



**A Lent Talk at Wells Cathedral, given on
Wednesday 18 March by the Reverend Mary Lewis,
Priest Vicar**

Contemplative Prayer

Welcome to this talk on contemplative prayer given as part of the Lent series of talks.

The word contemplation originates from the Latin *contemplatio*, meaning "to gaze attentively", which was used to translate the Greek word *theoria*, which means, looking at, observing or meditating upon something; so appropriate if one is seeking to gaze upon God.

Here are some definitions of contemplative prayer. The first one comes from Egypt where contemplative prayer originated, rooted in the meditative practices of the Desert Fathers and Mothers of the 3rd and 4th centuries, who aimed to "pray without ceasing".

"About prayer itself they had little to say; the life, turned towards God, was the prayer; and about contemplation, who could speak? The usual pattern was to say the psalms, one after another through the week, and to intersperse this with weaving ropes, sometimes saying a phrase to still the mind such as 'Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy upon me'. The aim was *hesychia*, meaning quiet, the calm through the whole person that is like a still pool of water capable of reflecting the sun".

This description of contemplative prayer as lived by the Desert Fathers and Mothers describes a life of peace turned towards God, through the saying of the psalms, and a repeated word or words, supported by quiet manual work. I especially like the phrase, "and about contemplation, who could speak"? For yes, we are talking about something that is beyond words; so how indeed can one talk about it! It is more about love than anything - a falling in love with God who is love. It is a form of wordless, silent, and receptive prayer that goes beyond words where the mind is active to a direct, loving awareness of God's presence.

A definition of contemplative prayer by the 4th century monk Evagrius is simply, "the laying aside of thoughts". Such conscious letting go of attachment to thoughts is the core of contemplative practice, for this allows the opening of mind and heart to the mystery of God, who dwells beyond words and thoughts

- beyond the psychological content of the present moment. To lay aside thoughts is to open the heart to the mystery of God. But this is always challenging and much teaching on contemplative prayer is about how to lay aside thoughts and avoid such distractions.

A definition from the 6th century by Pope Gregory the Great, describes contemplative prayer as the knowledge of God that is impregnated with love. His emphasis on love is crucial, for our love for God and God's love for us are essential components of prayer.

If we fast forward to the 20th century, the late Fr Thomas Keating, an American Cistercian wrote, "Contemplative prayer is an experience leading to the abiding state of union with God. And the root of such prayer is interior silence". Thomas Keating is here bringing in a further aspect of contemplative prayer when he mentions how this prayer leads to a transformation of consciousness, from a consciousness that experiences ourselves as separate from God and creation, into what he calls unitive consciousness - a consciousness that is aware of God with us or even within us. A more accessible way to put this may be that contemplative prayer enables an awareness of a larger reality than the one we experience in our day-to-day life. We do not and never can become God, such union as can exist is a mystery of grace although perhaps we catch a glimpse of it in the Second Letter to the Corinthians where Paul explains that as Christians contemplate or "behold" the glory of the Lord, they are progressively transformed into his image from one degree of glory to another. (2 Cor 3.18). The orthodox teaching on this is helpful. The late Bishop Kallistos Ware writes, "While a union of love constitutes the true aim of contemplative prayer, this is a union with God in his energies, not in his essence. A human person can never become an additional member of the Trinity, God remains God and man remains man, but a human person can become god with a small 'g' by grace, but not in essence. We can through grace participate in the energies of God, that is to say, in his life and glory, but God will always remain wholly other".

The American Franciscan Father Richard Rohr, who at the present time directs a Centre for Action and Contemplation, when asked what contemplative prayer is, said contemplative prayer "refers to a deeper consciousness which is not about 'saying prayers' but rather living in conscious union with God and everything around us. Whatever one does then becomes prayer, which is why St Paul could say "pray without ceasing". For Richard Rohr, contemplative prayer is about rewiring the mind so that everything one does is open to the mystery of God. But this takes practice and that practice forms the beginning of contemplative prayer.

Before I go further, I am aware that the title contemplative prayer sounds rather grand, as if there is almost a hierarchy of types of prayer; but this is not the case

at all. Contemplative prayer is complimentary to other forms of prayer, and all forms of prayer are valid and worthwhile and can lead to contemplative experience. And there are many other names for it which you might find more useful and more encouraging such as, centering prayer, silent prayer, interior prayer, prayer of the heart or simply Christian meditation. In this talk I will be using a mix of these titles, as they are all descriptive of prayer that is focused internally on Christ within, rather than addressed to a God who is outside ourselves.

