



Approaching Silence

The Julian Meetings

*F*oster the teaching and practice of contemplative prayer and 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

Introduction

The first stated aim of The Julian Meetings is to foster the teaching and practice of contemplative prayer. Not all of us can receive direct or structured teaching on practising contemplative prayer, and mostly we glean what we can from the other members of our Julian Meetings, and from books, talks etc.

David Self is an Anglican priest who has had a long association with the Julian Meetings. He retired from his inner-city Bristol parish in 2006, and in 2008 was invited to lead a course of meetings in Bristol introducing people to silence and to contemplative prayer.

We serialised an edited version of his course notes over several issues of the Julian Meetings Magazine. Subsequently both we and David were asked if the notes could be produced as a single publication, since people found the material very useful. As it complements the content of our other JM booklets we are very pleased to add it to our list of publications, with many thanks to David for his permission and co-operation in publishing his work.

We offer David's course notes as a reflection on silent prayer; as a teaching aid; and as a refresher for anyone approaching silence in prayer.

However great or small our experience of contemplative prayer, we can always learn more if we are open to God's guiding.

Each session that David led included an exploration of an aspect of contemplative prayer, and then chance to practise. So some of the sections in this booklet not only include David's explanation but also his instructions for an exercise to do, or a time frame, and sometimes the words of a lead-in / lead-out.

Approaching Silence - Beginning

Contemplation is a very natural activity. Just look at a dog when a walk is possible or food is around: totally alert, totally focused. When we are looking or listening deeply our attention is drawn outwards towards something or someone else. It is natural then to fall silent as we contemplate what has become the focus of our attention. The scary thing is how little we do contemplate anything (except perhaps our own navel!), how little we are truly present to something or someone else without laying on expectations about what we are seeing or listening to.

What about contemplative prayer?

It is making yourself available and open to God, without having any expectations. It sounds very simple yet many of us find it difficult. A quote from Sr. Wendy Beckett: 'The real difficulty about prayer is that it has no difficulty. Prayer is God's taking possession of us. We expose to Him what we are, and He gazes on us with the creative eye of Holy Love. His gaze is transforming: He does not leave us in our poverty but draws us into being all we are meant to become. What that is we can never know. Total Love sees us in total truth because it is only He who sees us totally.' (*The Gaze of Love p. 9*)*

Be in touch with your body

One thing we have in common is that we are embodied beings. Our bodies are in constant use, not just for living but for every sort of communicating and relating. It is remarkable that such small, dusty things as ourselves can know something of the presence of God before whose glory we could be consumed. Even more remarkable is that God, in his transcendent, holy glory would embody himself in Jesus to come to us. So prayer is gifted to us, not only to approach and be loved, but also that our eyes may be opened more and more to see God's creation his way.

Consider then the body, the most faithful, long-suffering servant we have. It is always trying to do the best it can in instant response, and is something to be loved as the Lord's loves it. As our Lord accepted the limitations of his own body in his work of declaring the coming of the Kingdom, so we are bound to learn to accept the limitations of our bodies. Alas, the Church has a long history of hating the body, as if God was a purely 'spiritual' matter, as if the

body was to be deeply feared instead of deeply loved. Part of learning to love ourselves is to love our bodies, not resent them. Part of praying is to allow the body a full and loved part in the offering. As in every other part of our life, our bodies can be our most valued servants in our praying, if we include them. So that is where we shall begin.

Posture

Gently we take on a posture that allows the body to become still.

If sitting we put both feet on the floor without crossing the legs. Let our legs be straight down from the knees and our back be reasonably straight down from the head, supported as necessary.

Let our eyes look straight ahead and, when they are closed, imagine that we are focussing on a point some 18" in front of us.

Let the hands be folded together on our lap or lie separately on our knees. If using a prayer stool much of this also applies. We do what we can do, not what we can't, to bring our body into a position of stillness and prayerfulness.



Awareness of the body

Our body has a wonderful capacity for sensing: the skin; the clothes touching our skin; our back touching the chair; muscles; feet on the floor; etc.

Starting with the head let the point of our attention move gently, noting each part of our body and greeting it with delight and compassion. We note what we sense and what we don't.

If there is a tight muscle we note it, and pass on. We do not try to 'correct' anything.

