

In Jesus' name

Bede Griffiths

The founder of the ashram at Shantivanam in south India uses the Jesus prayer as his mantra. This is the name above all names which gives access to the mystery which is beyond all name. This article concludes *The Tablet's* series.

If anyone asks me how I pray, my simple answer is that I pray the Jesus prayer. Anyone familiar with the story of a Russian pilgrim will know what I mean. It consists simply in repeating the words: "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner." I have used this prayer now for over 40 years and it has become so familiar that it simply repeats

itself. Whenever I am not otherwise occupied or thinking of something else, the prayer goes quietly on. Sometimes it is almost mechanical, just quietly repeating itself, and other times it gathers strength and can become extremely powerful.

I give it my own interpretation. When I say, "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God", I think of Jesus as the Word of God, embracing heaven and earth and revealing himself in different ways and under different names and forms to all humanity. I consider that this Word "enlightens everyone coming into the world", and though they may not recognise it, it is present to every human being in the depths of their soul. Beyond word and thought, beyond all signs and symbols, this Word is being secretly spoken in every heart in every place and at every time. People may be utterly ignorant of it or may choose to ignore it, but whenever or wherever anyone responds to truth or love or kindness, to the demand for justice, concern for others, care of those in need, they are responding to the voice of the Word. So also when anyone seeks truth or beauty in science, philosophy, poetry or art, they are responding to the inspiration of the Word.

I believe that that Word took flesh in Jesus of Nazareth and in him we can find a personal form of the Word to whom we can pray and to whom we can relate in terms of love and intimacy, but I think that he makes himself known to others under different names and forms. What counts is not so much the name and the form as the response in the heart to the hidden mystery, which is present to each one of us in one way or another and awaits our response in faith and hope and love.

When I say, "have mercy on me, a sinner", I unite myself with all human beings from the beginning of the world, who have experienced separation from God, or from the eternal truth. I realise that, as human beings, we are all separated from God, from the source of our being. We are wandering in a world of shadows, mistaking the outward appearance of people and things for reality. But at all times something is pressing us to reach out beyond the shadows, to face the reality, the truth, the inner meaning of our lives, and so to find God, or whatever name we give to the mystery which enfolds us.

So I say the Jesus prayer, asking to be set free from the illusions of this world, from the innumerable vanities and deceits with

which I am surrounded. And I find in the name of Jesus the name which opens my heart and mind to reality. I believe that each one of us has an inner light, an inner guide, which will lead us through the shadows and illusions by which we are surrounded, and open our minds to the truth. It may come through poetry or art, or philosophy or science, or more commonly through the encounter with people and events, day by day. Personally I find that meditation, morning and evening, every day, is the best and most direct method of getting in touch with reality. In meditation I try to let go of everything of the outer world of the senses, of the inner world of thoughts, and listen to the inner voice, the voice of the Word, which comes in the silence, in the stillness when all activity of mind and body ceases. Then in the silence I become aware of the presence of God, and I try to keep that awareness during the day. In bus or train or travelling by air, in work or study or talking and relating to others, I try to be aware of this presence in everyone and in everything. And the Jesus prayer is what keeps me aware of the presence.

So prayer for me is the practice of the presence of God in all situations, in the midst of noise and distractions of all sorts,

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of pain and suffering and death, as in times of peace and quiet, of joy and friendship, of prayer and silence, the presence is always there. For me the Jesus prayer is just a way of keeping in the presence of God.

I find it convenient to keep in mind the four stages of prayer in the medieval tradition — *lectio, meditatio, oratio, contemplatio*. *Lectio* is reading. Most people need to prepare themselves for prayer by reading of some sort. Reading the Bible is the traditional way, but this reading is not just reading for information. It is an attentive reading, savouring the words as in reading poetry. For this reason I prefer the authorised or revised versions of the Bible, which preserve the rich, poetic tradition of the English language.

Lectio is followed by *meditatio*. This means reflecting on one's reading, drawing out the deeper sense and preserving it in the "heart". It is said that Mary "pondered all these things in her heart". This is meditation in the traditional sense, bringing out the moral and symbolic meaning of the text and applying it to one's own life. The symbolic meaning goes beyond the literal, and shows all its implications for one's own life and for the life of the Church and the world. It is a great loss when the literal meaning, of which today, of course, we have a far greater knowledge, leaves no



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place for the deeper, richer symbolic meaning which points to the ultimate truth to which the Scripture bears witness.

Meditation is naturally followed by prayer — *oratio*. Our understanding of the deeper meaning of the text depends on our spiritual insight and this comes from prayer. Prayer is opening the heart and mind to God, that is, it is going beyond all the limited processes of the rational mind and opening the mind to the transcendent reality to which all words and thoughts are pointing. This demands devotion — that is, self-surrender. As long as we remain on the level of the rational mind, we are governed by our ego, our independent, rational self. We can make use of all kinds of assistance, of commentaries and spiritual guides, but as long as the individual self remains in command, we are imprisoned in the rational mind with its concepts and judgments. Only when we surrender the ego, the separate self, and turn to God, the supreme Spirit, can we receive the light which we need to understand the deeper meaning of the Scriptures. This is passing from *ratio* to *intellectus*, from discursive thought to intuitive insight.

So we pass to *contemplatio*. Contemplation is the goal of all Christian life. It is knowledge by love. St Paul often prays for his disciples that they may knowledge (*gnosis*) and understanding (*epignosis*) in the mystery of Christ. The mystery of Christ is the ultimate truth, the reality towards which all human life aspires. And this mystery is known by love. Love is going out of oneself, surrendering the self, letting the reality, the truth take over. It is not limited to any earthly object or person. It reaches out to the infinite and the eternal. This is contemplation. It is not something which we achieve for ourselves. It is something that comes when we let go. We have to abandon everything — all words, thoughts, hopes, fears, all attachment to ourselves or to any earthly thing, and let the divine mystery take possession of our lives. It feels like death and is a sort of dying. It is encountering the darkness, the abyss, the void. It is facing nothingness — or as Augustine Baker, the English Benedictine mystic said, it is the "union of the nothing with the Nothing".

This is the negative aspect of contemplation. The positive aspect is, of course, the opposite. It is total fulfilment, total wisdom, total bliss, the answer to all problems, the peace which surpasses understanding, the joy which is the fulness of love. St Paul has summed it up in the letter to the Ephesians — or whoever wrote that letter which is the supreme example of Christian *gnosis*: 'I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, that according to the riches of his glory, he may strengthen you with his spirit in the inner man; that Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith, that being rooted and grounded in love, you may have power to comprehend with all the saints what is the length and breadth and height and depth, and may know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fulness of God.'