

## The Jesus Prayer [A] (Emma Cazabonne)

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### The Jesus Prayer

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This talk was an adaptation of *The Power of the Name*, by Kallistos Ware (1974) with an addition from *The Prayer of JESUS*, by A Monk of the Eastern Church (1967).

### **Introduction**

No authentic relationship between persons can exist without mutual freedom and spontaneity, and this is true of prayer. There are no fixed rules for those who seek to pray; and there is no mechanical technique, whether physical or mental, which can compel God to manifest his presence. His grace is granted always as a free gift, and cannot be gained automatically by any method or technique.



Nevertheless, the Jesus Prayer has become for many Eastern Christians over the centuries the standard path, and not for Eastern Christians only: in the meeting between Orthodoxy and the West which has flourished again since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, probably no element in the Orthodox heritage has aroused such intense interest as the Jesus Prayer, and no single book has exercised a wider appeal than *The Way of a Pilgrim*, in which a pilgrim wonders what is the meaning of the Pauline exhortation to pray without ceasing, and is led to inner knowledge of that prayer.

The prayer's origin is most likely the Egyptian Desert; sayings by Evagrius point to this place. But where lies the distinctive appeal and effectiveness of the Jesus Prayer? Perhaps in four things above all: in its simplicity and flexibility; in its completeness; in the power of the Name; and in the discipline of repetition. Let us take these points in order.

## **1) 4 strengths of the Jesus Prayer**

### **1. Simplicity and flexibility**

The Invocation of the Name is a prayer of the utmost simplicity, accessible to every Christian, but it leads at the same time to the deepest mysteries of contemplation. No specialized knowledge or training is required before commencing the Jesus Prayer.

Just begin. Begin to pronounce it with adoration and love. Cling to it. Repeat it. Do

not think that you are invoking the Name; think only of Jesus himself. Say his Name slowly, softly and quietly.

The outward form of the prayer is easily learnt. Basically it consists of the words 'Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me'. There is, however, no strict uniformity. We can say '. . . have mercy on us', instead of 'on me'. The verbal formula can be shortened: 'Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me', or 'Lord Jesus', or 'JESUS, have mercy' or even 'Jesus' alone.

Alternatively, the form of words may be expanded by adding 'a sinner' at the end, thus underlining the penitential aspect. Theologically, the Jesus Prayer can be considered to be an extension of the lesson taught by the parable of the Publican and the Pharisee, in which the Pharisee demonstrates the improper way to pray by exclaiming: "Thank you Lord that I am not like the Publican", whereas the Publican prays correctly in humility, saying "Lord have mercy on me, the sinner." (Luke 18:10-14.)

Incidentally, this urges me to wonder: did Benedict know the JESUS Prayer? The genre of the Rule does not allow for clues in that area. Nevertheless, one passage sounds to me very close to the JESUS Prayer. It is precisely the passage which quotes the prayer of the Publican:

Judging himself always guilty on account of his sins, he should consider that he is already at the fearful judgment, and **constantly say in his heart** what the publican in the Gospel said with downcast eyes: Lord, I am a sinner, not worthy to look up to heaven. RB 7:64-65

We can also add to the formula, recalling Peter's confession on the road to Caesarea Philippi, 'Son of the living God'.

The one essential and unvarying element is the inclusion of the divine Name 'Jesus'. Each is free to discover through personal experience the particular form of words which answers most closely to his or her needs. No doubt the formula employed will vary from time to time, following the movement of the Holy Spirit in you.

There is a similar flexibility as regards the outward circumstances in which the Prayer is recited. Two ways of using the Prayer can be distinguished, the 'free' and the 'formal' way.

By the 'free' use is meant the recitation of the Prayer as we are engaged in our usual activities throughout the day. Part of the distinctive value of the Jesus Prayer lies precisely in the fact that, because of its radical simplicity, it can be prayed in

conditions of distraction when more complex forms of prayer are impossible. This 'free' use of the Jesus Prayer enables us to bridge the gap between our explicit 'times of prayer' and the normal activities of daily life.

'Pray without ceasing', St Paul insists (I Thess. 5:17): but how is this possible, since we have many other things to do as well? Bishop Theophan indicates the method in his maxim,

'The hands at work, the mind and heart with God'.<sup>[i]</sup>

The Jesus Prayer, becoming by frequent repetition almost habitual and unconscious, helps us to stand in the presence of God wherever we are—not only in the chapel or in solitude, but in the kitchen, on the factory floor, in the office, or in the car. And again, the simplicity of the prayer and its few words make it very accessible at work time, especially manual work.

When I read your Constitutions, I find that this practice may help you greatly. Your CST 3 says:

To the greatest extent possible, Lay Cistercians are encouraged to find opportunities to devote themselves frequently to prayer, reading and reflection.

And CST 15 reads:

Although finding moments of silence in one's daily life may be difficult, Lay Cistercians are urged to create some time each day for silent prayer and awareness of God.

The 'free' recitation of the Jesus Prayer is complemented and strengthened by the 'formal' use. In this second case we concentrate our whole attention on the saying of the Prayer, to the exclusion of all external activity. The Invocation forms part of the specific 'prayer time' that we set aside for God each day.

Eastern Orthodox Monks, for instance, often pray this prayer many hundreds of times each night as part of their private cell vigil. The famous Cell Prayer of the Optina monks has it prayed 500 times.

Normally, along with the Jesus Prayer, we shall also use in our 'set' time other forms of prayer taken from the liturgical books, together with Psalm and Scripture readings, intercession, and the like.

In the 'formal' usage, as in the 'free', there are no rigid rules, but variety and flexibility. The words may be said aloud or silently. No particular posture is essential. In Orthodox practice the Prayer is most usually recited when seated, but

it may also be said standing or kneeling—and even, in cases of bodily weakness and illness, when lying down. It is normally recited in more or less complete darkness or with the eyes closed.