If contemplative prayer originated with the monastic tradition of the desert, has the Bible anything to teach us about contemplative prayer? Well in a sense the whole of scripture is seeking to turn our hearts and minds towards God that we may gaze on him, and Jesus' life and ministry are enveloped in prayer of many kinds. There are specific situations in the Gospels where we find Jesus praying alone and in silence. We read in Luke chapter 5 verse 16, "Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed". Jesus was always praying to his Father in order to know his will, in order to gain strength for tasks ahead, in order to be given guidance over decisions that had to be made like choosing the twelve apostles, but also in order to simply be in conscious union with his Father. But Jesus gives us no explicit method of prayer apart from the Lord's Prayer itself and the instruction in Matthew chapter 6 verse 6, "When you pray, go into your room, shut the door and pray to your Father, who is in secret; and your Father, who sees in secret will reward you". This does not specify an exact type of prayer but is suggestive of interior, silent prayer, of prayer that is reaching out in love to God.

Another Biblical text which illuminates the search for interior prayer further is from Luke chapter 17 verses 20 -21 when Jesus says, "The Kingdom of God does not come in such a way as to be seen. No one will say 'look here it is', or 'there it is' for the kingdom of God is within you".

And there is that wonderful phrase from Psalm 46 verse 10, "Be still, and know that I am God".

There are passages in the letters of St Paul which also indicate some form of interior prayer. In Ephesians chapter 3 verse 17 to 19 we read, "That Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith; that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth, and length, and depth, and height; and to know the love of Christ, which passeth knowledge, that you might be filled with all the fullness of God".

From such quotations, we learn that there are many instances of prayer in the Bible that are taking place more in the heart than in the head, that are about an inner journey, a journey to seek the kingdom that is within, a journey to find

interior stillness and silence, a journey to open ourselves to the love of Christ that dwells in our hearts, a journey into the mystery of God, a journey which will lead us to simply 'be' in the presence of God and through grace come to know the fullness of God.

So in the prayer that may be called contemplative we seek to silence the mind, to let go of thoughts and words, of petitions and intercessions, that keep the mind active, and instead place ourselves with love, in stillness and silence, before the presence of God, in order that the grace of the Holy Spirit may grow in our hearts unimpeded by our minds or our ego's activities. To practice such emptying and stillness deepens our love for God and our relationship with him and allows what might be described as a new clarity of consciousness or awareness to emerge.

So where does this journey into interior silent prayer begin for in one sense we are now and always connected with God? However, we are not on the whole aware that we are always in relationship with a loving God. And this is in a sense a problem because we often or mostly, live as separated from the source of Love and seek to compensate for this in ways that are often destructive to ourselves or others. We can know theoretically of our true relationship with God through theological insight and study of scripture and we might experience moments of transcendence at any time, uplifted in church worship by prayer or music, while watching a sunset, or through the joy of being with someone we love. God is never limited in what gifts of grace he may give anyone at any time. And the sacred is all about us. But usually these are but moments. If we yearn to know the love of God more deeply, not as a theory in the mind, but as an experience of the heart, so that more of our lives are lived with awareness of the presence of God, we may feel called to the practice of contemplative prayer, which offers an opportunity for such growth into the love of Christ, into the very life of God. And once one has tasted of such interior silence, one may be drawn to it and long for the silence out of which such peace can grow and a deeper sense of the mystery and presence of Christ emerge.

And while contemplative prayer offers the possibility of enriching our lives through greater awareness and love for all that exists, we also discover that this is not ultimately something we are doing for ourselves at all. Our present social culture and even our church culture, often gives us the impression that any time spent in silence, even though it may be a very small part of each day, which is not producing anything or actively doing something for someone else, or achieving something which can be measured, is a selfish waste of time. But in fact, this practice of prayer, in a way that is deeply mysterious, is making a contribution to the salvation of the world and is never a waste of time!

But a further problem for us is that the very possibility of union with God, and of an interior transformation of our consciousness, has been forgotten and not taught by the western church for the last several centuries. To give people confidence that such transformative prayer is possible Thomas Keating wrote in his *Guidelines for Christian Life, Growth and Transformation*, "The fundamental goodness of human nature, like the mystery of the Trinity, is an essential element of Christian faith. This basic core of goodness is capable of unlimited development; indeed, of becoming transformed into Christ and deified".

