

On (Not) Knowing How to Pray

SARAH BACHELARD – REFLECTION 2

Our theme is prayer and we are exploring the nature of pure prayer – what it is and how to practise it. For me, prayer is deliberate openness to God, deliberate availability for encounter with God. French philosopher, Jean-Louis Chrétien says that prayer is ‘the religious phenomenon par excellence’. And he goes on, ‘it is the human act that alone opens up the religious dimension and never ceases to sustain, to bear, to suffer that opening’.¹ This is a striking evocation – it’s alive to the sense in which prayer is difficult, risky, even wounding.

Yet this is not, I suspect, how most people view or experience prayer. For the ‘spiritual but not religious’ pilgrims I spoke of in my previous talk, my sense is that they experienced the prayer of the church as mostly formulaic and arcane, and as presupposing certain propositional beliefs they could not subscribe to. At one point in my life, this was my experience too. As a consequence, prayer felt either ‘dead’ or inauthentic; a practice closed to me because I could not muster its appropriate prerequisites.

But if these pilgrims are, as I suggested, open to – indeed already embarked upon – a journey of radical transformation, then it matters that they find (in Chrétien’s words) a way of ‘sustaining, bearing and suffering that opening’. And so I finished my last talk with a question: what practice of prayer can lead and sustain all of us on this way? What prayer opens us to authentic encounter with God? It’s not an original question. ‘Lord, teach us to pray’ Jesus’ disciples asked him (Luke 11.1). Four centuries later, John Cassian and his friend Germanus put the same question to Abbot Isaac in the Egyptian desert. ‘What we wish to ask you now is to tell us about the nature of prayer and we do so particularly since the blessed apostle warns us never to cease from our prayer. ... [W]e would like you to tell us ... about the

¹ Jean-Louis Chrétien, *The Ark of Speech*, trans. Andrew Brown (London: Routledge, 2004), p.17.

character it should always have. Then we would like you to tell us how to keep with it in all its forms, how to engage it without interruption'.²

Today, taking a lead from Cassian's approach, I want to begin by exploring something of the 'nature' of true prayer and how it relates to the journey of transformation, the journey into God. Later we will turn to the question of how to pray.

Transforming Prayer

In my last talk, I described the dynamic of the spiritual journey as involving being reintegrated or restored to myself, and then (in some sense) going beyond myself in transforming union with God. Prayer is a primary *vehicle* of this movement— it's how we open ourselves to authentically religious encounter. I want to suggest now that the *practice* of prayer itself participates in this same movement. To pray requires us to be recollected, gathered, present as ourselves, and then ultimately to let ourselves go, to be dispossessed. I am going to elaborate on these interdependent movements of prayer under two headings: presence and *kenosis*.

Presence

So first, 'presence'. Chrétien offers an initial definition of prayer as 'an act of presence to the invisible', which he also describes as an act of 'self-manifestation'. The person praying *shows* himself, exposes herself 'unreservedly'. 'This act of presence', he says, 'concerns our body, its bearing, its posture, its range of gestures, and it can include certain requirements for preliminary bodily purification, such as ablutions, requirements as to clothing ..., certain positions, such as holding up the hands or kneeling, and certain directions in which one must face. All these practices', Chrétien writes, 'come together in an appearance ... that incarnates the act of presence'. Indeed, the one praying 'is in his very being an active manifestation of himself to God. All modes of prayer are forms of this self-manifestation, whether

² John Cassian, *Conferences*, trans. Colm Luibheid (New York: Paulist Press, 1985), Conference 9.7, p.106.

individual or collective'.³ In colloquial idiom, we could say prayer requires us to 'show up'. The very act of prayer exposes us, the whole of us, to God.

This notion of presence, of 'showing up', has deeper ramifications than the simple observance of recommended bodily motions. The gestures of the body may help to recollect the one praying, and (as Chrétien says) they *signify* the act of presence. But being present requires also a certain interior recollection and intentionality. One condition of this interior recollection is freedom from what the early Christian tradition described as the 'passions' – vices and worldly attachments. According to Cassian, these include the 'poisonous tinder of carnal desire and avarice', the memory of worldly affairs, empty talk, and 'low-grade clowning' – whatever exactly he meant by that! And then there's anger, worry and gloominess.⁴

The problem with all these is not so much that God disapproves of them, but they get in the way, they stop us being wholly present. How? They distract our attention and, even more basically, they divide and alienate us from ourselves. Even monastics who have supposedly left behind the ways of the world, may still (says Cassian), be preoccupied by worldly cares and deceived about their motivations. A monk may be frenziedly driven by the need for more – the extra tunic, the *Grand Designs*-type extension to his desert cell; he may remain self-seeking and ambitious, most dangerously for those things that 'could be cloaked in seemingly good purposes'.⁵

So Cassian insists that the sure and necessary foundation of prayer is simplicity and humility.⁶ These are telling words. Simplicity is to do with being one, uncomplicated, clarified, pure in heart. Humility is about being on the ground, poor in spirit, in touch with reality. No pretence or defence. Simplicity and humility are markers of child-likeness, of being wholly oneself. These are the conditions of

³ Chrétien, *The Ark of Speech*, p.19.

