

WORDONWEB

Notes to accompany Session 3: Meditation and Contemplation

Presentation is addressed in the first place to those who have little or no experience of this form of prayer. We hope others will find it useful as a refresher course, and also make a contribution to the group discussion later.

CONTEMPLATION is a prayer of silence rather than words. The focus is attention to the presence of God within us.

“Silence is God’s language: everything else is a poor translation. In order to hear that language, we must learn to be still and to rest in God.” (*Thomas Keating*)

Our tradition has associated prayer with *saying prayers*. Contemplation has been regarded as something for an exclusive elite of very holy people, and not for ordinary people. John Main OSB says that to claim contemplation is beyond us shows “*stubborn false humility*”.

St. Paul was speaking to ordinary people when he said:

The Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. (*Romans 8.26-27*)

Prayer is the action of God within us, if only we will allow God to work there. Thomas Keating writes:

“Grace is the presence and action of Christ at every moment of our lives”
(*Open Mind and Open Heart p.128*)

“Divine love triumphs over every obstacle, including suffering and death”
(*Heart of the World p.21*)

SILENCE within and around us is a great help to contemplation. Joyce Rupp says “Without some quiet reflection, some solitude and stillness, our inner eyes will eventually be too blurred and weary to discover God in the rushing of our demanding days.” (*Prayer, p.72*)

Silence is difficult in everyday life, yet when we remember that prayer is more about listening than speaking we can see why some silence is valuable. Remember what we said in the first session:

- Prayer is not about telling God what we want; it is about tuning in to what God wants
- Your kingdom come, your will be done
- Prayer is being in the presence of God with open hands and open heart

Thomas Keating writes:

“The fundamental purpose of prayer, including prayer of petition, is not to get something from God, or to change God, but to change ourselves. When we have changed, God can give us everything we want, because our will, will be one with God’s, and we will want only what God wants.” (*Heart of the World p.63*)

That last sentence needs a comment. What does it mean when we are faced with personal loss or tragedy? Are we to think that it is God's will that a child dies, or that we or someone close to us is afflicted with a crippling illness? Are we to think that our role is to WANT these tragedies? Certainly not.

Creation is work in progress. Our finite nature means that in life accidents will occur, we all suffer ill health at times, and we all die. This can be painful, as Mary Oliver says in her poem "Snow Geese"

Oh, to love what is lovely, and will not last!
What a task
to ask
of anything, or anyone.
yet it is ours
and not by the century or the year, but by the hours.

(Mary Oliver: Snow Geese)

God's will is that we should have life and have it in abundance (John 10:10). To seek that abundant life is the task to which we awaken each day:

Each morning the Lord wakes me
to hear
to listen like a disciple.
The Lord has opened my ear (Is 50.4-5)

How can we cultivate the silence that will enable us to discern what God is saying to us in the circumstances of our lives. Writers on contemplative prayer recommend choosing a word (a mantra) which for you expresses your willingness to be aware of the presence of God in your life, and to be open to God's grace and action within you.

John Main recommends the word MA-RA-NA-THA, an Aramaic word meaning "Come, Lord Jesus, come". Other possibilities are: Jesus, Lord have mercy, Father, Spirit, Thanks, Amen, Yes, Here I am Lord, Yahweh, Shalom, Peace, Love.

Richard Rohr recommends the word *Yahweh* and he notes that the two syllables echo breathing in and breathing out.

Writers differ on how to use the mantra. John Main insists on using the mantra throughout the period of prayer. Thomas Keating gives the following guidelines:

1. Choose a sacred word as a symbol of your intention to consent to God's presence and action within.
2. Sitting comfortably, and with eyes closed, settle briefly and silently introduce the sacred word as the symbol of your consent to God's presence and action within.
3. When you become aware of thoughts, return ever so gently to the sacred word.

The key element is the intention which distinguishes Christian contemplative prayer from other forms. The intention is **to be aware that you are in the presence of God and to be open to God's grace and action in your life.**

Richard Rohr says:

"Prayer is not finally self-observation but rather to *fall into the hands of the living God (Heb 10.31)*"

St. Augustine

"You made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you".
(Confessions 1.1)

Possible Opening Prayers

From John Main:

Heavenly Father,
Open my heart
to the silent presence
of the Spirit of your Son.

Lead me
into that mysterious silence
where your love is received
by all who call

MARANATHA -- Come, Lord Jesus.

From Thomas Keating:

Father, Son and Holy Spirit,
alive at the centre of my being,
I wish to spend this time with you
consenting in love to your divine presence and action within.

May my Sacred Word which I will pray
when distracted by anything else,
be a sign and symbol of my intention

The effects of this form of prayer are seen in the long term rather than immediately. The advice of the World Community for Christian Meditation is:

“Do not evaluate your meditation. Do not be discouraged by distractions. Rather, let them come and go, always keeping your attention on the mantra. In time, the fruits of your meditation will appear in your self, your life and in all your relationships.”

Do not expect the extraordinary. St. John of the Cross commanded his followers to reject all visions, voices and unusual experiences. The way of prayer is the way of faith. It will bear fruit not in spectacular experiences but in helping you to understand and to experience things differently and more deeply over a period of time.

St. Teresa of Avila said that all we can do is to dispose ourselves.

Walter Hagen, a medieval spiritual writer said:

“Do nothing, allow God to work in your soul.”

How much time each day should be spent in contemplative prayer? The experts recommend two 20-minute periods daily, one in the morning and one in the late afternoon or early evening. We suggest that you aim initially for at least one 20-minute period per day.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. For those who have used this form of prayer: Have you any experience of Contemplative Prayer that you would like to share with the group? What have you found helpful?
2. For those who have not prayed in this way: at this point, what reservations do you have, if any, about using this form of prayer?
3. Do you have any question to ask arising from what was said during this presentation?