

## **The Diocese of Armagh**

### **ON CONTEMPLATIVE PRAYER**

#### ***INTRODUCTION***

I am greatly honoured to be invited by the Archbishop both to take part in his annual 'roadshow' – one his most personal contributions to the life of the Diocese, and to be asked to speak about prayer. Prayer is something personal to each of us, and vital to our spiritual life. In prayer we express our connection with God – and with Jesus.

This evening I would like to do two things: to use a way of praying with the Scriptures; and to explore the use of 'The Jesus Prayer'

#### ***PRAYING WITH THE SCRIPTURES***

There are many ways to do this. I want to use one which brings our imagination to the text of the Bible, especially to passages of the Gospels. I have chosen this because, in my experience it can be powerful, and because, if there are any texts that may be privileged above others in Christian use of the Bible, it is these.

But, before we explore this, I would like to mention one other. This I call 'Ruminative Reading', known more correctly in the Latin as '*lectio divina*'. The allusion to cattle is deliberate. This is a way of very simply digesting the Scriptures, by reading over a passage, perhaps several times, 'chewing over it' until its meaning begins to open up to you. In the course of this, it may be that a particular verse or phrase strikes you. Read over this phrase, and 'chew it over', as its meaning begins to open up to you. Then turn whatever you have been given, whatever insights have come, into prayer.

Our Benedictine friends at the monastery in Rostrevor (whose Prior, Mark-Ephrem Nolan, is an Ecumenical Canon of the Cathedral) do this as part of their daily engagement with Scripture. I do it myself when preparing to preach, but it's not something that I feel qualified to speak about.

The two ways of praying that I am going to speak of are both focussed on Jesus. This reflects something my own faith – centred more on Jesus than on God or the Spirit; that is, centred more on the 2<sup>nd</sup> Person of the Trinity than the 1<sup>st</sup> or the 3<sup>rd</sup>. But not everyone's is. Some relate more naturally to God as Creator, as Mystery; the Father in his inclusiveness, or parent in nurturing; others relate more naturally to the Spirit, in power or gentleness, in direction or wisdom. If your faith is more like that, what I have to share may not necessarily be helpful, unless, perhaps, you are drawn to develop your faith in a Christ-centred direction.

Both ways of praying have a similarity in posture and attentiveness:

We need to be relaxed and comfortable. A straight back is important, and essential to attentiveness. In preparing to pray, we need to become aware of ourselves, and of our breathing. In both, too, we can get distracted (in prayer we always get distracted!), in both we just have to let the distractions go.

Contemplative prayer is 'introspective', in the sense that it takes us deeper into ourselves. I want to offer, therefore, just one little note of caution. I believe that both ways of praying are safe. However, it could happen that praying in this way brings up something that troubles us, perhaps a painful memory, long-buried; or a reminder of something about ourselves that we don't like. We may touch the dark side of ourselves – and we all have a dark side. So, if something hurts, don't force yourself! Don't feel that you have to pray in this way – at least, not now. Find someone with whom you can talk about it, whatever it is, because these things are much better brought out into the open where, in a sense, we can 'see' them, than having them working away inside us.

### ***The Prayer of the Imagination***

We're used to having the Bible interpreted for us. Commentaries give us the historical background to Jesus' life, his parables and teaching. That is fine, important, and necessary. But if we stop there, we can make Jesus a figure of history. Jesus is not history! In our prayer we can – we need to - enter into community / communion with him. (I prefer, incidentally, to speak of communion or community, rather than 'relationship'. 'Relationship' seems to me a cold, analytical word. Once we start talking about 'our relationship', it's probably in trouble!) One way to do this is to enter imaginatively into the events of Jesus' life and ministry, as told in the Gospels, and into Jesus' own teaching in parables. The risen Lord, in whom we believe, is still Jesus of Nazareth.

Our imagination can bring us to Jesus in ways that go beyond Bible study, preaching and teaching. That's not to belittle Bible study: the more we know of the background, the better-informed, the richer, will be our meditation. But our imagination is a God-given faculty to allow us to enter into situations foreign to us, or things of long ago, so that they come to life.

