the whole process of Catholic emancipation and the restoration of the Catholic Church hierarchy, he was the leader his people, his church and his times needed. His capacity for personal warmth and generous friendship is shown in his correspondence. There exist over 30 collected volumes of his letters, many of which, tellingly, are not addressed to the fellow intellectuals and prominent leaders but to family, friends and parishioners who sought out his wisdom.
His example has left a lasting legacy. As an educator, his work was profoundly influential in Oxford, Dublin and beyond, while his treatise, *The Idea of a University,* remains a defining text to this day. His often overlooked labours on behalf of children's education are testimony to his commitment to ensuring those of all backgrounds shared the opportunities learning can bring. As an Anglican, he guided that church back to its Catholic roots, and as a Catholic he was ready to learn from the Anglican tradition, such as in his promoting the role of the laity. He gave the Catholic Church renewed confidence as it re-established itself in a land in which it had once been uprooted. The Catholic community in Britain today owes an incalculable debt to his

tireless work, even as British society has cause for gratitude to that community for its immeasurably valuable contribution to our country's life.

That confidence was expressed in his love of the English landscape and of his native country's culture, to which he made such a distinguished contribution. In the Oratory which he established in Birmingham, and which now houses a museum dedicated to his memory as well as an active worshipping community, we see the realisation in England of a vision he derived from Rome which he described as 'the most wonderful place on Earth'. In bringing the Oratorian Congregation from Italy to England, Newman sought to share its charism of education and service.
He loved Oxford, gracing it not only with passionate and learned sermons, but also with the beautiful Anglican church at Littlemore, created after a formative visit to Rome where, seeking guidance on his future spiritual path and pondering his relationship with the Church of England and with Catholicism, he wrote his beloved hymn, 'Lead Kindly Light'. When he finally decided to leave the Church of England, his last sermon as he said farewell to Littlemore left the congregation in tears. It was entitled 'The Parting of Friends.'
As we mark the life of this great Briton, this great churchman and, as we can now say, this great saint, who bridges the divisions between traditions, it is surely right that we give thanks for the friendship which, despite the parting, has not merely endured, but has strengthened.
In the image of divine harmony which Newman expressed so eloquently, we can see how, ultimately, as we follow with sincerity and courage the different paths to which conscience calls us, all our divisions can lead to a greater understanding and all our ways can find a common home.

In a telling reflection Newman wrote: "God has created me to do Him some definite service. He has committed some work to me which He has not committed to another. I have my mission – I never may know it in this life, but I shall be told it in the next. Somehow I am necessary for His purposes, as necessary in my place as an Archangel in his – if, indeed I fail, He can raise another, as He could make the stones children of Abraham. Yet I have a part in this great work; I am a link in a chain, a bond of connexion between persons. He has not created me for naught. I shall do good. I shall do His work. I shall be an angel of peace, a preacher of truth in my own place, while not intending it, if I do but keep His commandments and serve Him in my calling."

The Dream of Gerontius relates the journey of a pious person's soul from deathbed to judgment before God. The last verse of the poem relates these words of the angel (adapted)

"Softly and gently, dearly ransomed soul, in my most loving arms I now enfold you,
And over the penal waters, as they roll, I poise you and I lower you and hold you.
And carefully I dip you in the lake, and you without sob and resistance,
Dost through the flood your rapid passage take, sinking deep, deeper into the dim distance.
Angels, to whom the willing task is given, shall tend and nurse and lull you as you lie:
And masses on the earth and prayers in heaven, shall aid you at the Throne of the Most High
Farewell, but not forever! Brother dear, be brave and patient on your bed of sorrow:
Swiftly shall pass your night of trial here and I will come and wake you tomorrow."

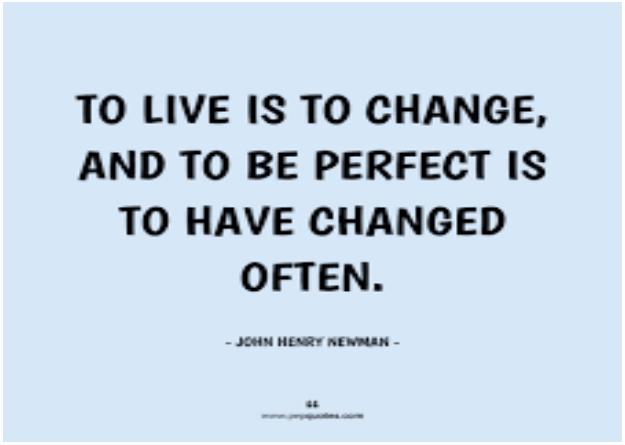
Beginning Meditation:
In preparation for your prayer today, I invite you to take the position you usually have for prayer. Gently call the focus of your attention to what you can feel in your body and see or hear around you. Maybe your mind is burdened with thoughts, regrets and loss from the past as well as worries about what your future may hold. Bring these thoughts and feelings before the Beloved, holding them gently in mind and allow yourself slowly to be still. Call to mind awareness of the present moment. This is where your Beloved waits for you now in the present. You may focus on a candle, your breathing, your special word…

