

Explorers in Prayer – Lesson Five Notes

Note from Last Weeks Reading

On the subject of *Sacramental Prayer* (chapter 10 of Richard Foster's book), Philip Yancey writes in his book *Reaching for the Invisible God* (pages 25-26), "On a visit to Russia in 1991...I visited a chapel in the basement of a nearby prison... Located on the lowest subterranean level, the chapel was an oasis of beauty in an otherwise grim dungeon. Each week priests travelled from a monastery to conduct a service there... We spent a few minutes admiring the handiwork that went into the [construction of] the room, and Brother Bonifato pointed to the icon for the prison chapel, "Our Lady Who Takes Away Sadness." Ron Nikkel of Prison Fellowship commented that there must be much sadness within these walls, then turned to Brother Bonifato and asked if he would say a prayer for these prisoners... "A prayer? You want a prayer?" Brother Bonifato asked, and we nodded. He disappeared behind the altar at the end of the room. He brought out another icon of the Lady Who Takes Away Sadness, which he propped up on a stand. Then he retrieved two candle holders and two incense bowls, which he laboriously hung in place and lit. Their sweet fragrance instantly filled the room. He removed his headpiece and outer vestments, and laced shiny gold cuffs over his black sleeves. He placed a droopy gold stole around his neck, and then a gold crucifix. He carefully fitted a different, more formal headpiece on his head. Before each action, he paused to kiss the cross or genuflect. Finally, he was ready to pray. Prayer involved a whole new series of formalities. Brother Bonifato did not say prayers; he sang them, following the score from a liturgy book propped on another stand. Finally, twenty minutes after Ron had requested a prayer for the prisoners, Brother Bonifato said "Amen"... I knew that Brother Bonifato was no otherworldly mystic, for I had seen his service among criminals... His tradition had taught him, though, that you do not approach the Other [or God] as you would approach your own kind. The ritual helped him move from a spirit of urgency and immediacy - the demands of the prison ministry - to a place of calm whose rhythms were the rhythms of eternity. If you find God with great ease, suggested Thomas Merton, perhaps it is not God that you have found."

The Place of Meditation in Prayer

There's a lot of confusion about the words meditation and contemplation. They mean different things to different people, and sometimes they are used interchangeably so that they mean the same thing.

Some Christians will say that they do not believe in meditation or contemplation, but they need to explain what they mean by these words.

The principle difference between Christian and non-Christian forms of meditation and contemplation lies in the goal a person is trying to achieve by doing it. In Christian meditation and contemplation the goal is ultimately to grow in love for, and in our relationship with, God.

Today we're going to look at two traditional forms of Christian meditation (in the next lesson we will be looking at Christian contemplation). The first form is known as the Jesus Prayer. This is what is known as an Apophatic form of prayer (this is a Greek word meaning 'without images') because we're not using thoughts or imagination as we say this

prayer, it is what might be called a 'chew and taste' prayer. We don't think about it but we allow it to impact on us.

The Jesus Prayer...

The Jesus Prayer is a verbal form of prayer which comes out of the idea that we are called to pray unceasingly. By 'praying unceasingly' I do not mean a conscious flow of words, which would be very hard to maintain throughout our busy lives. It is rather a process for reminding ourselves of God's presence at all times. The repetition of the Jesus Prayer is supposed to eventually become a subconscious prayer that will draw us back to God in our conscious thinking.

1 Thessalonians 5: 16-18 "Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus."

Ephesians 6: 18 "And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the Lord's people."

There are several different versions of the Jesus Prayer...

"Lord Jesus Christ have mercy on me" - Russian Orthodox version

"Lord Jesus Christ, Son of (the living) God, have mercy on me, a sinner." - Eastern Orthodox version

"Lord, have mercy." (Greek: *Kýrie Eléison*) - My preferred version in moments of crises!

The Jesus Prayer itself comes from a number of Bible passages:

Matthew 15: 22 - The Canaanite woman wanted Jesus to heal her daughter - cried out, "Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me!"

Matthew 20: 30 - Two blind men wanting Jesus to heal them - cried out, "Lord, Son of David, have mercy on us!"

