



Lesson Three: When you meet with God...don't talk too much, listen.

Reflection/Discussion

How do you feel about being alone? Do you have any sense of God's presence when you are on your own? In what sort of circumstances do you think you might feel God's presence?

How much were you able to quieten your mind during last weeks exercise? Some people will find these quietening exercises easier to do than other people. Some will really struggle with them, feeling they are not making any progress, whilst others will progress quickly. Most, I guess, will be somewhere in-between those two extremes. So how did you do?

For those of you who were successful in physically relaxing and quietening your minds, you may have found yourselves becoming very sleepy, if not falling asleep. That is hardly surprising! Don't worry about this. Perhaps you needed to sleep anyway!

Teaching

Matthew 6: 7-8 *"And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him."*

Learning to listen...

I once saw a person who was in trouble and really needed to talk about what they were going through, trying to explain their situation to someone who had no idea how to listen. Every time this troubled person started to speak, before they had reached the end of their sentence, the other person interrupted by telling them what they thought was the solution to their problems. To my surprise this happened time after time. What could have been a rich, healing, two-way conversation, had become a rather pointless speech by the person who was supposed to be doing most of the listening. I doubted much good came out of that conversation.

In Joyce Huggett's excellent book *Listening to God*, she describes the change in her own journey into prayer when the idea of listening to God began to grow in her. One key experience came when she and her husband took a group of university students for a weekend retreat in a monastery to discuss the subject of prayer. One of the monks joined them and was a part of her discussion group at the end of a seminar. *"The aim of the discussion was to encourage each person to explain to the others the methods of prayer which have proved beneficial to them. The monk listened, nodding and smiling from time to time, but not speaking. Towards the end of the*

*discussion we invited him to divulge the secret of his prayer life. His reply was to haunt me for weeks. 'Oh,' he replied, his eyes twinkling merrily as he spoke, 'I find that a rather difficult assignment. You see, most of my praying these days is done in silence.'"*¹ Some time later Huggett writes about how she was powerfully touched by God, the results of which transformed her prayer life. *"...the nature of [my] prayer had changed. It ceased to be a string of requests, a tirade of questionings, beseechings... Instead, the sense of the presence of God's life within stunned me into silence. This awed silence gave birth to a wordless praise, wordless adoration and wordless consecration of my life to him. Silence. Wordlessness. This was what the monk had been describing."*²

The first requirement of being a good listener is that you have to, at least for a moment, stop being a talker. You have to hold yourself back. You have to let someone else play this active role whilst you play the passive one. Listening requires humility. An arrogant person needs to hear the sound of their own voice, but a humble person recognises the value of another's voice even if the other person is difficult to listen to. The arrogant person will often find it hard to stop and listen to the elderly or infirm, the stammerer or the slow of speech. In the same way, arrogance prevents us from listening to God. This is because most of the time God speaks in a whisper; his actions may be slow and are inevitably subtle. We have to learn to be very patient and passive, at least for some of the time, if we are going to pick up what God wants to say to us. Only very rarely does he break into the created world in an overt way. As I stated in the last lesson, God wants us to seek him before he will allow himself to be found, and learning to listen to God is how we do that.

Slowing down...

Learning to listen requires us to slow down. I remember the chaplain, when I was at university, inviting a nun to come and talk to some of us students about prayer. At one point she got out a collection of small objects and invited us to pick one and study it for a minute or two. I picked up a leaf and examined it, turning it in my hand. It looked like a leaf! After a couple of minutes it still looked like a leaf! What was I supposed to gain by looking at that leaf? I now think that the nun had a good idea, but perhaps she was a bit too ambitious with it (especially with me as one of her students). I needed more to focus on than just that leaf. For people who live frenetic life styles, the journey towards stillness will inevitably take a little time with progress made in stages. The leap she wanted me to make was too great.

In the film *Creation*, which tells the story of how Charles Darwin came to write his book, *The Origin of Species*, there is a scene where he is leading his children in a walk through the woods. He wants them to notice what's going on around them and so he has them walking very slowly in single file. Each step would be followed by a pause, and because this way of walking caused less disruption to the local wild life the children were able to observe it more closely. Slowing down, in this case, brought its rewards.

Many years ago I went to Austria with a large group of teenagers, and one day we were led by a guide up a mountain. Like Darwin, the guide got us all in a line with him at the front. He told us to

¹ "Listening to God" by Joyce Huggett, 2005, page 9.

² "Listening to God" by Joyce Huggett, 2005, page 12.

follow him at his pace. He walked slowly, and at first we were regularly bunching up and bumping into each other. But eventually we got used to the slower pace he was setting and had no problem with climbing the mountain without getting out of breath or becoming exhausted. Jesus is like that guide. The journey he calls us on is a slow one, and he sets the pace. If we want to know what he is saying to us we need to travel at his pace, or even stop and stand for a while with him.

We don't need to babble...

This week's passage from Matthew 6 (see above) sums up what the first three weeks of this course have been about. My aim has been to move our mindset away from the idea that prayer is just talking to God about whatever is burdening us at any moment in time. Of course we can talk to him about these things, and it is right to do so. But prayer is first and foremost about relationship; and besides, as Jesus says, *"your Father knows what you need before you ask him."* This means that we don't have to treat prayer as a request time, and instead we can use it to experiment in other ways of communicating.

