Reading Session Two

John Main

John Main was born in London to Irish parents in 1926. He served in the army in the front line in the closing stages of the war. He then joined a religious order for a short time before leaving to study law at Trinity College Dublin. After graduation he entered the British Foreign Service and in 1954 was posted to Malaya where he joined the Governor's staff and studied Chinese.

One day, on a routine assignment to deliver a goodwill message, he met Swami Satyananda, a monk who ran an orphanage and ashram on the outskirts of Kuala Lumpur. John Main was deeply impressed by the Swami’s peaceful, calm wisdom. And he learned from him a simple way of meditation: the faithful recitation of a mantra during two periods of meditation at the beginning and end of the day. The monk encouraged John Main to meditate as a Christian and he took a sacred Christian word as his mantra. Each week John Main would return to his teacher, to deepen the discipline of silence, stillness and simplicity in his daily meditation.

He said that during this time his own spiritual life was opened to new depths. He returned to Europe to teach International Law at Trinity College, Dublin. During this time he continued his daily practice of meditation and integrated it into his other ways of prayer which included daily mass. Then he entered a Benedictine Monastery in London.

His novice master instructed him to give up his way of meditation and use more cerebral and imaginative forms of prayer, which in obedience he did. But he felt he had entered a much drier stage of his spiritual journey.

Later, in Washington DC, he became headmaster of a Benedictine School. As a result of guiding young spiritual seekers who came to him, he was drawn back to the roots of his own tradition, and eventually to the desert tradition of early Christian monasticism. Here, in John Cassian’s Tenth Conference he found and recognised the method of meditation he had been introduced many years before. Now he saw it and knew it to be part of his own Christian, spiritual and theological tradition. He began to meditate again.

He had started to uncover the practice of the prayer of the heart, of ‘pure prayer’ with a ‘formula’ or short phrase or prayer word. What he had learned in the East was indeed part of the Christian contemplative tradition. He found it described in Cassian and the Desert Fathers of the 4th Century who in turn influenced St Benedict’s teaching on prayer and also the Cloud of Unknowing, the great work on Christian meditation from 14th century England.

This led him to a much deeper reading of scripture. His journey of faith and his experience of meditation deepened John Main’s understanding of the teachings of Jesus on leaving self behind and uncovering the treasure within. Also the teachings of St Paul that the Holy Spirit “prays within us” came alive for him in his own experience.

John Main’s teaching on prayer is authentic and simple. He said:

All Christian prayer is a growing awareness of God in Jesus…And for that growing awareness we need to come to a state of undistraction, to a state of attention and concentration - that is a state of awareness…..the only way that I have been able to find to come to that quiet, to that undistractedness, to that concentration, is the way of the mantra”[[1]](#footnote-1)

He doesn’t say “this is the only way to pray” but he discovered it to be a way of deep simplicity and effectiveness.

John Main opened the first Christian Meditation Centre in London and was then invited to form a Benedictine community in Canada dedicated to the teaching and practice of meditation.

From those small beginnings the Community has now spread around the world. Through the work of this ecumenical Community meditation is being embraced by more and more Christians in response to the thirst for deeper prayer among modern people. The current Director of the World Community who assisted John Main in the early years is the Benedictine monk Laurence Freeman.

*Based on: John Main - A Biography, by Paul Harris*

1. Gethsemane Talks [↑](#footnote-ref-1)