⁴ Cassian, *Conferences* 9.3, p.102.

⁵ Cassian, *Conferences* 9.6, p.105.

⁶ Cassian, *Conferences* 9.2, p.102.

presence, and so of prayer. You can't show up, you can't pray, if somehow *you're* not willing to be there, as yourself, undivided, undefended, naked in the sight of God.

But here's the difficult bit. Actually, 'in the sight of God' is a very vulnerable place to be. It's totally exposing, you can't hide. No wonder we avoid, no wonder we resist, no wonder we prefer to play-act prayer – which leads to an important further dimension of this practice of presence. That is, being awake to who we're present to, the living God.

American writer, Annie Dillard, is one who insists on the magnitude of the reality we're invoking in prayer. 'On the whole, I do not find Christians, outside of the catacombs, sufficiently sensible of conditions', she writes. 'Or is it simply that 'no one believes a word of it?' And she goes on: 'The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews'. Why? Well, because 'the sleeping god may wake someday and take offense, or the waking god may draw us out to where we can never return'.⁷ In more familiar language, the letter to the Hebrews makes the same point: 'it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God' (Heb. 10.31).

Being truly present involves profound respect, *and expectancy*, in the face of God's radical Otherness. Something could happen here ... something will happen here. If we don't believe that, why are we praying – who are we praying to? Unless we're 'sensible' of these conditions then, whatever we *say*, however pious our approach, we're actually in some form of denial. Isaiah was utterly aware of the danger, when he implored God to depart from him, 'for I am a man of unclean lips' (Isa. 6.5). 'Why do ... people in churches seem like cheerful, brainless tourists on a

⁷ Annie Dillard, 'An Expedition to the Pole' in *Teaching a Stone to Talk: Expeditions and Encounters* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1998), pp.52-53.

packaged tour of the Absolute?',⁸ Dillard asks. Reverence is the traditional marker of expectant and awe-filled availability in prayer, but it too can become stylised to the point of domestication – more play-acting. Real prayer, true reverence calls for an apprehension of the risk and vulnerability of falling into the hands of the living God. For opening oneself to God is an 'agonistic and transformative' encounter, Chrétien says, one in which our very truth is at stake.⁹ This is the fear of the Lord, the beginning of wisdom. It's the condition of prayer.

Kenosis

So we show up – as fully ourselves as we have thus far realised – present and vulnerable. What then? We begin to realise that we do not know how to pray. We don't know what we may authentically ask for or desire; in fact, we may discover we don't even *know* what we really desire. We can't be sure of our motives, even what look like our 'good' motives. And so we begin dimly to apprehend the imperative to give our prayer, indeed our very selves, over to God so that we may receive our prayer and ourselves back in truth. This is the movement of *kenosis*, self-emptying.

The self-emptying called for here is absolute. Jesus says that if any want to become his followers 'let them deny themselves and take up their cross', let them lose their life (Matt. 16.24-25; Mk 8.34-35; Luke 9.23-24). The English philosopher and novelist, Iris Murdoch, calls this process 'unselfing',¹⁰ and John Main speaks rather shockingly of a 'holocaust', saying that in the Jewish understanding of sacrifice: 'Nothing was kept back. Everything was given to God'.¹¹

At this point, however, and because in the Christian tradition we have often inherited a distorted sense of what this call to give ourselves away involves, it is necessary to distinguish between two concepts of 'unselfing'. When I was growing up, I tended to understand exhortations to 'lose', 'die to' or 'deny' myself, as calls to

⁸ Dillard, 'An Expedition to the Pole', p.52.

⁹ Chrétien, *The Ark of Speech*, p.25.

¹⁰ Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good* (London: Routledge, 1996), p.84.

¹¹ John Main, *Moment of Christ: The Path of Meditation* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1984), p.113.

subordinate myself to others and, more or less routinely, to suspect or negate my needs and wants. Bound up with this was the need to repress, suppress or punish those bits of myself that didn't quite live up to this nice and self-less self-image.