While such theology and spirituality were lost in the West, it has never been lost in the Eastern Orthodox church where the Jesus Prayer has been known and practised since the days of the Desert Fathers of Egypt and Syria. It spread from there into Greece, especially into the monasteries of Mount Athos and also into Russia where, the Jesus prayer took root. This prayer which in its full form is, "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the living God, have mercy upon me a sinner", is repeated for particular lengths of time, or even throughout the day, and has become the foundation of Eastern Orthodox spirituality. It is a very well-trying practice through which to enter into contemplation and is now used widely in the west as well as the east.

The Jesus prayer is a combination of biblical words and phrases, the principal one being from the Parable of the Pharisee and the Publican of Luke 18.13 when the publican prays in humility, "God be merciful to me a sinner". The late Bishop Kallistos Ware wrote in his book *The Orthodox Way*, "The Jesus Prayer begins as an oral prayer like any other. But the rhythmic repetition of the phrase enables the one who prays to go beyond all language and images into the mystery of God. In this way the Jesus Prayer develops, with God's help, into what has been called the "prayer of loving attention", where the soul rests in God without a constantly varying succession of images, ideas or feelings. Eventually it may even become the prayer of 'Christ in me'".

Bishop Kallistos goes on to say, the use of the Jesus Prayer is "not to be understood in a negative sense as the absence of speech and outward activity, but it denotes in a positive way the openness of the human heart towards God's love". And he continues that the one who prays this prayer, "as well as entering into the prayer of stillness, uses other forms of prayer as well, sharing in corporate liturgical worship, reading Scripture, and receiving the sacraments. Each form of prayer strengthens the other. They are not alternatives".

After the Reformation, the western church entered a time which split the mind from the heart, and so the practice of contemplative prayer that awakens and connects our inner being to the Being of Christ was lost.

St Augustine wrote even as early as the 4th century in his autobiographical work *Confessions*, "O Beauty ever ancient, ever new. Too late have I loved you. I was outside and you were within me. And I never found you. Until I found you within myself". (Bk 10 ch 27)

Despite such insights from a number of theologians through the years, the practice of contemplative prayer was only recovered on a wide basis in the west in the 20th century; firstly, by the Cistercian monk Thomas Merton, and then the Benedictine monk John Main who made contemplative prayer much more accessible for all by advocating a simple method of repeating a phrase in time with the breath with the aim of focussing the unruly mind and enabling a person to find a stillness beyond thoughts, in the depths of the heart - a practice which many have found helpful and which is practiced today very widely.

We have seen how interior prayer was part of Jesus' life but not of course given a special name. Many early Christians may well have practised some form of interior prayer, and the 3rd century theologian Origen wrote a book on prayer which includes comments on the text from Luke that the "Kingdom is within one". He wrote, "Every person is subject to God's reign and obeys the spiritual laws of God who dwells in him as in a well-governed city.... the Father is present within him and Christ reigns with the Father in the soul ...for those of us who press forward unceasingly, the kingdom of God which is within us will reach its full completion ...and so let us pray unremittingly in the spirit which the Word inspires in us ...".

After Origen we have already heard how the hermits who settled in the deserts of Egypt and Syria sought to live a contemplative spirituality based on continuous prayer with an emphasis on the indwelling presence of Christ. These early desert monks used a formula, a short biblical verse, in order to help them silence the mind and bring them to an interior silence. And we are indebted to one particular monk called John Cassian who is celebrated in both the east and the west for his mystical writing and for his description of the prayer practice of the desert.

John Cassian was born in the year 360 CE in Eastern Europe. He became a monk and travelled to Egypt where he lived with the desert fathers for up to ten years. He spent the last years of his life in Marseilles, in France, where he founded a monastery and wrote several influential papers about the monastic life and prayer from his time in Egypt called *The Institutes and Conferences*. The Institutes are about the external organisation of a monastery, while the Conferences give guidance on the training of the inner person. Here is the guidance on prayer that he learnt from Abba Isaac, "Those who seek to pray must keep their minds in silence and stillness. If the mind wanders, as it surely will, he urged them to repeat the first verse of Psalm 70, 'O God, make speed to save me; O Lord,

make haste to help me". And Abba Isaac added, "Restrict yourself to the poverty of this simple verse, and reject all the abundant riches of thought and words that will come into your mind. This verse must always be in your heart". Abba Isaac also told Cassian to repeat the verse both in prosperity and adversity. And this is where we find the tradition for repeating a continuous phrase or mantra in our daily times of meditation or prayer.

