

THE JESUS PRAYER

- By Rev. Fr. Nilindra Gunsekera sss



1. The Practice of the Desert Fathers

The Desert Fathers strove primarily for prayer without ceasing sustained by frequent brief prayers sometimes condensed into a single formula. The repetition of a short sentence exemplified Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane whom we are told repeated the same words over and over again (cf. Mt. 26:44). Even the prayer of the Holy Spirit in us is limited to a single cry: Abba Father. Jesus himself taught his disciples not to squander a lot of words in prayer. This simple way of prayer quickly found its way into

the tradition of prayer. The Desert Fathers called this form of prayer '*monologia*' a prayer consisting of a few words, or even only of one word. The desert monk Aresenius used the formula: 'God lead me in the way of salvation.' Apollo used the formula: 'I have sinned like a man; like God have mercy.' Cassian used the formula based on Ps. 70:1, 'God come to my aid, Lord hasten to help me.'

St John Climacus urged: 'Let your prayer be simple and without many words. One word was enough to procure forgiveness for the tax collector and the prodigal son ... A single word saved the good thief. Lengthy prayers build up all sorts of images in the mind and distract it, whereas a single word can bring it to a state of recollection. If you feel that by uttering a word, you are inwardly comforted and mollified, stay with that word, for then your angel is praying with you' (Ladder 28).

Augustine in his letter to Proba (Letter 130, 19-20) states 'We are told that in Egypt there are brothers who offer up frequent prayers, but that these are very short, like arrows loosed off in rapid succession, for fear that the vigilant alert attention so necessary for one who prays should be weakened or blunted if too long an interval is left between them. Thus they show quite clearly that our attention is not to be forced if it cannot be prolonged, while on the other hand it should not be quickly broken off, if it is capable of being prolonged. So a multiplicity of words should be absent from prayer, but as long as ardent attention remains, let there be frequent supplications ... Praying intensely means repeatedly and fervently stirring the heart, knocking at the door of him to whom we are praying.'

John Cassian urged: ‘Reduce prayer to the poverty of a simple word or phrase.’

[Lectio Divina](#) become important here, for many brief ejaculatory prayers in the Bible may be used for prayer. For instance the Gospels and the Psalms are full of words, phrases, or invocations appropriate for use as a brief ejaculatory prayer.

‘Lord Jesus, I believe; help my unbelief.’

‘Lord Jesus that I may see.’

‘Lord you know I love you.’

‘Not my will but yours be done.’

‘God come to my aid, Lord hasten to help me’ (Ps. 70:1).

The Desert Fathers would say, as long as one of these formulas keeps your heart going, do not drop it, quietly persist until your heart is totally on fire within, the moment God so pleases.’

2. The Jesus Prayer

At the beginning of the 5th Century a privileged place began to be given to the invocation of the name of Jesus in prayer: ‘Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me.’ The verbal formula may be however shortened to read, ‘Lord Jesus Christ have mercy on me’ or simply the invocation of the name ‘Lord Jesus.’

It is the short prayer most favoured by most eastern Christians though it was also not unknown in the west. St Aeldred wrote to his sister in the 12th century: ‘The manifold repetition of the name pierces our hearts from within.’ As the Russian Pilgrim affirms the Jesus Prayer ‘holds in itself the whole gospel truth’; it is ‘a summary of the gospels.’

The [Jesus Prayer](#) belongs to a tradition called ‘*Hesychasm*’ coming from the Greek word “*hesychia*” meaning “quiet.” *Hesychasts* use meditative techniques which do not ‘seek a conversation’ with God. It is a non-discursive form of prayer (i.e. with no discourse). *Hesychasts* who practiced the Jesus Prayer have,

- i. a devotion to the name of ‘Jesus’
- ii. a keen sense of sorrow for sin
- iii. a discipline of frequent repetition of a phrase containing the name of Jesus
- iv. use the word Jesus in imageless prayer to lead to inner silence.

In the 14th century, the monk Gregory of Sinai coined the phrase ‘Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner’ to be used in the Jesus Prayer. A common way to pray the Jesus Prayer as proposed by Gregory of Sinai would be as follows:

- i. to breathe in on the first phrase ‘Lord Jesus Christ’
- ii. to hold the breath on the second phrase ‘Son of God’
- iii. to exhale on the third phrase ‘have mercy on me’
- iv. to hold the breath and keep lungs empty on the fourth phrase ‘a sinner’

Devotionally too, the Jesus Prayer embraces the two key moments that characterize all Christian prayer: the moment of adoration – of looking to god’s glory and reaching out to him in love, and the moment of repentance – the consciousness of unworthiness and sin. In the first half of the Jesus Prayer we rise up to God: “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God.” In the second half we return to ourselves in compunction: “have mercy on me a sinner.” Mercy bridges the gulf between God and fallen man.

Biblically speaking, invoking a person’s name is to make that person present (Acts 2:21, 38; 3:6, 16; 4:10, 30; 5:41; 8:12,16; 9:15, 27, 29; 10:43, 48; 15:14, 17, 26; 16:18; 19:5, 17; 21:13; 22:16; 26:9). So, the Jesus prayer was considered as being particularly effective because by the invocation, Jesus himself became present by virtue of the intrinsic power of the divine name. For the believer of today, as in apostolic times, the name of Jesus is power.

3. Conclusion

These short formulas gap between more whether at liturgical room, and going about possible to offer fervent walking in public ... or while buying or selling, (St. John Chrysostom). said, ‘The lord walks pans ... The true lover beloved, and him. It would be a bad able to practice prayer corners.’ These short in the presence of God Lawrence of the who ‘was more united with God during his ordinary activities than in religious exercises’ said, ‘It is a great delusion to imagine that prayer time should be different from any other, for we are equally bound to be united to God by work at work time, as by prayer at prayer time.’



enable us to bridge the explicit times of prayer, services or alone in our our daily business: ‘it is prayer even while seated in your shop, even while cooking’ As St. Theresa of Avila among the pots and everywhere loves his continually remembers business if we were only when alone in prayers help us to stand wherever we are. Br. Resurrection (d. 1691)