Not that it should run riot! Our meditation needs to be respectful of the biblical text, and cautious of adding to it. It helps to keep our focus on Jesus.

But the imagination is a lively, creative faculty. It may be that in the interaction between our imagination and the biblical text the Holy Spirit can be at work, bringing the text to life; making Jesus real to us – as the evangelists intend.

## **An Example**

I would like to try to lead you through a meditation on the woman bent double – *Luke 13:10-18*. I shall ask you to imagine yourself as the woman.

To prepare, we must get the posture right:

Sit, with back upright, and both feet on the floor.

Put your hands in your lap or on your knees. Close your eyes.

Become aware of your body on the chair ...

Become aware of your breathing ....

Become aware of your pulse, your heart-beat ...

Come, Holy Spirit,  
open our eyes,  
enlighten our minds,  
warm our hearts,  
that we may see Jesus. **Amen.**

Read (perhaps more than once) **Luke 13.10-17**

### *THE WOMAN BENT DOUBLE*

You are the woman – no longer young; bent double for eighteen years; you shuffle with two sticks; to look up, to look around, you have to crane your neck.

Is there pain that cripples you? Where is it? What does it feel like if you try to straighten up?

But it's the Sabbath, and you're going to the Synagogue. Why do you make the effort?

How does it feel as you make your way there, shuffling through dusty streets? Do people look at you? How? Do people speak to you?

You're going into the Synagogue – through the door, turning to the women's side – when a voice calls you – from the men's side; calls you over; calls you to him. Is his a voice that you know?

Crane your neck. Look ahead of you. Do you see him? Do you know him?

Make your way over, with your sticks, until you're in front of him.

***“Woman, you are set free from your infirmity.”*** Hear him as he says it. ***“Woman, you are set free from your infirmity”.***

Feel his hands upon you.

Feel yourself – straightening ....., straightening ....., and standing tall ....., and looking around.

Notice your sticks in your hands now. Do you need them? What do you do with them?

How do you feel? What do you want to do?

But stop! There's a chill in the air. The synagogue president is on his feet, shouting. This is the Sabbath! Look around at the faces. They're all looking at you. What do you see? Nervousness? Embarrassment? Anger? Disapproval?

How do you feel now? What do you do?

But HE's beside you, standing beside you, speaking up for you. They water their animals on the Sabbath – give them what they need – of course they do! And you've been bound for eighteen years. Why shouldn't you have what you need – your freedom – on the Sabbath?

Look around at them again, the men and the women, with Jesus beside you. How do they react? Some turning away, shamefaced, muttering?

What about the others? Are the smiles breaking out again: People getting to their feet. Can you see the joy breaking through? People coming over to you?

What do you do?

And what does Jesus do?

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This is a way of praying that anyone can do. It doesn't have to be led. It takes time, quiet, patience, stillness. And you can always come back to it.

You can imagine your way through a Gospel story as any one of those involved – someone who comes to Jesus, a disciple, a bystander, even an opponent, anyone but Jesus.

You can imagine your way through some of the parables – the Rich Man and Lazarus, say, or the Prodigal Son / the Two Sons.

You may even try 'updating' a parable: Where might the younger son go today? What would become of him (or even her?) in the recession? How would he get home? How would the welcome come about?

It's all about coming to Jesus, knowing Jesus, and hearing his word to us.

## **THE JESUS PRAYER**

'The Jesus Prayer', also known as 'The Prayer of the Heart' involves the repeated use of the phrase: "Lord Jesus Christ Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner".

There is nothing quite fixed about the Jesus Prayer. I have come across variation in the words, in the way of praying it, and in the posture for praying it. I can only share with you what I have received, and worked out, and what seems best to me.

The Prayer itself is found in the Book of Common Prayer 2004 – Ministry to the Sick, p. 451. It is not, however, intended to be restricted to use in sickness; and the Prayer Book tells nothing of how to pray it

The prayer is based on two verses from St Luke: the prayer of the blind man outside Jericho, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" (18:38); and the prayer of the tax collector in the Temple, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!" (18:13b).

