



*Some Basics
of
Contemplative
Prayer*

The Julian Meetings

*F*oster the teaching and practice of contemplative prayer in the Christian tradition

*E*ncourage people to practise contemplative prayer in their daily lives, and to explore ways of doing this which are appropriate for them

*S*upport the individual ecumenical Julian Meetings - groups whose members meet regularly to practise Christian contemplative prayer together



What is contemplative prayer?

Contemplative prayer has been described as the prayer of simplicity; waiting upon God; listening for God; prayer of the heart; opening ourselves to God; responding to the invitation to meet God in silent awareness.

In the Christian church this simplest of prayers goes back at least to the 4th century, to Cassian and the Desert Fathers. In the 20th century contemplative prayer became again a way that any Christian, not just those in monastic orders, might approach God.

Coming to pray in this way

All prayer is our response to God's initiative. We may think the initiative is ours, but it is God who makes the first move; an invitation to which we respond. There is no one right way to pray - we need to discover what is appropriate for us, at this stage in our spiritual journey. Regular practice will help our way of praying to become totally natural: we should be patient, but persevere.

Our early prayers were often asking for something. "Please can I have a bike for Christmas?" "Please make Mummy better." "Let me pass my exams." "Help!" "Thy will be done." At times we remember to say "Thank you" - for a wonderful holiday, for enough to eat, for good health, for friendship, for work to do, for the sacraments. We learn to say "I'm sorry. I've failed you again. I've fallen short of the glory you intend for me. I've sinned; forgive me again."

As we grow in our Christian life we reflect on God and on Jesus Christ and his life on earth. We read the familiar words of the Bible and think "What does this say to me, today?" We meditate and find new meaning and richness in the Bible. Perhaps for the first time we find a faith of our own, rather than the one we received from parents, teachers or books. God becomes a living reality to us. As we become more aware of God's glory and splendour we are drawn to adoration. "Holy, holy, holy, Lord God of hosts. Heaven and earth are full of your glory."

Petition, intercession, penitence, thanksgiving, mindful meditation, adoration - all these are good and valid ways to pray. But some of us

find they are not enough. A dimension is lacking - silence.

We are often so busy, so wordy and, if we are honest, so self-centred in our praying that God can't get a word in edgeways. When we realise this we can start to bring silence into our prayers, until it undergirds our whole prayer life - which is life itself. Life and prayer were inseparable to Jesus. They can be so for us.

So we come to contemplative, wordless prayer: prayer of the heart, a simple being-with-God, an awareness of Presence, in stillness and silence. Why? Because God is God. He invites, we respond. We need no other reason. We do not embark on contemplative prayer to experience God; to have holy feelings; to advance in prayer; or to lead a better life. Some or all of these things may happen. But when we come to God in silence and stillness we lay aside all else. We are available, open and receptive, for God to do as he wills. We just *are* with God in silence and stillness, because God *is*.

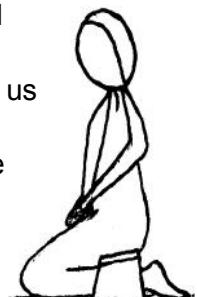
Preparing to pray contemplatively

Physical preparation

First we need to find a place and a time that suit us. The place should be quiet and comfortable. Freedom from the sudden distractions of phone, doorbell, conversation etc. is very desirable. Ideally we should choose a time when we are reasonably alert and able to relax.

When we pray we bring our whole selves to God - body, mind and spirit. If our body becomes uncomfortable it will distract us from prayer. We are all different, so we can experiment to find a posture that really suits us and helps us relax. Generally people either sit on a straight-backed chair, or kneel upright supported by a prayer-stool. Some find the cross-legged half-lotus position is right: others lie flat on the floor.

If we are sitting, our legs and feet need to be uncrossed with both feet comfortably on the floor (or on a footstool of some sort, if the chair is too high). Our back should be straight - if age or infirmity permit - but not rigid, as the spine has natural curves. Our hands may rest on our thighs, palms up or down. Most of us find it less distracting to close our eyes.



Having found a comfortable posture it is a good idea to relax, consciously and slowly, each set of muscles: feet, thighs, buttocks, belly - letting our abdominal muscles really relax - it doesn't matter if the stomach sticks out! The abdomen is often a centre of tension and letting go helps with the slow comfortable abdominal breathing that is another aid to stillness. Now relax chest, arms, hands, fingers, shoulders - another common site of tension - neck, jaw, teeth and forehead. Gently close the eyes. Now become aware of your breathing and rest in the regular 'in and out' of life-sustaining air.

Mental, emotional & spiritual preparation

We come to God *as we are at this moment*. God knows us completely - good bits and bad - so we don't have to pretend to him, or to ourselves. If we are bored, tired, happy, anxious, full of hatred, full of joy - God knows - and accepts and loves us, the whole of us, just as we are at this moment. So we don't need to say anything, at this time. However, if we are distracted by, perhaps, guilt or worry or joy we can share it with God quite simply and then put it to one side for the time being - like taking off a haversack for a while.

