

“PATTERNS OF PRAYER”

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IV. CONTEMPLATIVE MEDITATION

We should understand clearly that we cannot return to God unless we first enter into ourselves. God is everywhere. But he is not everywhere to us. It is only in the centre of our own soul that God speaks with us. He meets us there. He speaks to us there heart-to-heart. Therefore, to seek God and to find him, we must enter into the hidden sanctuary of our own heart.

Archbishop Ullathorne

There are many ways of praying just as there are many ways of living. Contemplative Meditation is both a way of prayer and a way of life. It is one particular response in faith to the reality of God’s presence in the world. It is neither difficult nor mysterious. Rather, it is the natural response of a child of God who turns to his Father in simplicity and love. It is a prayer of confidence, based on the Gospel promise, ‘If anyone loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him and we will come to him and make our home with him’.¹ It takes as its starting point our Lord’s assurance, ‘No need to use many words in prayer. Your heavenly Father knows well enough your needs before you ask him’.²

To pray is to love

In general, to contemplate means to look. In prayer this looking is neither physical nor intellectual. It is a looking in faith and in love. A living faith and a loving heart are the very breath of all true contemplative prayer. In prayer, St Teresa reminds us, ‘the important thing is not to think much, but to love much’. Prayer is not just having nice thoughts about God or experiencing fine feelings or emotions. Rather it is a being with him in faith and a looking towards him in love: an entering into the mystery of a real and personal God in whose love we share.

In the same way, to meditate means to think, to reflect or to ponder. But the meditation we are concerned with here is not a mere thinking process, with God as the end result. Rather, it is a deep, prayerful attentiveness by which we get in touch with our own inner selves, so that we can be more open to God who is within. The word ‘meditation’ comes from the Latin stare in medio, to stand or abide in the centre. The centring is not on ourselves, but on God. This

¹ John 14:23

² Matthew 6:7-8

loving and attentive pondering on God and on his word is what the Desert Fathers call 'the prayer of the heart': the prayer of the whole person standing before God with the 'head in the heart'.

Contemplative meditation, then, is a way of prayer and a way of love. In contemplative meditation loving is more important than thinking, listening more important than asking, being more important than doing, and a deep and attentive silence the most important of all.

Who prays?

In prayer we reach out to God as he is in himself. But it is sometimes helpful, perhaps even essential, to step back a little so as first of all to find ourselves. After all, it is the 'me' who prays – the whole person, body as well as soul, and not just some part of me, mind or will or head. Sometimes distractions and difficulties in prayer come from forgetting the obvious fact that we are not angels but men and women of flesh and blood. It is not just that I have a body. Rather, I am a body. I am a unity made up of both body and soul: a spiritual body and an incarnate soul.

Nor is it sufficient to say that I 'use' my body in prayer. No, the body itself prays. It is part of my total response to God, the visible expression of the hidden workings of grace in my soul. When I stand before God in prayer, my body too has a right to stand with me in prayer and worship. Just as the body is the principal way by which I communicate with others and is itself part of the communication, so too in prayer it can and should be part of my communication with God.

Respect and reverence for the body is a deeply Christian thing, a natural consequence of belief in the goodness of all God's creation and of its sanctification in Christ through the mystery of the Incarnation. 'Surely you know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit', St Paul reminds the Corinthians; 'glorify God by making your bodies the shrines of his presence'.³ With good reason, then, we emphasise the total involvement of the body in prayer, especially contemplative prayer. Such things as breathing, relaxation, sensory awareness and bodily posture play an important part in helping me to love God not just with mind and soul, but with body and heart as well. They help me not only to appreciate, but even to create the stillness and silence essential for prayer, to be more present to myself so that I can be more open to God, to be more aware not only of who God is, but of who I am. When I pray with my body, I put body into my prayer.

³ 1 Corinthians 6:19-20

Presence

Contemplative meditation is essentially a prayer of presence. It is in this sense that prayer has been described as 'being present to Presence'. In prayer we do not have to make God present. He is not 'here' or 'there'. He is one, unique and indivisible, and through creation he has communicated his presence to all things: 'In him we live and move and have our being'.⁴ The glory of our human nature is that we can consciously reflect and lovingly respond to this self-communicating presence of God. And this, not only to him as the Creator-God who holds all things in being by his power and his knowledge, but as a Friend and a Father who comes to dwell within: 'the sweet Guest of the soul'.