We're increasingly aware, however, of how morally and psychologically, as well as spiritually problematic this approach to life can be. Feminist critics have noted, for example, that calls to self-denial and self-abnegation in the Christian tradition have been 'usually calls that men seem to have issued and women ... expected to heed', though I certainly know men who have been entrapped in such a vision. This life-denying, moralistic and violent suppression of the self was brilliantly exposed by the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, who also saw its shadow-side in the forms of resentment and mean-spiritedness which, paradoxically, keep the frustrated and wounded self firmly at the centre of things. For the problem is that when unselfing is practised as a kind of self-mutilation, an automatic disavowal my needs and desires as well as my 'shadow', then either I fail to become a self at all, or 'I remain at the centre. I decide what is needful; I exercise my will or virtue and heroically sacrifice some part of myself, thereby perpetuating self-alienation and risking spiritual pride. I continue separate from God and other people, acting out of my own resources and self-sufficiency.

There is a second understanding of unselfing, however, which is not structured essentially by self-rejection and repression. John Main spoke of it as self-forgetfulness, the letting go of self-consciousness. It's not that a *part* of us is sacrificed to an ideology of virtue, but the *whole* of us is handed over, entrusted to God. This is the means by which ultimately we may be truly converted, transfigured. Main wrote: 'Now perhaps this is the greatest thing we can do as conscious human beings – to offer our consciousness to God'.¹² The 'unselfing' that happens in this process is not a matter of being systematically denied or thwarted, a matter of self-mutilation. It is simply that we are letting go possession of ourselves, our attempt to

¹² Main, *Moment of Christ*, p.114.

own, dispose of, or control our identities by way of our ego-ic self-consciousness. Paradoxically, this practice of self-yielding to God is precisely the way we become most freely and truly who we are and long to be. 'In offering [our self-consciousness]', says Main, 'we become fully conscious'.¹³ Or, as Jesus puts it, 'Those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it' (Matt. 16. 25).

Except, and here's where the *practice* of prayer comes in, we can't just *decide* to forget ourselves. We can't let go self-consciousness by an act will. We might sincerely want to get out of our own way, surrender ourselves into the divine life. But there remains a 'me' trying to hand myself over and let myself go, whom I cannot get behind. So true *kenosis*, true self-surrender, must be lived into by means of practices that displace the ego-ic self, loosening its hold on our consciousness from the *inside*. In this way, ultimately, we become sufficiently available, sufficiently yielded to be caught up beyond ourselves by the grace of God.

What practices enable this loosening and whole-hearted yielding of our self-consciousness? First must come our consent.¹⁴ Jesus says: 'Follow me'; his disciples are those who say 'yes'. The author of the *Cloud of Unknowing* tells his reader that it is the Lord who stirs up the loving desire which draws us to seek Him. He awaits, the *Cloud* says, 'only your co-operation'.¹⁵ This involves a 'naked intent toward God in the depths of your being'.¹⁶ We embark on the journey of self-emptying, *kenosis*, by means of our intention to give ourselves wholly to God, by means of our 'yes'.

We then enact this consent over time as we practise obedience, as we say, 'Thy will be done'. But here we come to a critical dimension of transforming prayer. If I am really to say 'Thy will be done' at deeper and deeper levels of my being; if I am

¹³ Main, *Moment of Christ*, p.114.

¹⁴ Centering Prayer emphasises the centrality of our consent to 'the Divine presence and action in our lives'. See for example <http://www.contemplativeoutreach.org/article/intention-mindfulness-and-centering-prayer> (accessed 5 May 2015). I am indebted to talks given by Cynthia Bourgeault at Jamberoo Abbey in April 2015 for clarifying the relationship between intention or consent, and attention in the work of contemplative prayer.

¹⁵ *The Cloud of Unknowing*, ed. William Johnston (New York: Image Books, 1986), p.39

¹⁶ *The Cloud of Unknowing*, p.40.

really to discern what following Christ looks like in the particularities of *my* life and context, then my listening for God must grow likewise ever deeper. I must be progressively liberated from the clamour of all the voices which are not God's – the voices of those whose approval and good opinion I crave as well as voices within, my ego-preserving anxieties, defences, reasons and self-justifications.

How do I cultivate this capacity for profound listening and radical obedience? The early Church understood that we must first progress from being simply overrun by our grasping, acquisitive instincts and our self-obsession. We then advance to what was called 'natural contemplation'.¹⁷ This is the capacity to be aware of what is not me. It involves learning to see other things for what they are in themselves, as God sees them, rather than in terms of how I might use or dominate them. This growth in 'natural contemplation' happens as we practise paying attention. Interestingly, it doesn't so much matter what we pay attention to, so long as our attention is other-directed. In her poem, 'Praying', Mary Oliver puts it this way:

It doesn't have to be
the blue iris, it could be
weeds in a vacant lot, or a few
small stones; just
pay attention ...¹⁸

This is important because the energy of our consciousness is usually turned inwards. It is centripetal. Other-directed attention helps turn this centripetal energy from self-centred compulsion to awareness. Iris Murdoch described such a shift in consciousness occurring when she looked out of the window one day 'in an anxious and resentful state of mind, oblivious of my surroundings'. Suddenly she observed 'a hovering kestrel. In a moment everything [was] altered. The brooding self ...