This is our one and only body, the gift of God to us. So we let ourselves become aware of all of it – lovingly. Then do it all again, slowly.

Breathing

Now let our attention focus upon the breath as it comes in and goes out through our nostrils, cooler coming in and warmer going out.

We concentrate on the air and do not try to control our breathing in any way.

If we find we are becoming tense, then we are trying to control, and we don't have to.

If we are tempted to yawn, then we deepen our breathing for a few breaths so that all of the lungs are working, then return our awareness to the air coming in and going out. (15 minutes)

These are exercises to bring us into the present moment. In particular, being aware of our breathing is a marvellous way of 'centering down' to become more still, more available to the God who is very close to us.

We may find that we become more aware of the sounds on the street, or in the house, or the birds in the garden. Once we remove the overpowering sense of sight, the other senses have a chance. Good. We may note each one and then bring our attention back to the air coming in and going out.

These are exercises in the discipline of awareness and attention. Let's go through the body and the breathing once again, slowly.

Approaching Silence – Words & the Word

A story from Anthony De Mello:

Did you hear the bird sing?

Hindu India has a magnificent image to describe God's relationship with Creation. God 'dances' Creation. He is the Dancer, Creation is his Dance. The dance is different from the dancer, yet it has no existence apart from him. You cannot take it home in a box if it pleases you. The moment the dancer stops, the dance ceases to be.

In our quest for God we think too much, reflect too much, talk too much. Even looking at this dance we call creation, we are thinking, talking (to self and others), reflecting, analysing, philosophizing. Words. Noise.

Be silent and contemplate the Dance. Just look: a star, a flower, a leaf, a bird, a stone ... any fragment of the Dance will do. Look. Listen. Smell. Touch. Taste. Hopefully, it won't be too long before you see Him, hear Him – the dancer Himself!

The disciple was always complaining to his Master, 'You are hiding the final secret of Zen from me.' He would not accept the Master's denials.

One day they were walking in the hills when they heard a bird sing. "Did you hear that bird sing?" said the Master. "Yes," said the disciple. "Well, now you know that I have hidden nothing from you." "Yes."



If you really heard a bird sing, if you really saw a tree ... you would know. Beyond words and concepts. What did you say? You have heard dozens of birds sing, seen hundreds of trees? Ah, was it the tree you saw or the label? If you look at a tree and see a tree, you have really not seen the tree. When you look at the tree and see a miracle – then, at last, you have seen! Did your heart never fill with wordless wonder when you heard a bird sing?
*(The Song of the Bird p.16)**

Noises, and listening

Our senses are bombarded and polluted with overload. Our minds filter out the familiar, and often we need to do so to keep sane. When I lived in the inner city I had to learn to filter out the street noise as best I could and ignore the pollution of the atmosphere. It was only when I was elsewhere and the air was clean that I could remember its sweetness and enjoy it. But we also filter out what we don't want to receive (selective listening, selective seeing ..) because we are preoccupied with the noise in our minds and hearts: the feelings and memories from the past; what we are in the middle of doing; worries about the future. They fill the mind and clog the heart. To look at a tree, to listen to birdsong, to feel the texture with a touch, to smell or taste – to receive these gifts deeply requires a sense of stillness and awareness surrounding them.

Real listening happens within the silence of the heart. God speaks to us in many ways:

A wondrous aspect of creation

Through another person
A word or glimpse that releases
A nudge in the heart
A phrase from the Bible

Jesus, God's Word, given to us.

Jesus brings us the word of life in many creative ways, always direct and particular. Jesus came that we might have life, overflowing and generous. Whatever he brings us is so that we might live, even it feels sharp. His gift is powerful, alive, active, surprising, fresh, cleansing, releasing, forgiving, creative. He invites us to turn away from our fears and distraction, lay them aside and drink the good news that God has drawn near to us. We open our hearts in the stillness to receive his gift without expectations or pre-conditions. It is a challenge of trust.

A phrase or a single word from Scripture can work creatively with our being. We can use these as a focus for our prayer within silence, not thinking about the phrase but letting it sink quietly into our heart through many layers. Let it form us without asking or analysing what is going on: let it sink gently, silently, as God cleanses and moulds us secretly. God will hide our eyes so that we do not get in the way. We trust our Lord to get on with creating the real person he wants us to become.

