

## Contemplative Prayer

To start with I'd like us to have a minute or two together in silence. As we do this I'd like you to simply observe whatever goes on in your mind. I'm not asking you to pray, but just to observe. You might want to close your eyes. So lets do that straight away.....

Thank you. If, like me, your mind was full of a variety of thoughts you are surely not alone. The mind, left to its own devices is inclined to keep very busy. Anyone who has practised meditation or silent prayer will be all too aware of the way in which the mind is full of thoughts: memories, imaginings, projections, anxieties, chit chat and gossip! These are just some of the things that go on in our minds to make up what has been described as a 'noisy cocktail of thoughts'. This conjures up the image of a cocktail party, where people do indeed gossip and chit chat, drifting from one conversation to another.

And so it can be in the mind: our thoughts buzz around in high octave voices clambering for attention, pushing themselves forward, dressing themselves up, putting on a performance, claiming to be of great importance. But to come before God we have no need to put on a good front or dress up for the occasion, or prove how interesting we are, or even to find the right words. Instead, what we need before God is to simply be our true selves, and learn to be quiet and to listen. And so, I am hoping that today you will be able to sit back and listen to some words from of our contemplative Christian tradition: and that the cocktail party in our minds can settle down and be at peace.

Contemplative prayer is an illusive subject, impossible to pin down or put into words, and that is both its challenge and its gift. It's not something that can be explained, and it would be unwise to attempt to do so. As one of the Desert Fathers, Abba Isaiah said *Until your heart is at peace through prayer do not attempt to explain anything to anyone*. So this talk will not give an explanation, but will hopefully shed some light on the subject.

But how do we open our hearts to be at peace through prayer? The Desert Mothers and Fathers, the saints and mystics of our rich tradition have things to say about how to reach into our hearts: not simply our emotions and feelings, but to the very centre or core of our

being, where God can and does transform us from within. These great teachers tell us, from their own experience, that using our own will power is not the way to bring about this transformation. It is only by the grace of God that our hearts can be opened and transformed. What we can do is prepare ourselves as best we can, by being quiet and still and listening to that solitary, silent space within us; waiting in the dark of faith, in the hope that the Holy Spirit may effect this transformation.

What do we mean by prayer in the first place? There are so many aspects to prayer; it takes on many forms. There are prayers of petition and intercession, prayers of thanksgiving and of praise; and many more ways to pray. We pray for ourselves and we pray on behalf of others. We pray with others, and we pray alone. We use words from scripture, the psalms, or from our liturgy, or prayers from the saints, poets and theologians of the past. Sometimes we use our own words and simply say whatever is in our minds and hearts. These are all ways of communicating with God. All of these forms use words. There is also prayer, that takes place in silence, and that is what we will be looking at in a little while. We can say that prayer, in whatever form it takes, is about our relationship with God – with God our Creator, with Jesus Christ, and with the Holy Spirit.

According to some of the great teachers on prayer, the most basic and often overlooked question to ask is who is it doing the praying? We think it is us. We think we initiate it and we choose the time and place, the words and the ritual and the method. But really it is God who is praying within us who initiates the prayer. What we are doing is responding to God's prayer in us. At some deep and hidden level we are moved by that call which is God's prayer from within our hearts. I say hidden because we may not even be aware of it. God is praying in us all the time. We are normally too engrossed with other matters, things on the surface of our lives, to hear God's constant prayer, in us and in the universe, but it is there.

We need to have an understanding of who we are in relation to God. To ask the question Who am I? We are made by God in the image of God, and God lives within us; we might say within our souls. St Teresa of Avila tells us that our soul is a paradise where God lives and is delighted to be. She describes it as a beautiful interior castle with many rooms in which God dwells. The gateway of entry into this castle is prayer. God opens the gate with prayer, we enter in with prayer.

Many think that prayer is all about our minds: of wonderful holy thoughts and reflections, meditations etc. Some struggle with this, find it hard to find the words, or imagine scenes from scripture, or articulate spontaneous intercessions. But they need not fear because these are just methods, the things we do, the rituals and words that we use when we pray. They are not prayer itself. Prayer itself is deeper than that. It is fundamental to who we are. It is our unique relationship with the one who loves us most, and it starts with God. Prayer is another word for love. God is within each and every one of us and is loving us at all times. We are always in relationship with God even when we feel the exact opposite. We may find some of the methods of prayer difficult but we all have the ability to respond to that love. The words and methods we use are not as important as our inner response to that love, that prayer of God who is already praying or loving in us.

Sister Edmee, a contemplative nun from the Community of the Sisters of the Love of God, once said, *Prayer is the very opposite of another activity...for it is the activity of another. ie, the activity of God.*

That's the first and most foundational point I want to make, and shows us that if we want to know God, to become closer to God, we need to listen to God praying in us.