The prayer expresses our faith in a nutshell. It addresses Jesus as we believe he is:

- Lord – the exalted one, the crucified and reigning one;
- Jesus – the Saviour – who will save his people from their sins (*Matthew 1:21*);
- Christ – the Anointed One, Spirit-anointed at his baptism, the Spirit-anointed king and ruler of his people; the Messiah;
- Son of God – first confessed, in death, by a centurion (*Mark 15:29*); declared as such by his resurrection (*Romans 1:4*); both the subject and the author of the Good News (*Mark 1:1*)

It brings us to Jesus as we are:

- sinners – each and every one of us,
- individually (*Romans 3:23*) and as enmeshed in the sin of the world.

So the prayer expresses that very ancient prayer in the liturgy of the Church- *Kyrie eleison* – Lord, have mercy, a prayer that we still use today.

For me, when I'm praying this prayer, I'm kneeling at the foot of the cross, the cross of him who reveals in his crucifixion and death the glory, the being, the love, the Presence of God (*John 11:23; 13:31*). To put it another way, I am kneeling at the cross of him who, crucified, is 'the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world' (*John 1:29*).

The point of the prayer, repeating it over and over again, is that it become part of you; part of one's self; that the prayer descends from the mind into the heart. In Hebrew understanding the heart is the centre of our personality. If the prayer

descends there, it goes on living and praying there –even when we’re unaware of it – at the core of our being; keeping us in touch with Jesus at the heart of our faith.

### ***The History of the Prayer***

The Jesus Prayer is part of the Hesychast tradition of Orthodox spirituality – from the Greek word *hesychia*, meaning ‘quietness’, ‘stillness’, tranquillity. *Hesychia* is a spirituality of inwardness, of attention – not unlike the contemporary interest in ‘mindfulness’.

This is the spiritual tradition of the Russian Orthodox ‘Staretz’, or holy man, possessed of extraordinary insight, of whom the first and greatest was the nineteenth century St Seraphim of Sarov. It is also the tradition of countless thousands of ordinary Orthodox Christians.

Hesychasm seeks ‘the kingdom within’ (*Luke 17:21*); seeks an inward purification; seeks an encounter with God beyond words, images and ideas; seeks communion in God.

Hesychasm is a spiritual tradition that evolved from people like Gregory of Nyssa in the Fourth Century. The first of its authors to use the Jesus Prayer is St John Climacus in the Seventh Century. The tradition was further developed by St Gregory Palamas in the Fourteenth Century, that is, before the Reformation which divided western Christianity.

This is a very ancient Christian tradition, rooted in scripture, seeking in prayer communion with God in Christ, in a way that is, for all its inward focus, transformative of the way in which we live in this world.

### ***Objections and Parallels***

It might be objected that this repeated use of a phrase, like a mantra, is like non-Christian religious practise, as in Buddhism or Sufi Islam?’

The answer is, ‘Yes!’ There are parallels between the world’s great religious traditions. The World Community for Christian Meditation is based on the work of a Benedictine monk who first learnt his meditation from Buddhism, and only later discovered that meditation has Christian roots. So there are similarities, but also differences.

The World Community for Christian Meditation recommends repeating the Aramaic word, familiar from the New Testament, *Maranatha* – Our Lord, come! This method,

like the Buddhist one, seeks to empty the mind of everything. It is close to the recommendation of the English fifteenth century author of 'The Cloud of Unknowing' (which was my first encounter with mystical writing), who recommends meditation on the word 'God', and nothing more.