How to use a phrase or word?

A phrase is often in two parts, especially from the psalms:

The Lord is my shepherd - I'll not want.

On God alone - my soul in stillness waits.

We can breathe in with the first phrase and out with the second, usually on alternate breaths. As the word or phrase sinks into our being we may find we become more still. So let it go.

When distractions return, we use it again to restore the focus. We think no thoughts about God, or about the phrase, or about ourselves.

God is God, and we are who we are. As we and God both are, that is how we meet. If we find a particular word or phrase from Scripture is emerging within us, we pay attention gently to it, for it may be our Lord is speaking to us through it.

Approaching Silence – Distractions

We lead lives filled with stimuli, rush, and information, with an emphasis on doing, on experiencing NOW, of fixing things NOW. We carry cross-currents of worry, and unaddressed aspects of our lives, so it's not a surprise if we take longer than we expect to slow down. We discover the ongoing distractions and tensions we carry. Our lives are of a piece. If we regularly practice being still before God for a time, that feeds into the whole of our living, though we may not feel it to be so. Conversely, the way we live the rest of the time affects deeply our times of prayer.

In the silence we all suffer from distractions. A thought appears, and the mind follows it until we find we are far away in our own preoccupations. We don't beat ourselves up over it - that gives energy to the distraction. Just gently come back to our focus, for God never gives up on us. We can imagine we are on a small bridge looking at a stream flowing under it. We take our attention away from the leaves on the water's surface - the leaves are distractions - and let them flow on. We look instead at the water. We can't stop our thoughts happening, but we can step back from them. This is the discipline of practice, perhaps for a lifetime. Gently.

Persistence

All our preparations - posture; awareness of our breathing and bodies to help us to a sense of body stillness, body prayer; using a focus to help our minds come to a still point - express an intent, a desire to pray. So they are a proper part of praying, and not to be hurried. Sometimes, due to our daily life or things within us, this is all we can do in our prayer time— persist with the intention; use the exercises as best we can; keep recalling a distracted mind to a focus; pray within a tension that will not go away or within a storm in mind and heart that will not be quiet.

At such times it is very important to persist, even if the only prayer we can offer is 'HELP'. Here I am, knotted up, constantly distracted. I want to pray. 'Help!' In the same way we must sustain regular praying, and find a time and place which we can give directly to God, and we must defend it against invading demands. More easy for some than others. By giving God the intention, the

longing, the regularity, we welcome the Spirit into our hearts and lives. God will lift our groanings that are deeper than the storms of mind and heart, and his healing will carry on beneath it all. We must abandon the idea or expectation that the only 'good' prayer is the one that is calm and still.

Everyone suffers from distractions. They come in different ways, and there are things we can do to help:

Physical – tense muscles, an itch, ache, cough, rumble ... Instead of moving or scratching (assuming our body posture is OK) we direct, in our imagination, the flow of our breathing through the area. We take it to the area within the cycle of our breathing and ask the Holy Spirit to attend to it and heal whatever is giving rise to it. The body is carrying something for us. Let the Spirit flow through us there. (practise)

Distractions in the environment – noises inside or out from clocks, cars, birds, sirens, other people. Like other distractions, when we try to push sounds away, put them out of our consciousness, or get irritated with them, all we are doing is giving the distraction energy. Instead, let them become a trigger to lead us to a deeper awareness of the God who holds us. (practise)

Distraction thoughts. We can use a mantra, repeating a phrase and relating it to our breathing. For example *Jesus* (breathe in) *have mercy* (breathe out). We do not control the pace of the breathing but deepen it so that our stomach goes in and out, and we relax into it, using the mantra on alternate breaths. When our mind becomes more still, we stop using the mantra for a while.

When our mind wanders and we become aware of the wandering, we return gently with the mantra.

Sometimes we are given a sense of God's presence – it may be a realisation that God lives at the centre of our being, far deeper than thoughts or feelings; it may be a feeling that we are surrounded by God; it may be simply a sense of the presence without being able to say more.

Those moments are gifts, glimpses of the love that is always there. We do not try to hold onto them. We receive them with thanks and let them go, turning again to the Giver that lives beyond the gift.

Such gifts may not happen very often and they are not a measure of the praying. Most of the time we are asked just to carry on, longing to make ourselves available to the God who is so close and yet beyond our understanding.

