

The Jesus Prayer //

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Some things take a lifetime to get into you and this is surely most true of Jesus with his followers. As the Lord seeks fuller access to us he uses a variety of means for us as individuals to complement hearing his word and participating in the sacraments. God works with the temperaments of those who love him through all the stages of their life.

I have known about the Jesus Prayer all my Christian life but it is only recently that it has got hold of me. After reflection on my experience I decided it would bring encouragement to others if I shared something of its value to me. I do so with apprehension as one writing about getting closer to Jesus but also with determination to hold myself to what I am writing about.

The Jesus Prayer is an Eastern Orthodox devotion in which you repeat continually some variant of *Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy upon me a sinner*. It is said formally at set prayer times, in my case in association with Mattins and Evensong, and also freely as part of the unceasing prayer invited by scripture.

Why did I start?

If I examine the origin of my own current preoccupation with this way of prayer I can trace a number of factors that have brought me into active commitment:

- A catholic-evangelical theological mindset wanting to centre on fundamentals in both great traditions
- Association for many years with the Community of the Servants of the Will of God at Crawley Down, a religious community that encourages us of the Jesus Prayer
- An overactive mind with a tendency to useless wrangling that distracts me and helps me lose energy in both life and prayer
- Recently discovering a local sign of hope for Christianity: that the number of monasteries in Europe has doubled in the last 20 years on account of the ongoing spiritual momentum of Orthodoxy in the east, a momentum that is so much rooted in the Jesus Prayer.
- Involvement with *True Life in God* through reading the messages received from the Lord by Greek mystic Vassula Ryden and close engagement with Christians within that movement who pray the Jesus Prayer and see it as a gift from Jesus to the whole church.



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- Meeting a monk from Mount Athos who convinced me that the Jesus Prayer need not be over ritualistic and can be harmonized with charismatic prayer in the Holy Spirit
- Reading the Russian classic *The Way of a Pilgrim* which became a taster for reading *Philokalia* the collection of writings on prayer of the heart from the Orthodox fathers whilst on a sabbatical
- Desire for a simple form of prayer that links in with the Eucharist and with my life as a whole

As I make this list I am aware of the combination of theological inclination and lifestyle frustration that made fertile ground to receive the invitation from the Holy Spirit brought by the people I have met recently at a spacious period in my life and ministry. All the resources were there, including books dusty on my shelf, awaiting ignition and take off so to speak.

What is the Jesus Prayer?

The Jesus Prayer expresses the good news of Christianity. It affirms both the coming of the Saviour and our need for his salvation. Based on incidents in the life of Our Lord it combines Peter's act of faith in Jesus – *You are the Son of God* (cf Matthew 16v16) – with the cry of the Publican – *have mercy upon me a sinner* (Luke 18v13b).

It exalts the *name which is above every name* (Philippians 2v10b). You cannot repeat the name of Jesus with a good intention without touching his person, God's person. It is a form of Holy Communion without bread and wine though it comes into its own in my own experience as an extension of sacramental communion. *The Name of Jesus, present in the human heart, communicates to it the power of deification...Shining through the heart, the light of the Name of Jesus illuminates all the universe.* Bulgakov

The Jesus Prayer is thoroughly evangelical and uncompromisingly catholic. To pray it is to centre upon the good news of Jesus with the faith and prayer of the church through the ages. This gospel encounter is in recollected repetition of the holy name of Jesus which is found eventually to convey his close presence.

Cooling the mind

I say eventually. I have been heartened so far as I have pressed on, guided by the advice in *Philokalia* as for example from St. John of Karpathus. *Long labour in prayer and considerable time are*



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needed for a man with a mind which never cools to acquire a new heaven of the heart where Christ dwells, as the Apostle says: "Know ye not your own selves, how that Jesus Christ is in you..?" (2 Corinthians 13v5)

As someone whose mind is far from cool most of the time this sort of advice has been literally heartening. *Call to our Lord Jesus, often and patiently, and thoughts will retreat, for they cannot bear the warmth of the heart produced by prayer, and flee as if scorched by fire.* St. Gregory of Sinai

The Jesus Prayer is not primarily a cerebral activity but something that warms the heart as it embraces, however haltingly, the heart of God. The main thrust of Orthodox anthologies of prayer seems to be concerned to help lower the mind into the heart in a way that resonates with the experience of baptism in the Holy Spirit through the charismatic renewal. *Abide constantly with the name of our Lord Jesus, so that the heart swallows the Lord and the Lord the heart and the two become one* St. John Chrysostom advises but he also warns that *this work is not done in one or two days; it needs long effort and a long time. For much labour and time are needed before the enemy is cast out and Christ comes to dwell in us.*

Hesychius of Jerusalem confirms the way the Jesus Prayer operates as a therapy for the heart that works by transcending our mental activity: *For as more the rain pours down upon the earth, the more it softens the earth; so too the holy Name of Christ, when it is invoked by us without thoughts, the more constantly we call upon it, the more it softens the earth of our heart, and fills it with joy and delight.*