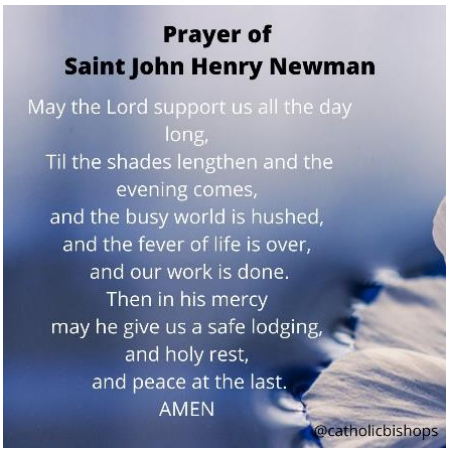
25-minute meditation begins…

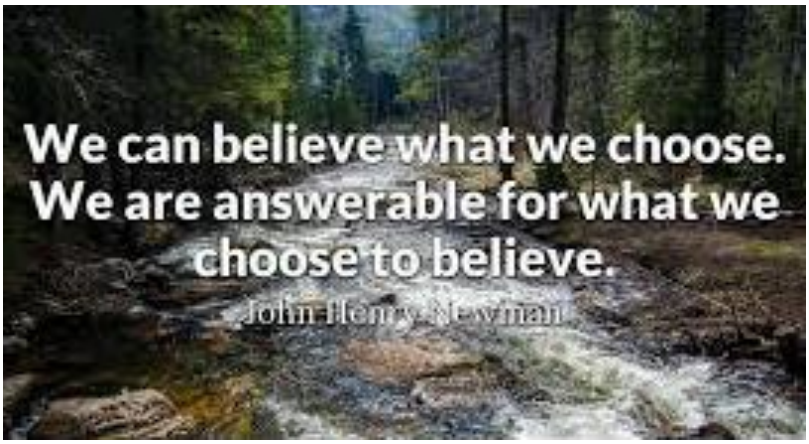
Post meditation: **The Parting of Friends** end part of sermon on leaving Littlemore church

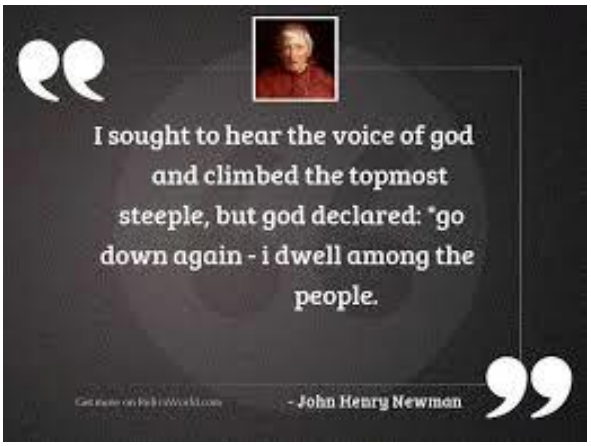
And, O my brethren, O kind and affectionate hearts, O loving friends, should you know anyone whose lot it has been, by writing or by word of mouth, in some degree to help you thus to act; if he has ever told you what you knew about yourselves, or what you did not know; has read to you your wants or feelings, and comforted you by the very reading; has made you feel that there was a higher life than this daily one, and a brighter world than that you see; or encouraged you, or sobered you, or opened a way to the inquiring, or soothed the perplexed; if what he has said or done has ever made you take interest in him, and feel well inclined towards him; remember such a one in time to come, though you hear him not, and pray for him, that in all things he may know God's will, and at all times he may be ready to fulfil it.

Closing prayer: Loving and Eternal God, we thank you for the gifts of prayer, meditation and contemplation. We thank you for being with us and for this community. May we, therefore, pray with all others, as one community, one world and one spirit to One God…Take some time for your personal prayer …**Amen**









Thank you for meditating with us, please join us again soon.

Images/ resources: https://www.britannica.com/biography/Saint-John-Henry-Newman
https://www.jhn.herts.sch.uk/501/saint-john-henry-newman-biography
https://www.vaticannews.va/en/vatican-city/news/2019-10/newman-canonization-prince-charles-editorial-britain.html



Our peaceful outdoor spaces promote wellbeing and are open to all, free of charge.