Reading Session Four

The Wheel of Prayer

Meditation is a universal spiritual tradition and practice. We find it in all the great spiritual traditions including the Christian tradition. This week we will hear about how meditation can be understood as part of the Christian tradition.

Prayer according to the early Christian teachers defines our way of life: ‘The way you pray is the way you live’. This is what we mean by ‘spirituality’. Many people today are seeking this in a deeper and more personally authentic experience of prayer. There are many forms of prayer. We use different ways at different times according to our needs, our moods, whether we are alone or with others etc. All forms of prayer are valid, provided they come from a sincere heart.

In the Christian tradition there is a wonderful richness and variety of forms of prayer. For example: the Eucharist, the other sacraments, petitions, intercessions, charismatic prayer, scripture, devotional prayer. Different churches arrange these forms in their own way, for example more emphasis is placed on scripture in Protestant traditions. But the essence is the same. There are also many personal forms: some people pray when they exercise, walk in the country, play music or write. Whatever draws us into the presence of God can be called a form of prayer.

A good way of understanding prayer is with the symbol of a wheel. A wheel suggests both movement and groundedness. Prayer is our movement or journey towards God.

If a wheel is to be effective it must touch the ground, otherwise it just spins in the air and goes nowhere. Prayer must be grounded, that is, integrated into our daily living. The spokes of the wheel represent the different forms of prayer. They converge at the hub of the wheel – the centre. In Christian faith, at the centre we find the prayer of Christ, the Spirit of Christ that ‘prays within us…deeper than words’, (*Romans 8:26*).

All our forms of prayer move us into the prayer of Christ, and his prayer is his contemplation of the Father and his love for the world.

Jesus has completed his human journey to the Father but he also returns to us through his spirit, the Holy Spirit, in our hearts. St Augustine says ‘Jesus is our teacher of prayer because he prays in us, with us and for us.’ His prayer contains and unifies and completes all forms of prayer.

St Paul says “I live no longer, but Christ lives in me.” (*Gal 2:20*) In our relationship with Christ we move through our own private prayer and our separated lives, beyond our ego and into the Spirit or the “mind of Christ” where we find our own identity clarified or expanded in growing self-knowledge. We could say “I pray no longer but Christ prays in me.” The prayer of each one of us flows into the great ocean of the prayer of Christ.

How do we find our way to the hub of the wheel? Meditation is a direct way.

In the Christian tradition, we have the same way of prayer that John Main recovered, a tradition first described by the early monks; we find a simple form of prayer of the heart that purifies the heart and introduces us to poverty of spirit. John Main said to

take a single word or short phrase, one that is sacred in our own tradition. Repeat it continually in your mind and in your heart. Listen to the word as you say it, pay attention to it.

We let the word guide us through all thoughts, anxieties and distractions. It leads gently and directly along the path of silence and simplicity and the stillness to the centre of our being. ‘Be still and know that I am God’. (*Psalm 46:10*). Repetition in faith leads to stillness.

That stillness, however, is not passivity or drowsiness. Jesus said “stay awake and pray”. That stillness is pure wakefulness, pure consciousness. If we can experience this stillness at the hub of the wheel we find a wonderful transformation developing throughout all aspects of our lives. At the centre of the wheel there is stillness. But at the outer rim there is movement. This is where we find the movement of our lives: our work, or relationships, our activities.

If there is no stillness, there is no movement that has ultimate meaning. The quality of our lives depends on the stillness that we find at the centre.

In Jesus’ teaching (*Matthew Chapters 5-7*) on prayer we find a teaching that shows him to be a master of contemplation.

The first element he identifies is interiority. He says “Go into your inner room (the heart) and pray to your heavenly Father in secret” (*Mt 6:6*). He then moves to silence: ‘Don’t go babbling on like the heathens who think that the more they say, the more likely they are to be heard.’ He does not say we should not express our needs in prayer at other times but that God knows are needs before we ask.

He tells us to trust. We don’t have to give a constant shopping list of our needs to God. He then tells us to be calm. ‘Don’t be anxious about material things, what to wear, what to eat, what to drink’ (*Mt 6:25*). We should not let our daily requirements of life turn into obsessions or anxieties.

He tells us to pay attention. “Set your mind on God’s Kingdom before everything else”. (*Mt 6:33*). He tells us to be present in the moment. ‘Don’t worry about tomorrow’.

These are all the essential elements of meditation or prayer of the heart: Interiority, trust, calmness, attention, presence. The essence of all prayer is paying attention to what we find at the hub of the wheel, in our own hearts.

What makes prayer Christian is that it is all centred on Christ, it all flows into the prayer of Christ. We discover then that he is paying attention to us.

The more deeply we enter into the prayer of Christ, into the silence and stillness at the centre, we find that other forms of prayer become enriched. They are transformed and deepened and their spiritual meaning is enhanced by the daily practice of meditation.

*Based on: The Journey of Meditation, Laurence Freeman, OSB, Track 2*

*A similar talk can be downloaded from the website Talk 4.*