A prayer-rope or rosary (*komvoschini* in Greek, *chotki* in Russian), normally with a hundred knots, is often employed in conjunction with the Prayer, not primarily in order to count the number of times it is repeated, but rather as an aid to concentration and the establishment of a regular rhythm. It is a fact of experience that, if we make some use of our hands as we pray, this will help to still our body and to gather us together into the act of prayer.

But quantitative measurement, whether with a prayer-rope or in other ways, is not encouraged. The most important element of the physical technique is certainly the control of the breathing. The breathing is to be made slower and at the same time coordinated with the rhythm of the Prayer. Often the first part, 'Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God', is said while drawing in the breath, and the second part, 'have mercy on me a sinner', while breathing out; or the same with 'JESUS/Have mercy'. It can help also to walk as you pray this prayer, or even to sing it.

## **2. Completeness**

Theologically, as the Russian Pilgrim rightly claims, the Jesus Prayer 'holds in itself the whole Gospel truth'; it is a 'summary of the Gospels'. In one brief sentence it embodies the two chief mysteries of the Christian faith, the Incarnation and the Trinity. It speaks, first, of the two natures of Christ the God-man: of his humanity, for he is invoked by the human name, 'Jesus'; of his eternal Godhead, for he is also named 'Lord' and 'Son of God'.

In the second place the Prayer speaks by implication, although not explicitly, of the three Persons of the Trinity. While addressed to the second Person, Jesus, it points also to the Father, for Jesus is called 'Son of God'; and the Holy Spirit is equally present in the Prayer, for 'no one can say "Lord Jesus", except in the Holy Spirit' (I Cor. 12:3). So the Jesus Prayer is both Christocentric and Trinitarian.

Devotionally, it is no less comprehensive. It embraces the two chief 'moments' of Christian worship: the 'moment' of adoration, of looking up to God's glory and reaching out to him in love; and the 'moment' of penitence, the sense of unworthiness and sin. There is a circular movement within the Prayer, a sequence of ascent and return.

In the first half of the Prayer we rise up to God: 'Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God'; and then in the second half we return to ourselves in compunction: 'on me a sinner'.

These two 'moments'—the vision of divine glory and the consciousness of human sin—are united and reconciled in a third 'moment' as we pronounce the word 'mercy'. 'Mercy' denotes the bridging of the gulf between God's righteousness and the fallen creation. He who says to God, 'Have mercy', laments his own helplessness but voices at the same time a cry of hope. He speaks not only of sin but of its overcoming. He affirms that God in his glory accepts us though we are sinners.

So the Jesus Prayer contains not only a call to repentance but an assurance of forgiveness and restoration. The heart of the Prayer—the actual name 'Jesus'—bears precisely the sense of salvation. To understand why the Jesus Prayer possesses such efficacy, we must turn to two further aspects: the power of the Name and the discipline of repetition.

### **3. The power of the Name**

In the Old Testament, there is a close connection between one's soul and one's name. One's personality, with one's peculiarities and energy, is in some sense present in one's name. To know a person's name is to gain an insight into its nature, and thereby to acquire a relationship with him/her—even, perhaps, a certain control over that person.

In the Hebrew tradition, to do a thing *in the name* of another, or to *invoke* and *call upon his name*, are acts of weight and potency. To invoke a person's name is to make that person effectively present. One makes a name alive by mentioning it.

Everything that is true of human names is true to an incomparably higher degree of the divine Name. The power and glory of God are present and active in his Name. Attentively and deliberately to invoke God's Name is to place oneself in his presence, to open oneself to his energy, to offer oneself as an instrument and a living sacrifice in his hands.

This Hebraic understanding of the Name passes from the Old Testament into the New. Devils are cast out and people are healed through the Name of Jesus, for the Name is power. "There is no other name under heaven given to men whereby we must be saved" writes Saint Peter (Ac 4:12).

It is this biblical reverence for the Name that forms the basis and foundation of the JESUS Prayer. God's Name is intimately linked with his Person, and so the Invocation of the divine Name possesses a sacramental character, serving as an efficacious sign of his invisible presence and action. For the believing Christian today, as in apostolic times, the Name of Jesus is power. In the words of the two

Elders of Gaza, St Barsanuphius and St John (sixth century),

‘The remembrance of the Name of God utterly destroys all that is evil.’<sup>[ii]</sup>

‘Flog your enemies with the Name of Jesus’, urges St John Climacus, ‘for there is no weapon more powerful in heaven or on earth. Let the remembrance of Jesus be united to your every breath, and then you will know the value of stillness.’<sup>[iii]</sup>

#### **4. The discipline of repetition**

The Name is power, but a purely mechanical repetition will by itself achieve nothing. The Jesus Prayer is not a magic formula. As in all sacramental operations, the human person is required to co-operate with God through active faith and ascetic effort. We are called to invoke the Name with recollection and inward vigilance, confining our minds within the words of the Prayer, conscious who it is that we are addressing and that responds to us in our heart.

This is not easy in the initial stages, and is described by the Fathers as a hidden martyrdom. St Gregory of Sinai speaks repeatedly of the ‘constraint and labor’ undertaken by those who follow the Way of the Name; a ‘continual effort’ is needed; they will be tempted to give up ‘because of the insistent pain that comes from the inward invocation of the intellect’. Only through such patient faithfulness shall we discover the true power of the Name. This faithful perseverance takes the form, above all, of attentive and frequent repetition.

[i] *The Art of Prayer*, p.92.

[ii] *Questions and Answers*, n.693.

[iii] *The Ladder*, #21.27.