Two lovers silently walking hand in hand through a park are still communicating with each other even though nothing is being said. They are making no demands of the other, yet needs are being met and love signals are passing back and forth between the two of them. Nothing practical is being done by these two people yet this is not wasted time. Neither is time wasted when we just walk with or sit quietly before the Lord with our minds at rest. It is in those moments that we can learn the art of simply loving God and receiving his love for us. This also is prayer!

So, our prayer starts as we become attentive to God. Have you ever found yourself in a situation where you are talking to someone in the midst of a crowd, and you notice that the person you are talking to keeps looking at other people around you? You wonder if you really have their attention! Getting distracted is very easy to do, whether it is in a conversation with another person, or in conversation with God. We are trying to focus on God and suddenly we are thinking of things we need to add to our shopping list, or of an important phone call we need to make. This is completely normal, and one way of dealing with this problem is to have a note book handy so that you can scribble down the thought, and then forget about it and deal with it later. As *"St Francis de Sales used to say...if in our time of prayer our thoughts wander a hundred times, we must not worry; because if we can come back to God each time unruffled, these thoughts have done no harm and we have turned back to God and have so given him a hundred signs of our love for him."*³

Exercise

This is our third and last Centering Prayer exercise and there are various ways that you can do this depending on your circumstances. Like the last two exercises, begin the ten minutes by giving God the time as a gift and thanking him for whatever he is going to do with this time. In this exercise you will use what you can see as a means of focussing your mind. So get yourself in a comfortable sitting position as before, and relax into it. You may find it helpful to sit near a window (or in the garden if it's warm enough and you have a garden) so that you can use your eyes as well as your

³ "Prayer and Contemplation" by Mark Gibbard, 1985, page 71.

ears to focus your attention away from your thoughts. You could even use a picture to help you focus. This why they have Icons in the Orthodox Church!

Alternatively, you can take a walk and do the exercise this way: begin by standing still and giving the time to God as before. Concentrate on quietening your mind, and when you have done so start to walk slowly through a park or some woods looking around at nature. When I did this in the past I used to stop walking if I became distracted by thoughts until I had quietened them down again. One thing I noticed when I did this exercise was that whenever I saw a bird, for example, I would think, "There's a bird", as if my mind didn't already know that I was looking at a bird! It took a while to achieve my goal, but eventually I could walk through the local woods hearing the sounds and seeing the sights without having a dialogue with myself over what I could see and hear going on around me.

I was once told of a girl who came to stay with a family in England. She came from a poor country, and when she arrived late at night she was welcomed, fed, and then shown straight to her bedroom. In the morning, when she drew back the curtains and saw the family's garden full of bright, colourful flowers, she stood for some time, transfixed by the beauty before her. We are going to do something similar, as we focus on the beauty of nature with our eyes and listen to its sounds. It may be that you do not have a view of nature from where you live. That's a shame, but it doesn't really matter. A view of a street with people walking around will do just as well for this exercise.

Exercise in brief:

- 1) Pray – give God this time you have set aside for him.
- 2) Sit still and comfortably for ten minutes.
- 3) Focus your mind on what you both see and hear.
- 4) Relax. OR
- 2) Take a walk outside for ten minutes.
- 3) Begin by quietening your mind by focussing on what you see and hear around you.
- 4) Stop whenever your mind gets busy and refocus.
- 5) Close the exercise with a prayer of thanks.

Encouragement

Esther writes...

One night, a few years ago, I was living like a single mum with two young children to care for. I had no bank account, no job and I wasn't entitled to receive any benefit money from the government. All I had was £10 with which I had to buy bus tickets to take my children to the school they attended far from where we were living in London.

I fed the children that evening with the last of our food and put them to bed. I then locked myself up in my room and spent the night crying out to God for help. The following morning, with bloodshot eyes, I went to my children's room to get them ready for the day. While I was doing this the phone rang and I was angry as I wondered who could be calling so early in the day. However, I felt the Holy Spirit calming me down and I answered the phone. The caller was a man I knew, but after I explained to him we were running late he said, "*Could you please wait for me because it is absolutely necessary that I see you this morning*".

I agreed to wait for him and carried on getting the children ready for school. When he arrived on my doorstep he apologised profusely for keeping us waiting. He offered to drop us at the nearest bus stop, which I agreed to let him do. Then he gave me an envelope from his pocket and said, *"Please do not open it until I leave."*

When I opened the envelope, after he had gone, I found £200 in it. I couldn't believe the speedy way God answered my prayer. Whenever I remember the incident, I recall the bible passage that states, *"weeping may remain for a night, but rejoicing comes in the morning"* (Psalm 30: 5). In the morning God relieved me of the pain of that dark night!

Sayings of the Desert Fathers/Mothers

Abba Joseph said to Abba Nisterus, *"What should I do about my tongue, for I cannot control it?"* The old man said to him, *"When you speak, do you find peace?"* He replied, *"No."* The old man said, *"If you do not find peace, why do you speak? Be silent and when a conversation takes place, it is better to listen than to speak."*