

Explorers in Prayer – Lesson Plan Six

The Place of Contemplation in Prayer

The aims of this class are as follows:

- 1) To give deeper understanding of Contemplative prayer.
- 2) To do an exercise using the whole Lectio Divina.
- 3) To offer other exercises to do at home.

Supplementary items to take to class:

- 1) Candles/matches.
- 2) Pens/pencils and paper.
- 3) The two bible passages for the opening game on slips of paper.
- 4) Box of tissues.

Arrive - light a candle and wait in silence - opening prayer

Feedback from the previous weeks readings and exercise

Feedback from book:

Chapter 11 - Unceasing Prayer

Chapter 13 - Meditative Prayer

In chapter 13, on page 152, Jim is talking to a monk about how hard he is finding the exercise the monk has given him to do. The monk tells him, “You’re trying too hard, Jim. You’re trying to control God. Go back to this passage and this time be open to receive whatever God has for you. Don’t manipulate God; just receive. Communion with him isn’t something you institute. It’s like sleep. You can’t make yourself sleep, but you can create the conditions that allow sleep to happen.”

Eleven weeks is a long time to do a course on prayer, but this is deliberate. Time is needed for change to happen, so the most important aspect of this course is that of giving God time. The 15 minutes that we give him each day, whether or not we do the exercises on the handouts, is a sacrifice, an offering, a gift to God. When we want to go to sleep at night we lie down in a comfortable bed, rest our heads on a comfortable pillow and switch the light out. In so doing we try to create the necessary conditions for sleep to happen. In the same way, giving God time and our attention, and approaching him with love and humility, creates the right sort of conditions for communication with God. We can grow in our head knowledge about prayer without growing any more intimate with God. To become intimate with God requires a sacrifice of our time.

Feedback on the prayer exercises:

Praying out of our meditation on scripture.

End of Feedback

Main Talk (Contemplation)

The subject of Contemplative prayer gets a mixed reaction from Christians. Some embrace it, others feel quite negatively towards it, and many simply don't think they know enough about contemplative prayer to have an opinion on it. One problem is that we are now entering the world of Christian mysticism, and this is a world that many people feel uncomfortable in. Perhaps this is because it is a world in which the boundary between Christianity and other world religions is far less clear than, for example, the world of theology. In the world of theology we can lay out the Christian set of beliefs and easily compare and contrast them with those of another religion. However, the differences become a lot less clear in the realms of personal spiritual experience. The range of unusual experiences described by Christian mystics in contemplation can seem remarkably similar to the experiences of mystics of other faiths, such as the Muslim Sufis, or Buddhist monks. Also, the actual practise of contemplative prayer can also seem very similar to forms of prayer practised by other religions, which can leave us wondering if this is really a legitimate form of Christian prayer?

In reality, people of other religions pray in many ways that are just the same as Christians, such as asking or thanking God for things, and this fact does not stop us praying in these ways. So why should the practices of other religions prevent us from exploring contemplative prayer, which has been a part of the prayer life of Christians since the early centuries of the church? The important thing to remember is that with contemplative prayer, as with meditative prayer, and all other forms of prayer, the ultimate goal of all Christian prayer is the deepening of our love relationship with God through Jesus Christ. In fact, contemplative prayer is the form of prayer which is most exclusively for that purpose. There is no other agenda in contemplative prayer. There is no wish list that we are bringing to God, just a simple desire for awareness of God's presence, and for the opening up of our human heart towards God in love, by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Exercise 1

This first exercise should be treated as a game.

Get people into twos and have them sit or stand opposite each other. If you're meeting in a large room try to spread out so that people won't find other couples a distraction. This is an exercise in wordless communication, so neither person is allowed to speak during this exercise. One person will try to communicate a short passage from the bible by just using their face, arms and hands, etc., but not by mouthing words! The other person will try to interpret the message and write what they think the message is down on a piece of paper. When this has been done the two people swap roles and the process is repeated. The course leader will hand out to each person the passage they should be trying to communicate, and then give them a few minutes to do so. When the exercise is over the couples can show each other what they have written down and see how closely they match the passages.

Here are the two passages:

Zephaniah 3: 17 "The Lord your God is with you, he is mighty to save. He will take great delight in you, he will quiet you with his love, he will rejoice over you with his singing."

Psalm 28: 7 “The Lord is my strength and my shield; my heart trusts in him, and I am helped. My heart leaps for joy and I will give thanks to him in song.”

When the game is over people can return to their original seats. I expect that many people will not do too well in communicating these passages. We are so used to using words to communicate that other means of communication tend to be underdeveloped.

