

maranatha

Stillness and Contemplation

Being Still

In the confusion of a noisy world we hear the great call *“Be still and know that I am God”* (Ps. 46.10).

We can learn with Mother Teresa that *“God is the friend of silence”*. Catherine de Hoeck Doherty said *“Pure silence is a key to the immense and flaming heart of God”*.

When we turn away from all the words of the world and offer ourselves to God we become receptive to Him. We wait upon Him. We do not speak because our words may become a way of avoiding God instead of meeting Him.

Contemplation means being aware of God’s personal presence, listening to Him in silence, recognising His nearness and giving Him priority as we accept that He is beyond the understanding of our minds. We gaze upon Him and we allow Him to gaze upon us, in silence. Bishop Stephen Verney explained *“Contemplation is to open our whole personality to God so that He can take possession of our emotions, our thinking and our will.”* John Milton said *“Wisdom’s best nurse is contemplation.”*

In contemplating we kneel before the King. We allow the Father to embrace us. It is a loving relationship. We even become His friend. Gregory of Nyssa (331-396) said *“Becoming God’s friend is the only thing worthy of honour and desire. This is the perfection of life.”* Carlo Carretto said *“If we want to know God, to become close friends of the Most High, we must acquire the habit of contemplative prayer, made with the eyes of humility and with simplicity of heart”*. Dom Vitalis Lehodey said of this prayer *“You turn yourself entirely to His presence. You steadily look at him. His presence becomes more real to you. He holds your inward sight”*.

The driving force of true contemplation is love. We come before God in love, we express our love to Him, we look at Him in love, we allow Him to look at us in love, for He is love. We allow Him gently to dispel the darkness of our ignorance and to bathe us in the light of His Shekina glory.

The roots of contemplation

The Bible teaches *“Be still before the Lord, all mankind”* (Zachariah 2.13). *“Be silent before the Sovereign Lord”*. (Zephaniah 1.7) It is awesome to come into the living presence of God, the Creator of all. It is awesome to realise that He responds to our presence before Him.

We come into the presence of God and *“we who with unveiled face all reflect the Lord’s glory, are being transformed into His likeness with ever increasing glory which comes from the Lord who is the Spirit”* (2 Cor 3:18). When we come to God we listen, like the prophets. They repeatedly said *“The Word of the Lord came to me.”* However, our prime position in contemplation is simply to be in the presence of the supreme being.

Contemplation is a Latin word translating the Greek word ‘theoria’ which means ‘gazing at’, ‘looking at’, ‘being aware of’. St. Francis de Sales defines contemplation as *“a loving, simple and permanent attentiveness of the mind to divine things”*. Thomas Aquinas defined contemplation as *“a simple gaze on God and divine things proceeding from love and tending thereto”*.

In Christianity the word is associated with silence and solitude and was taken up by the monastic tradition. Ignatius of Loyola emphasised the need to enter into the constant presence of God. In contemplation we deliberately close our eyes to all external things. It has been said that when the eyes of the body are closed, the inner eye can open. There is confusion between mysticism and contemplation. Contemplation is a silent waiting upon God in total openness and freedom, putting on one side all striving.

Mysticism

Mysticism is sometimes associated with mystery and undue secrecy and often, sadly, embraces a strenuous and perhaps fruitless search for wisdom.

The word mystica was introduced into Christianity by an anonymous Syrian monk in the late 5th or early 6th century. Through his works he affixed the name of Dionysius, the Areopagite (who is mentioned in the Acts of the Apostles as a convert of St. Paul). He urges his readers to *“Leave behind the senses and the operations of the intellect and all things that the senses or the intellect can perceive, and all things which are not and things which are, and strain upwards in unknowing, as far as maybe towards the union with Him who is above all things and knowledge. For by unceasing and absolute withdrawal from yourself and all things of impurity, abandoning all and set free from all, you shall be born up to the ray of divine darkness which surpasses all being”*. Darkness can be the prelude to light. Dionysius points to the example of Moses who climbs the mountain and enters into the cloud of darkness. Moses cannot see God, but he knows God by unknowing, he knows God in darkness (Ex. 33.20). In coming to God much is hidden and remains hidden. St. John of the Cross recognises this in his ‘Dark Night of the Soul’.

There is a danger in a mysticism which is secretive and perhaps even possessive. We must beware of striving to possess secret wisdom in the manner of Gnosticism, against which the Epistles and the Early Church gave dire warnings.

Intimacy

The essence of contemplative prayer is that we approach God, with great intimacy - He is 'Abba-Father'. We are aware He knows our name. We allow Him to open our eyes that we may see His glory ("*blessed are your eyes for they see*" – Mt. 13.16). We look at Him and He looks at us – in silence.