And so, it was John Cassian who brought the practice of contemplative prayer into Western Europe, and he was the teacher of St Benedict and St Benedict instructed that Cassian's text be read regularly in the monasteries of his rule. And this is how contemplative prayer spread throughout the West in the Medieval period.

From the origins of contemplative prayer in the desert, and of how it spread through European monastic communities, I now turn to England and to the English connection with this tradition and especially to one of England's great spiritual classics called, *The Cloud of Unknowing*. The work is anonymous, but the author was almost certainly a Catholic priest or monk, who was a spiritual master and guide. We know that it was written in the 14th century in England, almost certainly for someone who was being instructed in contemplative prayer, and it draws on the teaching of John Cassian amongst others. The author conveys the fathomless mystery of God and that God can only be known by love.

Hence the central theme of *The Cloud* is that God cannot be reached by the mind or by thought but only by the silent prayer of love that can reach up into, what he imaginatively calls the cloud of unknowing. We can never fully know or see God, however holy we are - even Moses, in Exodus, chapter 33, was only allowed to see the back of God, so the author teaches that the nearest we can come to God which is not a mental image of him, is to approach him through a way of "unknowing".

The author of *The Cloud* teaches how a repeated word or phrase can be used to pierce the cloud of unknowing where God resides. He would surely have approved of the use of the Jesus Prayer, but his preference is to encourage the use of just one word rather than a phrase. He says, "We must pray in the height, depth, length and breath of our spirit, not in many words but in a little word". And he urges the one who seeks to pray in this way to set aside all thoughts, words and imagination and consign everything to what he calls the cloud of forgetting. His argument is that if we can let go of all our thoughts and feelings into an imaginary cloud of forgetting that is beneath us, we will be that much nearer God, who dwells in the cloud of unknowing which is above us. He describes this further,

"So, when you feel by the grace of God that he is calling you to this work, and you intend to respond, lift your heart to God with humble love. And really mean God himself who created you, and bought you, and graciously called you to this state of life. And think no other thought of him. It all depends on your desire. A loving intention directed to God, and himself alone, is wholly sufficient". He continues with this practical guidance,

"If you want this intention summed up in a word, to retain it more easily, take a short word, preferably of one syllable, being more like the working of the Spirit. A word like 'God' or 'Love'. And fix this word fast to your heart, so that it is always there come what may. It will be your shield and spear in peace and war alike. With this word you will hammer the cloud and the darkness above you. With this word you will suppress all thought under the cloud of forgetting".

Another insight from the *Cloud of Unknowing*, concerns the problem of distractions in contemplative prayer, which keep us from the stillness and silence of our minds and hearts, for this is not only a problem that we may be manifesting on account of our own restlessness but the author of the *Cloud* says that this prayer, or work of the soul, as he calls it, is the work that pleases God most and the saints and angels rejoice over it and hasten it on with all their might. However, the demons are less pleased; they are furious at our attempt to love God and come close to him and try to defeat it in every conceivable way. Now we may not believe in the devil, but we can surely acknowledge powers, or energies, in the world that work against the common good. What is being described here are not of course physical beings but negative thoughts that sneak into our minds and try to persuade us to give this prayer up ... they whisper....it is of no use it is too hard ... it is too selfishit is a waste of time, why not do something useful?

But the author of the *Cloud* not only says that it is the work that pleases God most but that the whole of humankind is wonderfully helped by it in ways we do not understand. "Yes, the very souls in purgatory find their pain eased by virtue of this work".

And another insight from the *Cloud* concerns the use of the repetition of a word or phrase. Jesus teaches in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 6 verse 7, "When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think they will be heard because of their many words". This verse may have led some to be cautious about the validity of contemplative prayer, but for the author of the *Cloud*, there is no problem as long as, every time we silently repeat the word or the phrase that we have chosen for our time of prayer, we say it with love, with the intention to love God.