End of Exercise 1

(Main Talk continued)

James W. Skehan - *Place Me With Your Son* - page 10.

“Notice how sharp is the hearing and the sense of touch of the blind person. Having lost the faculty of seeing, such a person has been forced to develop other faculties of perception. Something similar happens in the mystical world. If we could go mentally blind, so to speak, or if we could blindfold our mind while we are communicating with God, we would be forced to develop some other faculty for communicating with him - that faculty which, according to a number of mystics, is already straining to move out to him anyway if it were given a chance to develop - the heart.

If you would communicate with God through this heart that the mystics speak of, you must first silence the mind. Awareness meditations, such as those in Sadhana*, are an excellent way to attain to this silence of spirit. Even in your prayer time try gently to reduce the amount of thinking that you do and pray more with the heart. St Teresa of Avila used to say, ‘The important thing is not to think much but to love much.’ So do a lot of loving during your time of prayer. And God will guide you even though it will be through a period of trial and error.”

* A book written by a Jesuit Spiritual Director called Anthony De Mello

A prayer of the heart...

Some people are more ‘head led’ than ‘heart led’. The ‘head led’ people will probably find contemplation harder as it is a prayer of the heart!

Contemplation is first and foremost about love.

God measures a person by the inclinations of their heart, not the soundness of their theology. Theology is very important but it is not ultimately what we are judged by.

Matthew 22: 37-40 “Jesus replied: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbour as yourself.’ All of the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.”

As we consider contemplative prayer, we must be careful that we are not in search of an experience - but in search of God.

Contemplative prayer is very different to any other form of prayer as it is a prayer without words. It is heart to heart prayer – hence it is known as the ‘prayer of the heart’. It’s purpose is not to gain some sort of ecstatic experience (though this seems to happen for

some people), but to be transformed. It is a transformation of the heart. Through it we grow in compassion, both for God and for others.

Gazing prayer...

Two lessons ago we looked at Icons and how Christians over the centuries have gazed at them. The idea is that the more we gaze, the more we see, and the more we see, the more we love. I remember once gazing into the eyes of a young child; the daughter of a single mum friend of mine. I had known that little girl since she was a baby and had grown to love her. I knew that she loved me. We didn't speak in that moment. We just looked at each other with eyes of love, and that moment became impressed on my mind. I kept coming back to it when I thought about her and I could sense it increasing my love for her. We also see this in couples as they gaze fondly into each other's eyes in a romantic moment. There are no words spoken, but love is communicated. Contemplation is like this, only with God.

As a teenager we used to sing a song that went like this, "Turn your eyes upon Jesus. Look full in his wonderful face. And the things of earth will grow strangely dim, in the light of his glory and grace." From one perspective this song is wrong; when we turn our eyes upon Jesus things can become clear, rather than dim, in terms of wisdom and insight. But if we see this song as being about contemplative prayer it makes more sense. As we become more absorbed into our love for Jesus, so the "things of earth" do become dim in the sense that they lose their importance in our eyes. Most people who own a house, value it. But if they are told they need to sell it in order to raise money for life saving medication for their child, the decision to part with the house becomes quite easy. In the light of the love they have for their child, the house becomes fairly unimportant by comparison.

As an aside, the world of commerce and advertising makes great use of contemplative gazing in order to sell their products. Their song might go something like this, "Turn your eyes upon our new sports car. Look full at its wonderful shape. And you'll quickly forget about other cars on offer, in the roar of its power and pace." We can fall in love with the things we can see, but not everything is worthy of our love!

Growing the heart...

"Prayer makes your heart bigger, until it is capable of containing the gift of God himself."
Mother Teresa – *In My Own Words*

So, contemplative prayer begins with learning to be attentive to God, and less distracted by things around us. For most people this means learning to enjoy silence; firstly externally (stop speaking and learn to be still to the present moment), and then internally (a quietening of your thoughts, which can also be learnt with time and patience).

Robert Llewellyn - *Prayer and Contemplation* - pages 45-46

"Before we go further we ought to make it clear that this silence of which we are speaking is not the silence of blankness or idleness, which has nothing to do with the drawing of the Holy Spirit. There are two images we might use to describe it. Think of a sentry on duty, an image of silence as alertness or awareness; or think of two people who love one another deeply, an image of silence as understanding and perception and harmony. We all know how different silences can be. There can be an idle silence or an embarrassed silence - better than either of these is conversation, in which we try to develop an

awareness of one another's needs and interests. But that is only a stage (just as discursive meditation is only a stage), and sooner or later there will be a breakthrough and long periods can then pass, perhaps before the fire of a winters evening, when each is supported by the silent presence of the other and conversation is superfluous or, rather, both are free to let it come or go at will. That is the picture of contemplative Silence."