Mark 10: 47 - Bartimaeus also wanted Jesus to heal him of his blindness - cried out, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!"

Luke 18: 13 - The parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector – the Tax Collector in humility cried out, "God, have mercy on me, a sinner."

But this is also a prayer used to focus or 'centre' the mind as a prelude to entering into contemplative prayer.

"A woman who had been using the Jesus Prayer for fourteen years complained that she had never had any sense that God was there. But when she had it pointed out to her that she was talking all the time, she agreed to take her stand silently for a few days. As she was doing it she became aware that God was there, that the silence that surrounded her was not emptiness, absence of noise and agitation, but that there was a solidity in this silence, that it was not something negative, but positive, a presence, the presence of God who made himself known to her by creating the same silence in her. And then she discovered that the prayer came up quite naturally again, but it was no longer the sort of discursive noise that had prevented God from making himself known." Metropolitan Anthony of Sourozh, *Living Prayer*.

Exercise 1

Repeat one of the versions of the Jesus Prayer in silence, slowly, over and over. You may want to say it in line with your breathing - known as a 'breath prayer'.

End of Exercise 1

In meditation we try to engage with God in different ways through using our minds.

In contemplation we try to engage with God through using our hearts (see next lesson).

So when the Bible says... "Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable - if anything is excellent or praiseworthy - think about such things." Philippians 4: 8...this is talking about meditation. As we notice these wonderful things around us, and meditate on them, we are led to a new and greater awareness of the glory of God.

At the beginning of this course we talked about gaining silence in our heads. We should not over spiritualise it, or get frustrated about it. We need to see this as simply a discipline which we can learn over time (some more quickly than others) which will enable us to do meditating or contemplating more effectively.

Of course, we can always meditate on the wrong things...as we fill our minds with the sinful things of this world! Monks and nuns who have dedicated their lives to prayer, live lives which are separated from the world so that they can more effectively focus on God. Other groups like the Amish have chosen to live more materially simplified lives in order to give priority to their spiritual journey. Perhaps there are lessons we can learn from these people to help us in our own spiritual development? When Jesus said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these." (Matthew 19: 14) is there something about the attitude of children that we could make good use of in our own spiritual journey?

Exercise 2

The second form of Christian meditation is that practiced in the Lectio Divina which involves ruminating on Scripture. This is a Kataphatic form of prayer (Greek meaning 'with images' or using our imagination) as we use our thoughts to process the Scripture and engage with God through it.

Read through the 1st chapter of Jonah 2 verses at a time and give gaps between each reading for people to meditate and talk with God about it.

End of Exercise 2

Home work

We have already tried out another form of meditative prayer in the first session when we imagined ourselves at the scene of Jesus healing the lepers. Ignatius of Loyola is particularly associated with this form of prayer (though he didn't invent it) because he encouraged people to use it a lot when doing his 30 day retreat known as the Spiritual Exercises. In the course of 30 days the 'exercitant' uses their imagination to go through the life of Jesus as found in the gospels. As with the other forms of meditation, the goal is

to grow in love for Jesus as you have some kind of experience of him through these imaginative meditations. We are going to do something very similar for homework.

Individual Exercise: Each day we will be doing an imaginative meditation on a portion of the Gospels. Let the meditation lead into a prayer.

Day 1 - *Luke 1: 26-38.*

Day 2 - *Luke 2: 41-52.*

Day 3 - *Matthew 3: 13-17.*

Day 4 - *Matthew 4: 1-11.*

Day 5 - *Luke 4: 13-30.*

Day 6 - *Luke 5: 1-11.*

Day 7 - *Mark 4: 35-41.*

Practice using your preferred version of the Jesus Prayer when you have some free time during the week.

Read chapters 11 & 13 of the course book.

Prayer Triplet Exercise: One person reads John 20: 10-18 out loud. After a minutes pause the second person reads the same passage. And after another minutes pause the third person reads the passage. Spend time in silence meditating on the scripture and share what God has given to you. Let that lead into a time of prayer. Also, share how you have each got on with the Jesus Prayer.