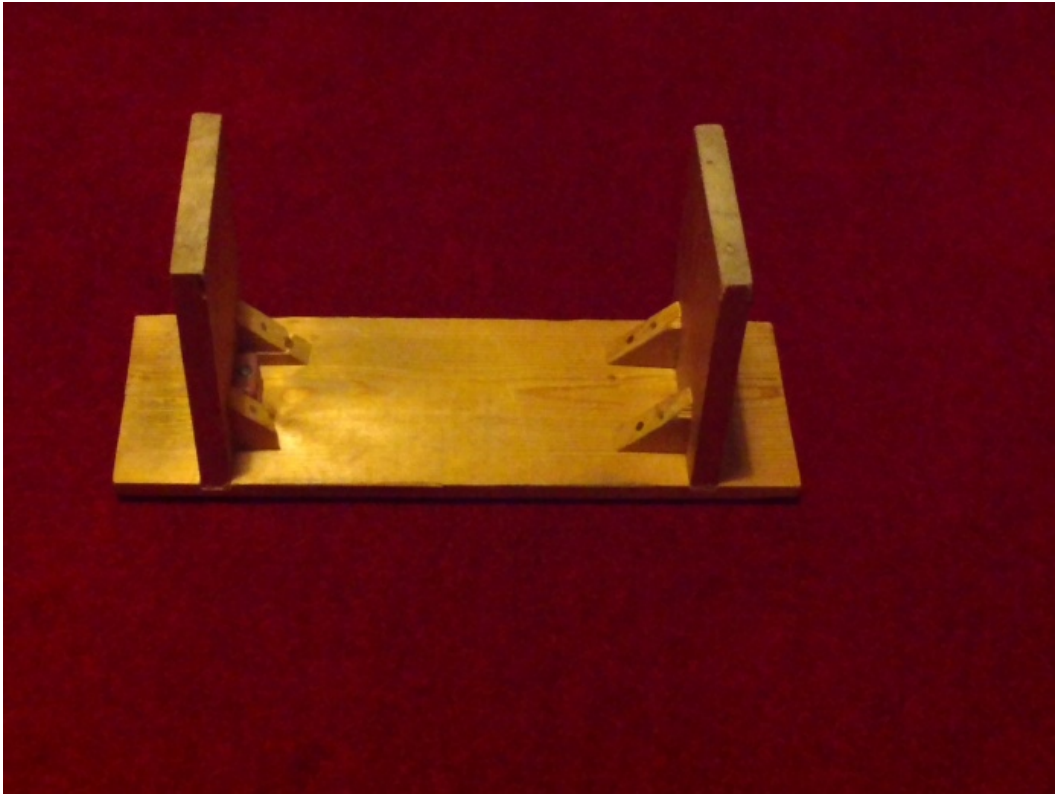
I prefer the Jesus Prayer because it is Christ-centred and relational. To descend into one's own emptiness, as the other methods recommend, should not be done without the accompaniment of a spiritual guide or director. The Jesus Prayer is, in my understanding, safe, and for everybody. However inadequately, it has become part of my spiritual life.

### ***How to pray it?***

First it needs the same sort of upright, attentive posture as in other forms of meditation.

I have also found helpful something which (to my knowledge) isn't part of the tradition: a ***prayer stool*** (see below) – home-made, from an off-cut of floor board. It helps to keep the back upright and supported while kneeling. (Church furnishers can supply these – upholstered! – which is unnecessary). You kneel on the floor, and slip the stool under your bottom.





For those who want to take the Jesus Prayer seriously, a **knotted prayer-rope** is a help, in Russian, a *chotki*, in Greek, a *komvoschoinion*. You could start, as I did, by knotting a piece of string. You hold the rope in your fingers, moving along on knot every time you say the prayer.









Almighty God,  
you have made us for yourself,  
and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you;  
teach us to offer ourselves to your service,  
that here we may have your peace,  
and in the world to come may see you face to face;  
through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

Gregory Dunstan  
Revised 17<sup>th</sup> November 2015

## NOTES

Dimensions of the **prayer stool** illustrated:

Length – 45 cm

Width – 14.3 cm

Thickness – 1.8 cm

Legs inset from end – 5.5 cm

Height of Legs: Tall side – 19 cm Short side – 18 cm

Mortice the legs into the plank, glue, and brace for stability.

None of the above dimensions is critical. Make sure it's comfortable, safe and stable.

A **Chotki**, with 33, 50 or 100 knots, may be obtained from St George Orthodox Information Service (SGOIS) (<http://www.sgois.co.uk/>)

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