However, it must be said that contemplative silence is not the only way to grow the heart. Helping those who are vulnerable, or in need, in practical ways, can be an effective way of making us more compassionate and loving. Then there is the love that grows through pain and suffering. It is quite common for there to be a special bond between a parent and their child who has needed so much more love and attention than their siblings, perhaps because of a disability; or the bond of love between a group of people who have been through a terrible experience together.

Exercise 2

Do the full Lectio Divina ending with Contemplation, using Matthew 27:45-56 for the bible reading.

- 1) Be still and silent for a little while in order to become focussed on the exercise.
- 2) Read the passage, maybe a few times, and listen for verses that speak to you.
- 3) Meditate for a while on the passage, allowing God to open it up for you.
- 4) Let this meditation lead into a time of prayer.
- 5) When the prayer is finished, sense the appreciation (love) you have for God, and he has for you. This is the moment when the prayer becomes contemplative.

When the exercise is over ask each person individually to talk about how they got on with it, but be careful to allow them to share only as much as they are comfortable with doing.

End of Exercise 2

Mindfulness...

It is possible to see contemplative prayer as simply a form of prayer that you do on an occasion, but it is actually meant to be a way of life. In Richard Foster's book, he wrote in last week's reading, "I am at a loss to convey to you the sense of immediacy, of adventure, of breakthrough that is in the journals and letters...of many other pioneers in the spiritual life. These people were alive to a reality that most of us miss. Their writings dance with the excitement of discovery. Thomas Kelly writes, 'Life from the Centre is a life of unhurried peace and power. It is simple. It is serene. It is amazing. It is triumphant. It is radiant. It takes no time, but it occupies all our time. And it makes our life programs new and overcoming.'"

Note for the course leader

What I have done in the past is ask the students to do the exercise with their hands facing down on their laps, and to turn their hands upwards when they have finished. Some people may finish quite quickly whilst others may take a lot longer. You will have to use your own judgement in deciding when to finish the exercise.

Some people refer to this way of life as 'mindfulness'. It's not just about being aware of what's going on around us and inside of us, but it's also about seeing the activity of God in all those things, and in particular, sensing the love God has for every part of his creation. It involves putting our own agendas to one side, not just temporarily but over and over again, until we learn to walk through this life at the speed that God intended for us to walk.

So to summarise this week's lesson:

1) Contemplative prayer is the form of prayer which is most exclusively for the purpose of deepening of our love relationship with God through Jesus Christ. In contemplative prayer there is no wish list that we are bringing to God, just a simple desire for awareness of God's presence, and for the opening up of our human heart towards God in love, by the power of the Holy Spirit.

2) Contemplative prayer is very different to any other form of prayer as it is a prayer without words. It is heart to heart prayer – hence it is known as the “prayer of the heart”. It's purpose is not to gain some sort of ecstatic experience, but to bring about a transformation of the human heart. Through it we grow in compassion, both for God and for others.

3) Contemplative prayer begins with learning to be attentive to God (mindful), and less distracted by things around us. For most people this means learning to enjoy silence; firstly externally, and then internally.

End of Summary

Home work

Distribute the handouts.

Over the next week the students should ponder the question - **what does spiritual maturity look like?** They should come back with their own answer at the next class. Possible answers might be:

- a bible verse which sums up spiritual maturity.
- characteristics or personality traits of a person they know whom they consider to be spiritually mature.
- an idea of their own...”I think spiritual maturity looks like...”

Individual Exercise: Each day think of one person that you love and hold a picture of them in your imagination. Gently pray prayers of blessing on them and feel the love you have for them. After a while remember that this person is a gift from God to you and feel the love of gratitude to Him for this person. You can try thinking of a different person each day or keep thinking of the same person.

This can be a very difficult exercise for people to do. An alternative could be to set yourself the task of helping some person in need each day and try to see Jesus in that person; and so love them by your actions as if that person were Jesus.

Read chapters 12 & 14 of the course book.

Prayer Triplet Exercise: Spend half an hour in silence. Begin by one person praying that God will increase the love you each have for Him. Try to focus on your heart and the feelings you have for God. From the silence speak out very brief prayers such as 'have mercy'; 'thank you father'; 'you are holy'...whatever you feel moved to say. Mostly, maintain the silence and try to feel and enjoy God's presence.

And finally...

The class will end with a time of open prayer.

After Class Notes: