



CONTEMPLATIVE PRAYER A BRIEF INTRODUCTION

Contemplative prayer has been part of the Christian tradition since earliest times. In the medieval period it became mostly associated with monasticism, but in the 20th century it was reclaimed as a normal part of many people's spiritual journey. 'The Julian Meetings' is a network of groups to foster contemplative prayer in the Christian tradition. Other such networks are listed in a leaflet produced by the Retreat Association.

The terms contemplation and meditation are often used interchangeably. But they are different ways of being open to God. Imagine being shown a picture:

If you meditate on the picture you actively engage your mind, imagination, and perception. What is the subject? How was it painted? How does it affect you? What might the artist have intended?

If you contemplate the picture you just sit and gaze at it, allowing it to 'speak' to you however it may.

So in contemplation we just 'are' before God with the four 'S's':
Stillness, Silence, Simplicity, Surrender

Stillness enables us to give all our attention to God. It is most important when a group contemplates, as movement or noise from one participant can distract others from focusing on God.

Silence allows for the 'still, small voice' of God to be heard, and helps to focus our attention on God — not easy in a society where noise is used as an escape.

Simplicity does not mean it is easy, but that it needs minimal external input.

Surrender. Much of our Christian life - when, where and how we pray, worship, study - is decided by us. In contemplation we give all the initiative to God, letting God be in control, not us.

Stillness and silence help us to BE fully in the present moment, entirely aware of NOW

Different approaches to contemplative prayer.

We are all different, and at differing stages on our spiritual journeys. So one approach may help us now, but as we grow we may need to try something else. An approach that suits us may not help another person.

Julian Meetings allow you to experience going into and out of contemplative silence, and 'being' in the stillness, with a group of other people. This may make it easier for you to try making time just to BE, alone, with God. It may help you explore a personal approach to the prayer of contemplation, or you may decide to try joining a contemplative prayer group.

Ways to lead into, and out of, contemplative silence

Words are often used as a lead into and out of silence. It is usually a passage of scripture, or a poem, or from a religious book, or a novel. The words chosen should not encourage you to *think about* God (ie to meditate) but to become open to some aspect of God as the focus for your contemplation.

A short passage is usually preferable to a long one. You may find that one word or phrase, or an image, stands out for you. Hold that as your focus. When your mind wanders (as it will), just bring it back to that focus.

A Mantra is a specific way to use a word or words in contemplation. A word or short phrase — Jesus; Maranatha come Lord Jesus; Lord have mercy; be still and know that I am God — is repeated slowly in your head throughout the silence, the repetition allowing it to go deep into you and resonate. It is usually repeated in rhythm with your breathing.

Music can lead in and out of contemplation. It is very useful where issues of language might make words inappropriate, as in bi-lingual parts of Wales, or in a multi-faith group.

A gong or a 'singing bowl' may be used instead of music. This again avoids the way words can be too specific.

A Symbol may be used as a focus, either on its own or with words, music etc. Many people light a candle when they contemplate. Some use a picture or icon as a visual focus. Many objects - religious, created or natural - can be used as a tactile focus, held in the hand. Scent from herbs, flowers or incense is used by some people (be aware that incense or strongly scented flowers could trigger an allergic or asthmatic reaction, so avoid them in a group).

Contemplative prayer on your own.

Outside the gathered silence and stillness of a group, you may find that other things help you with solo contemplation.

Some people can focus their attention better if their hands are busy with a repetitive task like weaving or knitting, or some repetitive aspects of cooking or woodwork. Embroidery or painting helps others. Just walking, or being in a garden, or by the sea may help.

Take thought as to where and when you might wait on God in silence on your own.

Some people can set aside a house corner, with a cross or icon, candle, flowers. You might be able to use a local chapel or church. The garden may suit, if there is a summer house for wet days!

When you seek a time for contemplation consider what time of day will fit in both with your own life, and that of your family, and also the times you are alert enough. Are two shorter times more practicable than one longer time? It can be helpful to have a timer to set - possibly an alarm on your watch if it is not too loud, or a kitchen timer in a cupboard, so that you can hear it go off but it doesn't make you jump.

Ideally personal and group contemplative prayer should complement and enhance each other.

Words of warning

In contemplation we give the initiative to God. We are there, for that time, just to be with God. God may interact with us in whatever way he/she chooses — but we should not *expect* anything. Many times we may feel that nothing is happening, that it is all a waste of time, but often we do receive something — and it may be quite amazing. Whatever happens, we should be thankful, and persevere. Human beings (beings, not doings!) are naturally impatient but all things happen in *God's* time, not ours.

Occasionally emotions, fears, regrets, anger etc. may surface during or after the silence, sometimes very strongly. If this does happen it can be very helpful to have a good Christian friend or pastor available with whom you can talk, pray, share.

Silence is not easy for some.

Many people are unused to silence - finding it scary, unsettling, even threatening.

Some people have encountered silence as a threat, or as a punishment. They may at some time have endured hate-filled or angry or terrifying silences.

For some people meditation / contemplation is very challenging, but it can also be very rewarding if they persevere.

Gathered Silence

Sharing prayerful silence with a like-minded group can be both encouraging and strengthening. The whole group benefit when different people lead in and out of the silence, bringing their own insights and ideas. There can develop an intensity and depth to the silence that is not describable, but can only be experienced and shared.

For more information about The Julian Meetings

visit www.thejulianmeetings.net *or send an sae to*
263 Park Lodge Lane, Wakefield WF1 4HY