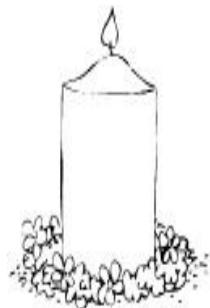
We have now prepared for this silent, still, being-with-God by adopting a comfortable, relaxed, alert posture; perhaps by recognising and sharing with God any major preoccupation; and by realising that we come as we are, warts and all, and that God accepts and loves us just as we are at this moment. Now we may wish to ask the help of the Holy Spirit: "Be with me" or "Into your hands" - as we acknowledge God as a reality beyond our imagining.

Finding inner silence

Contemplative prayer is about *being not doing*. It is without thoughts, images, ideas. We rest in the present moment, the NOW, ignoring past and future, aware of God's unchanging presence. How do we reach inner stillness, inner peace? We cannot make our mind a blank, so it is futile to try. However, contemplative prayer precludes thinking (often a distraction to contemplative prayer), so most of us need a visual, verbal or tactile focus to anchor us, or to which we can gently return when we find ourselves distracted by thoughts or feelings.

For some the best focus is a single word, sometimes called a *mantra* -

God or Love or Jesus or Maranatha (Come, Lord). Others use a short prayer such as the Jesus Prayer of Eastern Orthodox Christians. 'Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner.' or 'Lord, have mercy'. A visual image may be helpful. This may be real - a candle, or a cross, or a bowl of water - or may be an image in our mind's eye. We may wish to hold a cross, or a stone or shell, or a leaf. We may find just being aware of our breathing is the best path to inner stillness.*



Once we have found a focus that is right for us we should stay with it. In time we may need to change it, but consistency is usually more help to our praying than changing from one focus to another. It is important not to analyse these images or words, just to stay with them. When close friends are together they do not think about each other; they just enjoy being together. Our focus is something to anchor our awareness of being in God's presence.

What about distractions?

Everyone has distractions. However hard we seek silence, there will always be some noise around us - traffic, birdsong, a neighbour's radio, children playing. We should not try to blot these out, but just let them be, recognising that they are part of our and God's world. By letting them be, they should gradually cease to be a distraction and become absorbed into the whole.

Some distractions are superficial: "I must phone Jack"; "What shall we have for dinner tomorrow?" If these thoughts recur, we can jot them down and let them go. We can then return gently and calmly to our focus and rest in God in the present moment, staying as relaxed and receptive as we can and not fussing. St Francis de Sales said that if we have to return a hundred times a minute to the presence of God, we show him a hundred times that we want to love him.

Some distractions are more subtle. We want to praise God, or give him thanks, 'God, it is good to be here!'. Or, sensing our own failure or weakness we want to express contrition or sorrow. Don't! Even these seemingly good distractions should be let go. We just return to our

* The Julian Meetings publications 'Going Into Silence .. and Coming Out' and 'Your Turn To Lead' have further suggestions which may be helpful.

focus, holding to the still, silent prayer of the heart until the end of the time we have set for this. Penitence, praise, or thanks can come then.

Disturbances can sometimes arise from deep within us. During contemplative prayer our subconscious may become more active and assail us with anger; guilt; religious doubts; or painful memories. If such disturbances do surface they may eventually lead to healing and growth. Just acknowledge them, leave them to one side, and return to God. They can be faced later, perhaps with the help of a friend or spiritual counsellor.

Whatever the distractions may be, we let them drop away by returning to our anchor. We may use the anchor throughout our prayer time, or only return to it when we notice our attention has wandered.

The heart of the matter

So we remain alert and relaxed in stillness and silence, waiting upon God and aware of (but not thinking about) his presence. We let God be God with us for the time we've decided to spend in prayer. We expect nothing, ask for nothing, want nothing, during this time. It is God's time to use as he wills. It is our persistence in prayer that is important. We may sometimes feel close to God, and that's fine, but it may be mainly because we have slept well, have no pressing worries and a good digestion! Or we may feel bored, restless, dry, fed up. And that is fine too because we come as we are, not as we want or ought to be, and God is present whatever we may be feeling.

Coming out of the silence

Just as we should prepare for prayer - centre down - so we should 'come-out' gently. We become aware of our surroundings, listen to the sounds, and gently stretch. We may be moved to say "Hold me," or "Lead me," or "That I may grow," at the end of the silence. We should remember to give thanks, however we may feel about our prayer time. We might like to end by slowly saying the Grace or the Doxology:

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with us all, evermore. Amen

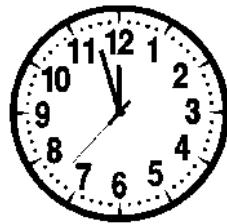
*Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit.
As it was in the beginning, is now, and shall be for ever. Amen*

The discipline of time

Silent contemplative prayer of the heart is food for our spiritual life, just as eating and drinking are for our physical life. So it should be part of our daily prayer and daily living. It is for any Christian, not just the favoured few.

We should decide, perhaps with the help of a fellow Christian, on a specific place and time for our contemplative prayer. Otherwise we can become irregular and, in times of boredom, dryness or busyness we may give up altogether.

