

On Contemplation

by the Revd Neil Broadbent

"Be still and acknowledge that I am God." Psalm 46:10

"He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will rest in the shadow of the Almighty."
Psalm 91:1

"In returning and rest you shall be saved: in quietness and in trust shall be your strength."
Isaiah 30:15

Silent Communion with God

Contemplation is an uncommon form of prayer. Prayer has been called the descent of the mind - or the intellect - to the heart. By 'heart' is meant the unifying centre of the human person as a whole. To descend to the heart leads to reintegration and a recovery of integrity. Prayer of the heart is prayer in which the person who prays is actively identified both with the act of prayer and also with God, who meets us in our heart. It follows that personal experience of the Divine must precede prayer.

In contemplation, one who is praying is expressing his or her relationship with God in a way that is neither purely intellectual nor purely emotional, but which employs, in one act, all the powers of the human soul. The prime concern of contemplation is the direct experience of God in silent communion. It is a conversation of one's spirit with God, reaching out towards our Lord and holding converse with Him without any intermediary.

Contemplation, then, is very different from the prayers that we may hear in a broadcast or in a place of worship. It is little discussed - at least in Protestant denominations - and not often taught or practised. As defined in Thomas Keating's beautiful and challenging book *Invitation to Love*, it is the process of 'the development of one's relationship with Christ to the point of communing beyond words, thoughts and feelings; a process moving from the simplified activity of waiting upon God to the ever-increasing predominance of the gifts of the Spirit as the source of one's prayer.'

It unfolds, or opens up, from simple 'resting in God' to become what St Gregory the Great described as 'the knowledge of God that is impregnated with love'.

Obstacles in the Way

A 21st century Christian may see this as desirable and even ask God for this degree of closeness to Him. As we are created and sustained by God in order to be partakers of, and

sharers in, His infinite love, any such requests are not refused. Why then is not the whole world rejoicing in such experiential knowledge? And, if God does not refuse it, why is there so much misery and suffering in life? Without encroaching on mysteries beyond our knowing in this life, may it not be that modern attitudes of impatience, wishful thinking, self-importance and the like act as barriers in the way, as hurdles to be overcome in our spiritual pilgrimage?

Contemplative prayer does not come quickly - or easily. It comes through greater and greater receptivity, a receptivity which allows God, also known as Eternal Love, to love the hell out of us. The journey to the Promised Land may entail many years in the wilderness of incomprehension and struggle, until we learn that the ways of the Lord will seem strange whilst we live with delusions of personal ability or strength. What may have been thought proud achievements must come to be counted as dross, and vice versa, for 'when I am weak [in self-reliance], then I am strong [in Christ].' Along the way, much will need to be abandoned. As well as multitudes of fears – many masquerading as indignations, prides or 'must-have essentials' of daily life – attitudes need to be relinquished. St George had his dragons to slay and we have ours. Our dragons can be named as fear, greed, lust, anger, gluttony, pride, vanity, envy and apathy.

The False Self

From childhood, we have collected many emotional programmes which we, unconsciously, believe will bring us happiness. We have unwittingly, and at a very early age, created false beliefs of who we are and how the world should behave toward us. This false self affects every part of our lives. Contemplation is a God-given gift by which such untruths about ourselves are dismantled, so freeing us up to experience more fully divine love and choose more readily to live by it.

During times of seeming utter aridness, hidden interior growth is gestating at a soul level, which is in our psyche. Years of practice in waiting on God are needed during which we discover that affliction and humility burn out one's self-centred passions and so free us from sin. Old understandings are eventually jettisoned to allow room for the presence of the Lord, the Holy One, to grow in our hearts and minds, bodies and souls. This giving up, or forsaking, is the kind Jesus spoke of, 'Anyone who has left brothers or sisters, or father, or mother, or children, for the sake of my name will be repaid many times over, and gain eternal life.' One's psyche is being cleansed and re-ordered by the Divine Spirit.

The Rôle of Contemplation

Where then does mystical prayer, which is synonymous with contemplation, fit in with other styles of relating to God? The best order for praying with God seems to be, as the

Revd Dr Martin Israel used to expound, to start with alert expectancy and move into silence and then into contemplation, petition, confession, intercession and finally, thanksgiving and praise.

Contemplation is found in all the world-religions and acts strongly in breaking down barriers between faiths and opening minds and hearts to the Holy One.

Being Transformed in God's Presence

Mystical, contemplative prayer is not an exercise in relaxation, nor is it a technique. It is not a para-psychological or charismatic gift, nor is it anything to do with hypnosis. It isn't spontaneous prayer and is not about feeling the presence of the divine. If we remember that it is about growing a deeper relationship with the One who is closer to us than our thoughts, feelings or breath, closer than consciousness itself, we must conclude that it is a way of *being* with God and offering back to him our actual self just as we are, false self and all, for, as St Thérèse of Lisieux wrote, 'Love is repaid by love alone.'

Helpful Resources

The Daily Reader for Contemplative Living compiled by S Stephanie Iachetta, Continuum, 2009.

Into the Silent Land by Martin Laird, DLT, 2006.

Prayer and Contemplation by Robert Llewelyn, Marshall Pickering, 1989.

Guidelines for Mystical Prayer by Ruth Burrows, Sheed & Ward, 1976.

CFPSS Cassette Tape: *The Healing Power of Silence (for self, tape 1 of a pair)* Martin Israel.
Website: www.contemplativeoutreach.org

(1,119 words) Version dated 14/05/2010 09:53