Session Three Reading: The Roots of Christian Meditation

To understand the origin of meditation in the Christian tradition we need to go back to the gospels. In the gospel of St Matthew Chapter 5-7 we find the essential elements of Jesus’ teaching on prayer which reveal him as a master and teacher of contemplation. He speaks of:

* + Interiority: “when you pray go into your inner room, shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret”
  + Silence and faith: do not go babbling on like the pagans who think the more they say the more likely they are to be heard
  + Equanimity: do not worry
  + Mindfulness: set your mind on God’s kingdom before everything else
  + Present moment: Do not worry about tomorrow

In meditation we follow these teachings of Jesus on prayer and, because we are taking the attention off ourselves, we are also obeying his command ‘leave self behind’. Meditation is the work of obedient discipleship and love. To take the attention off ourselves is the first step to love.

The theology of silent prayer is explained by St Paul who tells us that as Christians we know that the risen Christ dwells in our hearts, and that Christ has sent his Holy Spirit to dwell in us. In Romans Chapter 8 he says:

for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words.

When we meditate we allow our prayer to be one with the prayer of the Holy Spirit who prays in us. We join in the prayer of the Holy Spirit that takes us through Christ to the Father. John Main expresses this when he says that in meditation the focus is not on me and ‘my prayer’ but upon the prayer of Jesus that we are entering in the Spirit.

We find this way of silent, imageless prayer throughout the Christian tradition. It is called apophatic prayer (without words or imagination) in contrast to katophatic prayer (using all the operations of the mind).

It is clearly the prayer of the desert monks of the fourth Century who had settled in the remote deserts of Egypt but became the global spiritual centre of their time.

They abandoned the cities to live a life alternating between solitude and community. Solitude, silence and simplicity was their way of life and their understanding of prayer followed this. They saw detachment from the ego as the essence of their path. They ‘left self behind’ to follow Jesus and to find themselves because they knew that self-knowledge is the foundation of our knowledge of God.

Their immediate goal was ‘poverty of spirit’, and the ultimate goal was ‘the kingdom of heaven’ fullness of life in God. Because they lived in solitude or in small clusters in caves or huts far from urban distraction they had to face their inner demons and thus became astute psychologists as well as master of the spiritual life.

Prayer of the heart, not discursive prayer or theology, was the heart of desert monasticism. It consisted of the psalmody (which they committed to memory) and contemplation. Yet they understood that the one who prays, is – through the lessons of experience – a theologian.

What they sought and found in the solitude was the love and the glory of God. The stories of their lives show us their deep joy and compassion recorded in their teachings or collected sayings, for example:

sit in your cell and your cell will teach you everything.

We have a detailed account of their teachings on prayer thanks to John Cassian.

John Cassian was born in 360 and died in Marseilles 430. In his 20’s he travelled with his friend Germanus to the deserts of Egypt, where he found the teachers he was seeking and the environment in which he could prove their saying that ‘experience is the teacher’.

His Ninth and Tenth Conferences of Abbott Isaac on prayer have been recognized for centuries as part of the foundations of Christian spirituality.

He saw the key to prayer as humility and poverty of spirit. Purity of heart is the result of poverty of spirit when we free ourselves of distractions, and even ‘all the riches of thought and imagination’. Pure prayer, as he called it, is free of all thoughts and imagination as we enter the vision of God.

He quotes the words of Jesus, ‘but when you pray go into your room, shut the door and pray to your father who is there in secret’. We pray in our room, Cassian says,

when we withdraw our hearts completely from the clatter of every thought and concern and disclose our prayer to the Lord in secret. We pray with the door shut when with closed lips and total silence we pray to the searcher, not of voices but of hearts.

This prayer is beyond all asking, imagining and desiring. It is about purity of heart, being free of all attachments and open to God. It is in us already: our work is to stop, look and discover it in us.

His friend Germanus asked Abbot Isaac ‘how can we do this?’ and Abba Isaac replied ‘because you have asked the right question, now I can tell you’

Abbot Isaac gave them what he called a *formula* for continual prayer. This was the phrase from the psalms: ‘O God Come to my assistance, O Lord make haste to help me.’ This way of stilling the mind and leaving aside all thoughts, he claimed, had been passed down from the earliest of the desert monks who themselves had received it from the apostolic fathers.

This formula (sacred word or mantra) should be recited continuously, silently, with undivided attention in order to empty ourselves of ourselves (*kenosis* is the New Testament word). This is the direct way to poverty of spirit and so becoming poor enough to unite by grace with God. When distractions come, simply, faithfully say your word. It is simple but not easy. Do not fight the distractions but lay them aside by returning to the *formula* – the prayer word or mantra.

St Benedict was greatly influenced by Cassian and in his Rule points to his teaching for those who wish to go deeper in prayer. Thomas Aquinas used Cassian extensively in his *Summa*.

We find this same simple tradition of the prayer of the heart throughout the Christian tradition, for example in the 14th century English work ‘The Cloud of Unknowing’. In the *Cloud* the writer tells us to ‘pray not with many words but with one little word. Fix this word fast to your heart so that it is always there come what may. With this word you will suppress all thoughts.’

We also have the teachings of Meister Eckhart, St John of the Cross, Augustine Baker, Thomas Merton, and many others who in different styles, some more practical than others, have emphasised this apophatic dimension of prayer.

In more recent times we have been blessed by the life and teachings of John Main who was inspired by Cassian in particular and many others in the contemplative renewal who have helped restore this dimension to its proper place at the centre of Christian life.

John Main transmitted Jesus’teaching on prayer and Cassian’s practical advice that has been passed down through the Christian tradition. Main called meditation the way of ‘silence, stillness and simplicity’.

*Based on: The Christian Tradition of Meditation, Fr Laurence Freeman: The Essential Teaching CD track 8, and From Cassian to Main, DVD, Carla Cooper*

*A similar talk can be downloaded from the website Talk 3.*