Mother Teresa of Calcutta was once asked 'When you pray, what do you say to God?' She replied 'I don't say anything...I listen' The person asked 'And when God speaks to you what does he say?' She answered 'He doesn't say anything. He listens.'...then she added 'if you can't understand that then I can't explain it'.

To be truly listened to is a great gift. It is one of God's greatest gifts to us and perhaps it is one of the most precious gifts that we can give to God and to one another. To listen whole heartedly we have to stop ourselves from talking! We have to learn to be quiet. And even more than that we have to learn to be still. *'Be still and know that I am God.'* This silence is not just an absence of words, it is also silence of our ideas and our agendas. If our spiritual journey becomes 'my project', something I'm going to achieve and master, then this is not a listening silence. It is a stumbling block and won't get us anywhere..

So today I am sharing some reflections about listening to God, and will introduce a few quotations from our mystical and contemplative tradition written by people whose hearts **were** at peace through prayer. Most of these words are about silence, solitude, and contemplation, in one way or another. These are words that have spoken to me deeply in ways that I cannot explain, and I'm hoping that they will speak to you too. They may not need explanation, but they do need to be heard.

The word 'mystical' has many connotations. I am using it in a way which relates to the mystery or hiddenness of our faith; the mystery or hiddenness of God; the mystery we enter into in contemplative prayer and silence. Words and rational thought are of great value but can only take us so far: there comes a point or a boundary beyond which words simply are no longer adequate in the journey of faith. This is where we enter into the mystical realm.

It is not necessarily about visions or revelations from God, or moments of spiritual ecstasy, although these have been experienced by some of our great mystics. But as they themselves say, these extreme experiences are not the point at all; they are not what the mystic is aiming for. The Christian mystic is aiming and longing for intimate union with God. As he or she comes into a deeper communion with God, so they also come into a deeper communion with all humanity and with all God's creation. One dictionary definition says *a mystic is one who seeks by contemplation and self surrender to obtain unity with, or absorption into, the deity: or one who believes in the spiritual apprehension of truths that are beyond the intellect.*

In mystical theology, and in contemplative prayer, knowledge and understanding of God come through experience of God's love rather than from systematic and intellectual study. This knowledge is different from any other form of knowledge and one that cannot be understood in the way we usually understand. It cannot be pinned down or grasped. It is sometimes called *unknowing*, as in the intriguing title of the anonymously written book of the Middle Ages, *The Cloud of Unknowing*. We might say it is knowledge and understanding of the heart rather than the head. To quote Sister Edmee again:

*In the contemplation of God in prayer our unknown contact with an unknowable God becomes possible.*

Mysticism and contemplative prayer are not just for an ascetic elite. Verena Schiller, who has lived for many years as a Christian hermit in North Wales writes, *In everyone there is a solitary centre and a silent place that longs for attention and space.* Many have a yearning (sometimes a hidden yearning) to find that inner place of mystery where we may communicate with God in a way which is beyond words. Karl Rahner, a well know Roman Catholic theologian of the 20<sup>th</sup> century said *The Christian of the future will be a mystic or he will not exist at all.* Rahner drew from that mystical tradition *...the notion of an apprehension of God in darkness, and experience of the obscure but immediate touch of God.*

If our prayer is truly an expression of love in response to God's love for us, then it surely will grow, in depth and in maturity; because love is not a static thing. Its nature is to be constantly changing and growing. Like the flames in a fire it is alive and transformative. We need to feed that fire to keep the flame of love burning bright within us. We need to commit ourselves to this inner relationship with God. And this can be hard and challenging work.

At times, sitting in silence may seem pointless and even boring because we don't get tangible and immediate results. It is a hidden process. Hidden even from the person who is praying. For, as St John of the Cross writes, *mystical wisdom (which comes through love)... needs **not** to be comprehended distinctly in order to produce love and affection in the soul; it is like faith whereby we love God without comprehending Him.....God the Father spoke one Word, which was his Son, and this word he speaks always in eternal silence and in silence must it be heard.*

Unfortunately, instead of listening to God, we are all too often inclined to want to be in control of our prayer lives and practice. We want to do it properly and as we think it should be done. We think that if we say all the right words, apply all the right methods, and pray often enough, then we should get some results. It's almost as if we want to impress God, to show what good Christians we are. Actually all God wants from us is that we should rest

in God's love. Just rest. And this is contemplative prayer - resting in the love of God with no expectations, no agenda, no requests.

God already knows our every need, our every thought, and our every attempt in prayer. God knows when we struggle in prayer, when we find our thoughts intrude and divert us, when we feel we are failing and when we would like to simply give up! But we need to remember that God's ways are often the direct opposite to ours.