On coming to the Lord we are led into the process of living with Christ, dying with Christ and rising with Christ. We allow Him to live in us, to die in us and to rise in us. When we commit ourselves to God it is permanent and total self-surrender without any conditions or reservations. We abandon ourselves to Him. We make ourselves vulnerable to Him.

The power of many of the great theologians of the church, lay not in their learning, but in their contemplation. This applies to Clement, Irenaeus, Gregory, Athanasius and Augustine. Listening, waiting, watching are part of our searching for the deep truths of God. Contemplation is a central part of our journey of faith. It is deep and awesome. It is based upon deep reverence for God and His name.

Freedom

As we contemplate we set ourselves free from inward-lookingness into a profound and liberating unity with Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all. We are liberated from all our fears. We are urged by St. John of the Cross to "*pay no attention to discursive meditation*". Total stillness before God in silence enables us to gradually put on one side all distractions. Our attention becomes focused upon God rather than ourselves or our intellects. His presence and His will dominate our feelings, doubts, hopes and fears. We lose our obsession with self. We willingly go through a process of self-emptying. We do not, however, endeavour to create a vacuum, as in some Eastern religions, as this vacuum can be easily filled by destructive spiritual elements. Our desire is to invite God to empty every part of our being, that we might be more Christ-like and be filled with the Spirit.

We come to God as the source of our being and the purpose of our life. In contemplation we embark on a journey and we do not know where God will lead us. Abraham "*went out not knowing where he was to go*" (Heb. 11.8). He had no schemes, plans or maps. We will be taken on an inner journey. We will be taken into unfamiliar territory, but we will begin to see things in a new way.

Contemplative prayer removes the barriers which separate us from God, others and the hidden parts of our own being. Contemplative prayer removes the barriers of deep and buried resentment, unforgiveness and suppressed anger. When we come to God in total silence we hear the knocking of Jesus on the door of our hearts. He will not invade us. He will not compel us. He simply waits for our invitation for Him to enter. His entry into our whole being involves a new intimacy.

God is not far off – He is near. God is not a bystander – He searches for us: "*Listen I stand at the door and knock. If anyone listens to My voice and opens the door I will enter his home and eat with him. And he will eat with Me*". (Rev 3:20). Jesus is aware that words could sometimes interfere with prayer and He warned His followers against

“empty words when you pray” (Matt 6:7). When we come to God in contemplation we observe deeper realities.

As we draw close to God in contemplative prayer we become aware that He is the One who is searching for us. He is calling us. He is knocking on the door of our hearts. He seeks to make our heart His home. In coming to Him we ourselves come home. In His presence there is complete security and safety. We come to Him, but He also comes to us and in this silent encounter, we embrace the one who is the ground of our being.

Approaching God in contemplative prayer there is genuine enlightenment and illumination and we can declare *“We have seen his glory”* (Jn. 1.14).

Our life is a struggle against darkness. Jesus says *“The eye is the lamp of the body. So if your eye is sound, your whole body will be full of light; but if your eye is not sound, your whole body will be full of darkness. If the light in you is darkness, how great the darkness”*. (Matt. 6.22 &23).

In contemplative prayer we discover that the awesome and mighty power of God is at work in the universe. This transcends all the schemes and efforts of our frail humanity. In contemplation we come to God in gentleness. We seek an awareness of His presence. We endeavour to be open to Him.

Surrender

As we draw close to Him we totally surrender our will to His and recognise that we belong to Him. An essential part of our contemplative praying is our renunciation of ownership over our lives and giving all our rights to God, being fully obedient to Him and yielding our life to Him. Then we will know peace.

We come to Him in humility and poverty of spirit. In all this, we clothe ourselves with love. As we open our hearts to His divine love, this same love flows out through us to others. Our contemplation is not inward-looking, primarily concerned with our own needs, but rather a looking up to the Lord, and out with Him into the world. We experience ‘shalom’ – the peace which heals. We enter into profound harmony with the Father, who is our creator. We experience His mercy and are overwhelmed by His grace. In surrendering to Him we become more than conquerors. In becoming totally subservient to Him, we are given a greater awareness and sensitivity.

As we wait upon God the roots of our spiritual life go deeper. In our passive state of consciousness we experience what Evelyn Underhill calls *“a self-forgetting attentiveness, a profound concentration, a self-merging, which operates a real communion between the seer and the seen”*.

Contemplation is a prerequisite for effective action. As we wait in contemplation, we grow in faith. God prepares us for witness and service in the world.

“Make me a captive Lord, and then I shall be free”- George Matheson

Dennis Wrigley