Purposeful repetition

One of the main obstacles to my taking up this form of prayer in past years has been the fear of consigning my life to rote repetition. I have come though now to discover that the reverent repetition of the phrase actually brings with it the momentum of the Holy Spirit. This is brought out vividly in the beautiful story in *The Way of a Pilgrim* where the pilgrim finds that after learning from a guide to repeat the Jesus Prayer it eventually catches on to proceed involuntarily deep within him even, literally, in the sense of Song of Songs 5v2: *I sleep but my heart wakes*. The phenomenon resembles speaking in tongues: an inner, gracious dynamic for *we do not know how to pray as we ought, but...the Spirit intercedes* (Romans 8v26b).



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My own practice of the Jesus Prayer was at first somewhat familiar through use of the Western Rosary, usually on my fingers, as a means of occupying my mind with set prayers to allow my heart to intercede as I go about my life. It always seems a good use of 20 minutes in a shopping queue to pray eg. The Glorious Mysteries of Christ for five different people or needs. As long as part of my mind is kept on the physical task in hand, to allow the rest of it to follow the Our Father's and Hail Mary's helps some heartfelt prayer to be offered from the rest of my being so to speak. With the practice of the Jesus Prayer there is a demand rather beyond 20 minutes though! It is to be offered ideally in the spirit of St Paul's injunction *pray without ceasing* (1 Thessalonians 5v17). This had always seemed inaccessible to me, such an all encompassing devotion. I cannot claim I have lived up to this but at least have got somewhat into the habit of saying sorry if I forget for long stretches of time to pray as I have intended.

It is a constant refrain of *Philokalia* that the mental discipline of purposeful repetition is a powerful aid against the distraction of energy away from the love of God: *Moreover you should know that when your mind becomes firmly established in the heart, it must not remain there silent and idle, but it should constantly repeat the prayer: 'Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy upon me!' and never cease. For this practice, keeping the mind from dreams, renders it elusive and impenetrable to enemy suggestions and every day leads it more and more to love and longing for God.* Nicephorus the Solitary

Even stronger is the counsel of St. John of the Ladder about the spiritual warfare that commitment to Jesus engages us in: *Flog the foes with the name of Jesus; for there is no stronger weapon against them either in heaven or on earth.*

How to pray the Jesus Prayer

The traditional advice is to stand with eyes closed, focus upon the Lord and, after invoking the Holy Spirit, to repeat the phrase *Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy upon me a sinner* pausing briefly between each prayer. A hundred prayers can be said in anything from ten minutes to half an hour. Guides recommend that prayer be neither gabbled nor offered in too intense a manner.

To help focus the body's engagement in the exercise prayer ropes of 25, 50 or 100 woollen beads are available from Orthodox



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sources. Pocketed these are also good reminders to engage in the free use of the prayer during the day, especially as, unlike Western Rosary beads, they do not rattle! For myself I use such a Jesus Rosary to say a hundred prayers before and after saying Mattins, perhaps standing for one group of prayers, and then I say another hundred or so before Evensong. In between it is just a matter of occasionally checking that my mind in repose is gently repeating the prayer. I say 'just' knowing that I have a long way to go compared to *The Way of a Pilgrim* to deeply establish a pattern that is only several months old, though that is my ongoing intention.

The free use of the prayer can be enriched by relating the prayer to prayer in the Holy Spirit. As we focus on Jesus, my Athos monk guide advised, we can imagine the Holy Spirit also descending upon him within us and also being part of the docility of Jesus to the Spirit. Another helpful aid is to use the Jesus prayer to build on and to extend one's last Holy Communion. Yet another aspect is to see one's prayer, as at the Eucharist, as a making oneself part of the high priestly intercession of Jesus. Even if the prayer is traditionally in the singular – have mercy on me – it is through *Jesus...who sustains all things by his powerful word* (Hebrews 1v3b). Hence it brings with it the aspirations of the whole world. *I prayed with my heart, everything around me seemed delightful and marvelous. The trees, the grass, the birds, the earth, the air, the light seemed to be telling me that they existed for man's sake, that they witnessed to the love of God...that all things prayed to God and sang his praise* (The Way of a Pilgrim).

A last encouraging quotation from *Philokalia* captures something of the positive, joyful goodness that seems to flow from this discipline even if such graces are inevitably sporadic. *The sun, passing over the earth, produces daylight; the holy and worshipful Name of the Lord Jesus, constantly shining in the mind, produces a measureless number of sun-like thoughts.* Hesychius of Jerusalem

For more information on the Jesus Prayer try *On the Invocation of the Name of Jesus* by a Monk of the Eastern Church (1949) or *The Power of the Name* by Bishop Kallistos of Diokleia (1974)

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