

Prayer of the Heart – Rev'd Hans Christiansen – Sunday 25 October 2009

Readings: Job 42:1-6, Ps 34:1-8, Mk 10:46-52

Last Saturday evening I spoke about the “*Mystic Heart of Christianity*” at a Hindu Ashram. The response was very good and I had many people coming up afterwards saying things like: “I never knew that there was a tradition of meditation and Christian mysticism in Christianity”. Some of our parishioners, who were there, asked me whether I could talk some more about this topic on Sundays.

As I read the texts last Monday for today I was struck with how apt the Psalm, Job and today's Gospel reading are for this topic, so I will talk a little on the topic of prayer and meditation today.

We don't often speak about prayer on Sunday. We come together to pray and give thanks but perhaps we need to spend more time talking about prayer.

What is prayer? Why do we pray? And how do we pray well? Of course we pray when we are in need. But prayer is much more than petitions – asking or telling God what to do. This is only the beginning of prayer.

Praying is about us growing into union with God. Union with God is our birth and baptism right. Like Job in today's reading we too are invited to see God face to face. Ultimately that is what prayer aspires to; to see God face to face, looking to him, as the psalmist sings so we can radiate.

Prayer can be expressed in as many different ways as there are people. Praying can be walking, dancing, cycling, talking etc. etc. No matter what expression, prayer is to be in relationship with God. Prayer is to listen and share with God. Prayer is to cultivate a friendship with God deeper than just asking for favours. We don't always ask our friends for favours, do we? We also listen to our friend don't we? And ultimately what characterises true friendship is when we can be quiet with a friend, when there is no need for many words. When one can just rest together and enjoy the moment.

Prayer, the eastern fathers used to say, is “*to stand before God with the mind in the heart*”.

At the early gospel times, St Paul uttered a profound sentence, which has come to be a wellspring of inspiration for 2000 years. He said: “*Pray without ceasing*”.

How, many have asked? Surely this can't mean saying petitions all the time. Of course not, so what did he mean? Over time, inspired by St Paul's notion of unceasing prayer, a method of prayer developed, much like in many eastern forms of prayers, which is called

“*The prayer of the heart*” or the prayer of the name as it is sometimes called

This way of prayer is the most wonderful cultivation of friendship with God. And best of all it is a way of prayer you can practise all the time.

The prayer of the heart is what many today would call meditation.

This way of prayer consists essentially by the silent repetition of single sentence, usually involving the name of Jesus but other names can also be used.

This way of prayer in the east later became known as “*the Jesus prayer*”. This prayer takes the prayer from the blind Bartimaeus in today’s gospel reading and uses it as a prayer word to be repeated over and over. “*Lord Jesus, Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner.*”

“*The Cloud of Unknowing*” (an anonymous fourteenth century English work) builds within the western tradition on the prayer word or mantra in a book that is as relevant to prayer as it was when it was written. The author of *The Cloud* teaches a shorter prayer word which is not too long as for example Jesus, son of David have mercy on me, instead he recommends:

“If you want to gather all your desires into one simple word the mind can retain, choose a short word rather than a long one. A one-syllable word such as God or love or Jesus is best. But choose one that is meaningful to you. Then fix it in your mind so that it will remain there come what may. This word will be your defence in conflict and in peace....should some thought go on annoying you, demanding to know what you are doing, answer with one word alone.”

The prayer of the Name of Jesus has always been used in the Christian tradition both east and west. It has its origins in the early desert tradition in the 4th century where the first Christian monks and nuns went to the desert to live in solitude. In the solitude these people prayed often using one or two syllables from the scriptures, often from the psalms, to focus their attention on God.

This way of prayer became very famous and popular through the wonderful book called “*The Way of the Pilgrim*” which tells the story of a Russian man learning this way of prayer and then walks all over Russia uttering it in the silence of his heart until he fully radiates the love Christ. It is a profound and simple book which had deep effect on many others and me.

But why would you want to repeat a name or a sentence?

Praying this prayer deeply over and over quiets our mind, focus our intention.

You only have to try to be still for 10 seconds and you will discover your mind jumping all over the place, making it almost impossible to listen for God. To use a single word – the word of Jesus – we concentrate the mind on one single thing that allows us to move deeper in prayer.

The Christian Benedictine Monk, Swami Abhiktannada writes in his wonderful classic called “*Prayer*” about the prayer of the name,

“At the psychological level it concentrates and deepens the mind. At the truly spiritual level, in virtue of the divine power with which it is filled, it leads the soul to the very centre of all things, to the Source, to the Father”.

The prayer of the heart cuts through our everyday superficial mind and reveals to us deeper levels within us. Like Jesus asks Bartimaeus today: What do you want? The prayer teaches us what we really want, what we really desire – who we really are.

And above all the prayer of the heart keeps us closely and consciously connected to God.

Today we can pray this prayer too:

“Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me.”

Have mercy upon is not negative petition it is rather to be understood as conscious recognition of the relationship we are in with God. Like Job, who discovers after much travail and through his vision of God, that he is the creature and God is the creator we too begin to understand that our whole life, our breath, our health, our mind, everything is in the hands of God.

When we realise this we can say ‘Have mercy on me’ – which is keep me in this relationship with you and reveal yourself more and more to me.

As we grow in prayer we grow in our relationship with God. We grow more radiant and more unified. Ultimately, by the grace of God, we will, like Job, see God face to face.

Hans Christiansen