There are many kinds of presence and different ways of responding to each. Among friends the nature of presence depends on the quality of love, and God's presence is no exception. I can be more present to a friend on the telephone or while writing a letter than to a total stranger who is sitting beside me on the train. As in human friendships, so also in divine: it is the quality of the relationship that determines the presence. With God there is both physical presence and a relationship of personal love and friendship. He is totally present to me in love: he loves me unconditionally and without distraction. His invitation is for me to share this presence in faith and in love: to be present to him through awareness, attentive listening and loving attention. Prayer, and especially contemplative meditation is my response to this personal self-giving of God in love. 'However quietly we speak, he is so near that he will hear us', St Teresa reminds us. 'We need no wings to go in search of him, but have only to find a place where we can be alone and look at him present within us'.

Awareness

Awareness is the quality of my presence to someone or something. It is the art of letting the thoughts flow around a particular idea or image, looking at something actively but without words. Being a state of wakefulness and attentiveness, it is the very opposite of a stare or a drifting into an objectless void. Rather, it is an active attentiveness and a loving concentration on one particular aspect of reality here and now present. Awareness is always concerned with the present moment and the concrete reality of its immediate experience. It is the one-pointed-ness of which the Zen mystics speak, the single-mindedness of the *Cloud of Unknowing*, the 'recollection' so dear to St Teresa and the 'purity of heart' which Jesus assures us is blessed with the vision of God.⁵

In this sense, attention is the key to contemplative meditation, attention to the here and now, the present reality of God within. 'Remember how important it is to understand this truth', St Teresa says, 'that the Lord is within and that we should be there with him'. Thomas Merton expresses the same truth when he says,

⁴ Acts 17:28

⁵ Matthew 5:8

In prayer you discover what you already have through the indwelling Spirit of God and your incorporation through baptism into Christ... you start where you are and you deepen what you already have...all you need is to experience what you already possess.

Through awareness, in loving attention, I allow my consciousness to be filled with the mystery of God as revealed in Jesus Christ. It is an attention that is alert though still, gentle yet active, selfless yet involving the whole person. It is the prayer of someone fully alive to the glory and the presence of God.

Prayer Word

The link between presence and awareness in contemplative meditation is the prayer-word. This is the searchlight or the radar, as it were, that carries my awareness into the presence of God. The prayer-word or mantra is a love-word that helps to focus my attention on God and keep my mind from wandering. It is a short, simple, loving prayer spoken over and over again in the mind, in the heart and in the spirit. Not only has it got direction, it has power as well: power to deepen my awareness, power to create stillness and carry my attention into the deeper silence where God reveals himself beyond words, thoughts and images.

The New Testament is full of beautiful examples of prayer words: 'Lord, that I may see';⁶ 'Lord, be merciful to me, a sinner';⁷ 'Come, Lord Jesus',⁸ In his own prayer and in his teaching Jesus gives us many prayer-words: 'Not my will but thine be done';⁹ 'Into your hands I commend my spirit'¹⁰ and the petitions of the Our Father¹¹ are examples. The author of the *Cloud of Unknowing* speaks of the use of a 'little word' and suggests a word of one syllable like 'God' or 'love'.

It is important to use a phrase or word that is short, simple and meaningful for you personally. Once you have found your prayer-word all that is necessary is to say it slowly, with full attention and with love. You don't need to think a lot about it or to force meaning into it; rather, it should reveal its deeper meaning back to you. The name 'Jesus' for example, or the phrase 'My Lord and my God' are compendiums of the whole Gospel and can reveal ever deeper levels of meaning and insight. So as we say our prayer-word, first of all in our mind and then in our heart, we listen to the deeper vibrations of the Spirit speaking to us from within and drawing us more and more into silence.

⁶ Luke 18:41

⁷ Luke 18:13

⁸ Revelation 22:20

⁹ Luke 22:42

¹⁰ Luke 23:46

¹¹ Matthew 6:9-13