Often there may well be all sorts of distractions of thoughts or feelings in the top layer of our being, all of them saying 'Pay attention to me!' And if we do, off we wander. We do not fight the distractions. Like the noises, we let them alone, let them come and go.

Let the mantra be the prayer of a deeper level, for it is at the deeper level that our Lord makes his home.

Jesus, have mercy. (silence)

Lord, take my heart from me, for I cannot give it to you.

Keep it for yourself, for I cannot keep it for you.

And save me, in spite of myself.

Approaching Silence – Going Deeper

Becoming more self-aware, with a deeper longing to be more available to God, does three things.

Awareness

We become more aware of the rest of God's creation. We are invited to increase our attitude of reverence and respect for all that surrounds us, seeing in everything the mark of the Creator and so leading us to a deeper reverence for God. In particular we are led to become more aware of others as God's people too, marred like us with sin and fragility, but also unique persons in whom God is at work. We are led to become more vulnerable to the joy and sorrow, the beauty and suffering that abounds in this world. We are led to participate with Christ in the Passion which seeks to heal this world. It is a path of wonder and humility.

Vulnerability

We become more vulnerable to ourselves as we long to make ourselves more vulnerable to God. The Spirit of Christ is at work within us for healing, creating us to be instruments of his love for

others. But God only works with truth and God wants all of us, not just the parts we feel comfortable with.

Slowly our illusions about ourselves are removed, our sins are shown for what they are. Slowly we are taken into the parts of ourselves where we are afraid, where we are deeply wounded. In such times the author of the Cloud of Unknowing gives wise advice: 'Do not look directly at the lump of sin or the turmoil, do not analyse it. Just offer it and ask the Spirit of Christ to flow through it. (cfch 32).

God wants to heal and transform the whole of our being and all our relationships and the Spirit works at deep levels within to invite our trust in God to increase. Our sense of self-sufficiency is profoundly challenged and it is easy to get lost.

Just as we need a guide through an unknown wilderness, so most of us need a trusted spiritual companion through whom God can help us and show us how we are being called forward in our praying and in our living. (silence)

O Spirit of God who speaks to spirits created in your own likeness: penetrate into the depths of our spirits, into the storehouse of memories remembered and forgotten, into the depths of being, the very springs of personality, and cleanse and forgive, making us whole and holy, that we may be yours and live in the new being of Christ our Lord.

George Appleton

Who are we opening our hearts to?

God is not another object we can examine. No words, no images, no thought can comprehend or encompass the nature of God. We must use words or images to communicate what understanding we have about God, but they are all indicators pointing beyond themselves to the One who has brought everything into being.

There is an ultimate hiddenness and incomprehensibility of the divine life.



Remembering that, we are led into astonishing wonder at the divine humility that comes to us in Jesus to bring us the love of God in a way we can approach and share.

Through Christ we discover that the essence of God is relationship. Each person in the triune God pouring themselves out to the other totally in joyous loving. We use words like Father, Son and Holy Spirit, pointing to a God filled with the dynamic exchange of love, a mutual joy that overflows in energetic creativity and causes this universe to come into being as an object of God's creative delight.

The Christian belief that we are made in the image of God means that we are given the capacity to relate to God who is beyond our understanding. More than that, we are being drawn by the costly longing of Christ's love to grow into his pattern of self-giving love, to share in its costliness, and so discover what it means to be truly human – together – as we are drawn into the dance of the Trinity.

Do I know what I am talking about? No, because words falter and we fall silent. We are dusty little things. In contemplation in this life we are led into the darkness of unknowing.

'For though we through the grace of God can know fully about all other matters and think about them – yet of God himself can no one think. Therefore I will leave on one side everything I can think and choose for my love that thing which I cannot think! Why? Because he may well be loved but not thought. By love he can be caught and held, but by thinking, never.' (Cloud of Unknowing ch 6)

(silence)

God, of your goodness give me yourself for you are enough for me. I cannot properly ask anything less, to be worthy of you. If I were to ask anything less, I should always be in want. In you alone do I have all. (Julian: Revelations of Divine Love ch.5)

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- * Some Basics of Contemplative Prayer
- * Going Into Silence ... and Coming Out
- * Approaching Silence
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