Well so far in this brief overview of a history of contemplative prayer we have made it to the 14th century. Before we move on, I want to acknowledge what an extraordinary century that was for mystical prayer. In his introduction to the *Cloud of Unknowing*, Clifton Walters writes, "The Cloud of Unknowing springs from an age when English mysticism was in full flower, when Richard Rolle, Walter Hilton, the author of the *Cloud* and Julian of Norwich, were writing with such timelessness and reality that their influence is as great today as it has ever been since that remarkable inexplicable century". In this talk there is no time to think about all these great mystics but I cannot quite let Julian of Norwich go by without a mention for in her work, *The Revelations of Divine Love*, she describes the soul as being "oned" to God in its essence, specifically explaining that God is our "being" and that our soul dwells in God. "Greatly ought we to rejoice that God dwells in our soul; and more greatly ought we to rejoice that our soul dwells in God".

The whole of the Western church was in fact alive with an understanding of the depths of the spiritual life at this time if one thinks of other mystics such as Mechtild of Magdeburg, Eckhart, Catherine of Siena and Thomas à Kempis. The surprising thing about this upsurge in spirituality is that it happened when it did. Western Europe was in the middle of the Hundred Years war; the Black Death was decimating every country it entered; and the Papacy was about to split in two. It was in such a time that mysticism and contemplative prayer thrived, and people turned from the political, social and church storms to consider rather the calm depths that lay beneath.

But what happened next? A positive attitude towards contemplation and the contemplative life in the church had characterized the first fifteen centuries of the Christian era but unfortunately, since the Reformation in the 16th century, a negative attitude has prevailed., despite the great works on mysticism by such writers as St John of the Cross, St Theresa of Avila and St Ignatius. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries if prayer was taught at all, it was mainly to monks and nuns in enclosed communities and then it was always discursive prayer, involving meditation on a text which was usually from the Scriptures or the Fathers of the Church, often based on the imaginative, scriptural exercises of St Ignatius, which can open into contemplative prayer. Contemplation was often identified with extraordinary phenomena, and was regarded as both miraculous and dangerous, to be admired from a safe distance by laity and clergy alike.

Thomas Keating in his book *Open Mind, Open Heart, the Contemplative dimension of the Gospel*, wrote, "The final nail hammered into the coffin of the traditional teaching was that it would be arrogant to aspire to contemplative prayer. Even clergy were then presented with a truncated view of the spiritual life, one that

did not accord with scripture, tradition and the normal experience of growth in prayer". This could lead to much frustration.

So what has enabled a renewed interest in contemplative prayer in our time? One reason is that theological study and general interest in spirituality have rediscovered the profound teaching on prayer and the spiritual life that has always been part of Christianity and yet has been so neglected. Another reason is the post-World War II challenge of the East when methods of meditation similar to contemplative prayer have received much publicity through people visiting Indian ashrams in particular and then through the writing of Thomas Merton, who wrote a book called *Contemplative Prayer* but whose whole output inspires one to search for God and an authentic spiritual life, as well as more recent writers such as John Main and Thomas Keating. In all these authors there is expressed the possibility of rising above our illusion of separation from God and of being immersed in the divine presence where the subject/object distinction disappears.

And what these more recent writers noticed was that there was a thirst for a deeper religious culture than what is often experienced in church. There is a hunger, a God-spaced hole in the heart that people do not know how to fill. And if people have been to the East in search of a meditative practice they are often surprised to discover that Christianity has its very own contemplative tradition, but it is still not widely taught or practiced. We have seen that such prayer is not new but has always been part of religious experience, what is new, as Thomas Keating says is how to communicate it in a way that makes sense for people today. Thankfully many have discovered the wonderful teaching of the medieval mystics and are also being helped by John Mains's teaching on Christian meditation or have discovered the Jesus Prayer.

I end with a quotation from Thomas Merton's book *Contemplative Prayer* written in 1968, "Is the Christian life of prayer simply an evasion of the problems and anxieties of contemporary existence? If what we have said has been properly understood, the answer to this question should be obvious. If we pray 'in the Spirit' we are certainly not running away from life, negating visible reality in order to "see God". For 'the spirit of the Lord has filled the whole earth'. Prayer does not blind us to the world, but it transforms our vision of the world, and makes us see it, all people, and all the history of humankind, in the light of God. To pray 'in spirit and in truth' enables us to enter into contact with that infinite love, that inscrutable freedom which is at work behind the complexities and the intricacies of human existence".

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