We must each decide for ourselves when, how often and for how long to pray contemplatively. It will vary according to our age, temperament, work schedules and lifestyle. A mother of small children may just be able to find a 10-minute space in her day. An office worker may use part of the lunch break, and there might be a church open nearby to use. A shift worker may set the clock twenty minutes earlier. Train or bus commuters may use part of their journey time. A retired person may spend thirty minutes both morning and evening. But we are not taking it seriously if we do not set aside some definite time to be with, and wait upon, God. It can be best to 'start small', with a realistic assessment of what we can do, and increase this as circumstances allow.



As far as possible we should stick to the time we have decided. If we are on holiday, or working away, we may have to adjust the time, but we should not abandon it. Even in illness we can use the focus to rest in God at quiet moments during the day, and at night too if we cannot sleep. Instead of being a burden, our time of prayer can become a point of stability.

When the going gets tough

There are likely to be thin times in our prayer lives. At first we may be filled with enthusiasm for this way of praying, and it is easy to be faithful to our daily commitment. But sooner or later it goes cold. We become bored with contemplative prayer; bored with God. It may seem a waste of time: "Nothing happens" - "I'm not *doing* anything" - "I've made a mistake; this is not for me" - "Is God really there?"

This is a crucial time, but it may be a blessing in disguise. When we begin contemplative prayer God often sends us feelings of peace and happiness, but we may then come to prayer for these satisfactions, and lose sight of God. Whatever our feelings - good or not - during contemplative prayer, we need to let them go and return to our anchor: to be aware, however obscurely, of the abiding presence of God. He does not come and go, but is always with us, however we are feeling.

When prayer gets tough, it is extremely important for us to go on - in darkness, boredom, distraction, or even irritation, however hard it may be. Contemplative prayer is not about achievement, success or self-improvement. It is about *being*, still, before God.

Contemplative living

Our concentrated times of silent prayer can and should spill over into the rest of the day. However busy we are there are always spaces. We knock on a door and wait for it to open; we queue at the bus stop or in the supermarket; we wait for the kettle to boil. We can use all these times to remember that we are always in the presence of God, and simply *be* in that presence.

Some people wonder if contemplative prayer is selfish. No, it's not. It should change us. As we become more aware that God loves and accepts us as we are at this moment, we grow towards being the person he created us to be:- less self-centred, judgmental, or impatient both with ourselves and with others. We become more aware of others needs, and readier to respond to them. We see Christ in everyone, including ourselves. We may see, as a child may, that the whole of creation is shot through with the glory and presence of God.

We are learning to see God in every thing, every event, every person. This will stir us to take action in the face of need, injustice or oppression - just as Christ was stirred to action. Contemplative prayer helps us to engage with the world, not to escape it.

Silent prayer is also a way of sharing the presence of God when language, culture, custom, disability or faith allegiance might otherwise form a barrier too great to overcome. Silence, music, and certain symbols can be links to join people to each other and to God.

We will continue to praise, give thanks, confess our faults and pray for people and situations, but many find that these prayer times become less significant because contemplation covers so much. For most of us, joining with others in corporate acts of worship remains a vital part of our spiritual journey.

People with disability, chronic illness, or the limitations of age or infirmity can sometimes feel useless or without purpose. If they can start on the inward journey of contemplative prayer, and persevere in it for the love of God, they will do a work and live a life of inestimable value to God and to others, however ordinary or difficult their lives may appear to be.

The Julian Meetings

Belonging to a group of people who meet regularly to pray in silent contemplation can be a great help and encouragement. We do not feel isolated. Prayerful silence is greatly helped when two or three gather together, and this complements our daily personal prayer.

If we are having problems with our praying, sharing them can help us grow through them. The insights of other Christians can enrich our own spiritual journey, and lead us along new paths.

The Julian Meetings provide these opportunities, and exist to foster the practice and teaching of contemplative prayer.

At our website: www.thejulianmeetings.net you can find:

- * information about JM
- * a list of Meetings worldwide
- * a list of JM admin. contacts
- * our Facebook & Twitter accounts
- * an events diary
- * a message facility
- * links to other resources
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If you wish to know more about the Julian Meetings,
and / or details of your nearest Meeting(s) either

Go to our website: www.thejulianmeetings.net

or write to (sae please)

The Julian Meetings,
28 Old Hospital Lawn, Cashes Green, Stroud, GL5 4GA

We have members and Meetings in many counties

Julian Meetings Publications

Waiting on God in the Silence

(*free introductory leaflet*)

A5 leaflet on contemplative prayer

Try Stillness

Some Basics of Contemplative Prayer

Going Into Silence ... and Coming Out

Approaching Silence

It's Your Turn To Lead

The Ideal Julian Meeting

Starting a Julian Meeting

The Healthy Julian Meeting

Resources List

The Julian Meetings Magazine (*three issues a year*)

A bookmark (*with helpful suggestions for using silence*)

A pew / handbag / wallet card (*with meditation suggestion*)

Promotional A4 posters (*two*) and A5 poster (*one*)

An A6 noticeboard card

**Buy publications direct from our website
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