These times of struggle in prayer may be the very times that transformation is taking place. And the reverse is also true: we may feel our experience in prayer is rather wonderful and that we are doing very well. This could indicate the shallowness of our prayer rather than its depth. One way to find out whether we are being genuine and sincere in our prayer lives is to see if we acknowledge that any transformative change is entirely God's doing and nothing that we have merited by our own actions. It takes us by surprise and we are full of gratitude, rather than self congratulation! It is humbling.

If we are to talk about silence in prayer we cannot exclude St Isaac of Nineveh from the conversation. He is sometimes known as St Isaac the Syrian, and more pertinently known as the Saint of Silence. He lived in 7<sup>th</sup> century Syria as a hermit monk for much of his life, and his writings were intended to give teaching and encouragement to others who were drawn towards solitude. He has been, and still is, particularly influential in the Eastern Orthodox Church, but is also recognized in the West and much loved by contemplatives. Here is what he has to say on the subject of silence:-

*Above anything welcome silence for it brings forth fruits that no tongue can speak of, neither can it be explained. At first we compel ourselves to be silent. Then from our silence something is born which draws us towards (deeper) silence...After some time delight is born in the heart from the exercise of this service and by force it draws the body towards remaining in silence... God grant us to perceive that which is born of silence.*

There is so much in these words. Again we see how it is impossible to explain, to put into words the experience of resting in God's silence and stillness. *It brings forth fruits that no tongue can speak of.* Isaac does not give a particular method, but does encourage us to put some effort into staying in silence long enough for the silence to begin to take hold of us, and to draw us further inward and into deeper silence. Then, as he says, after some time, delight is born in the heart, and this delight draws the person praying to remain in that silence: the effort is no longer ours, but we are so to speak, taken over by this delight in our hearts: taken over by God's love. And he asks God to grant us to perceive that indescribable experience which is born of silence.

I have found this quotation from Isaac to be of great help. As something to ponder, something to live with and absorb, something to remember as I settle down into silent prayer. The longer I live with these words the deeper the meaning they take on. They speak from the heart and to the heart.

We move from 7<sup>th</sup> century Syria, to the present day and England, to hear from another person who gives a very general approach to contemplative prayer, which he describes as silent prayer. Benignus O'Rourke, is an Augustinian friar and a member of the community at Clare Priory, Suffolk. He has written a short book called *Finding Your Hidden Treasure, the way of silent prayer*, which is based on the teachings of St Augustine. He manages to convey both the simplicity and the challenge of this silence. He makes it accessible to all who are searching for a deeper meaning in their lives.

He writes the following:- *Augustine had discovered for himself...the mystery of God who hides himself within us. And he realised that silence reveals God as nothing else can. If we journey in stillness to the centre of our being, he tells us, we shall find our true selves and we shall find God who, to use Augustine's own words, 'is nearer to us than we are to ourselves....God speaks to us in the great silence of the heart.'*

I could go on endlessly with quotations about contemplative prayer and silence, but for today that is where I shall leave it. If there is a message in this talk it would be addressed to the contemplative aspect of our human nature. It would say have faith in it. Don't ignore

it. Give it time and space and respect, even if people around us don't understand and try to divert us from it. Even when we don't understand it ourselves and think we may be wasting our time, or avoiding life. Even when it seems that nothing 'happens', and it feels boring, stay with it; because we don't see or feel what God is doing in us. Remember what the mystics tell us: that the work of God is done in silence, hidden from others and even hidden from ourselves.. As we learn to listen to, and participate in that silence, that apparent nothingness, we may find a living wellspring of love – the mystery and the peace of Christ: the living flame of love.

And finally the last word is from Rowan Williams, who made a bold statement about contemplation in his address to the Synod of Bishops in Rome 10<sup>th</sup> October 2012.

*Contemplation is very far from being just one thing that Christians do: it is the key to prayer, liturgy, art and ethics, the key to the essence of a renewed humanity, that is capable of seeing the world and other subjects in the world with freedom – freedom from self-oriented, acquisitive habits and the distorted understanding that comes from them. To put it boldly, contemplation is the only ultimate answer to the unreal and insane world that our financial systems and our advertising culture and our chaotic and unexamined emotions encourage us to inhabit. To learn contemplative practice is to learn what we need so as to live truthfully and honestly and lovingly. It is a deeply revolutionary matter.*

Hetty Kothari Lent 2023

Some of this talk is taken from a longer and more in depth article which was published in Fairacres Chronicle, Winter 2022 Vol. 55, No.2, price £3.00. It is available from [orders@slgpress.co.uk](mailto:orders@slgpress.co.uk)