¹⁷ Rowan Williams, *The Archbishop of Canterbury's Address to the Thirteenth Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops on the New Evangelization for the Transmission of the Christian Faith*, 10 October 2012, <http://rowanwilliams.archbishopofcanterbury.org/articles.php/2645/archbishops-address-to-the-synod-of-bishops-in-rome> (accessed 5 May 2015), s.7.

¹⁸ Mary Oliver, 'Praying' in *Thirst* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996).

disappeared. There is nothing now but kestrel'.¹⁹ In a related vein, in her 'Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies With a View to the Love of God' (I know it's a catchy title!) Simone Weil argues that genuine attention to a problem in geometry or to learning a language forms in students 'the habit of that attention which is the substance of prayer'.²⁰

Importantly, this attention has a particular quality. 'Most often', Weil notes, 'attention is confused with a kind of muscular effort'. If you say to students: "'Now you must pay attention'", you see them 'contracting their brows, holding their breath, stiffening their muscles. If after two minutes they are asked what they have been paying attention to, they cannot reply ... They have not been paying attention. They have been contracting their muscles'.²¹ But the attention that is the substance of prayer is not fierce, effortful concentration. It involves non-grasping, self-forgetful awareness, the mind and heart non-anxious enough to let reality be, awake enough to let it reveal itself. This attention is a form of receptivity, even hospitality. In Scripture, it is called 'beholding'.²² Mary Oliver understands it as

... the doorway
into thanks, and a silence in which
another voice may speak.²³

So ultimately, as Rowan Williams remarks, from natural contemplation grace leads us 'forward into true "theology", the silent gazing upon God that is the goal of all our discipleship'.²⁴ Here we are 'open to all the fullness that the Father wishes to pour into our hearts'.²⁵ Here we discover, as John Main always insisted, that true prayer is after all not really something we do. We practise praying so that ultimately

¹⁹ Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, p.84.

²⁰ Simone Weil, *Waiting on God*, trans. Emma Craufurd (London: Fontana Books, 1969), p.69.

²¹ Weil, *Waiting on God*, p.70. John Barton similarly identifies 'two different ways of "paying attention"'. One involves straining every nerve to concentrate on something The other is a matter of having a habit of being aware of things that are not ourselves'. John Barton, Foreword, Maggie Ross, *Writing the Icon of the Heart: In Silence Beholding* (Oxford: The Bible Reading Fellowship, 2011), p.8

²² Ross, *Writing the Icon of the Heart*, p.11.

²³ Oliver, 'Praying'.

²⁴ Williams, *Address to the Synod of Bishops*, s.7.

²⁵ Williams, *Address to the Synod of Bishops*, s.6.

our prayer is transcended. 'We have to realize', Main wrote, 'that when we talk about "our prayer" we are really talking about our disposing ourselves for the full liberation of the life of the Spirit within us, which is the prayer of Jesus and his vital connection with the Father'.²⁶

Word, Words and Silence

How then shall we pray?

I have described prayer at its transforming heart as deep listening and radical obedience, as profound availability and receptivity to God. In practice, the spiritual traditions of the world testify that cultivating this depth of listening and availability involves some disciplined practice of silence. Why? Because we are endemically agitated and distracted by the clamour of our thoughts. Our attention is intermittent, our listening shallow, and our receptivity attenuated by self-preoccupation and fantasy. And, it was ever thus.

'Here is what happens', confessed Germanus to Abbot Isaac. 'When our thoughts slip away from spiritual contemplation and run here and there, we turn to ourselves as though coming from a sleep of forgetfulness. We wake up and look for the formula by which to revive our vanished spiritual thinking. The looking is a delay for us and before we have even found it we lapse a second time ... So it happens that the mind ... is forever wandering and is tossed in all directions, like a drunk ... One thought follows another, arriving, coming to being, ending and going away – all without the mind noticing'.²⁷

This is where a practice of meditation comes in. There are many permutations as to method, but the basic teaching is to use a focus of attention – the breath, a prayer word or phrase – as an aid to letting go the stream of thoughts and identifications that constitute not only our distractedness but our distorting self-

²⁶ John Main, *Monastery Without Walls: The Spiritual Letters of John Main* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2006), p.47.

²⁷ Cassian, *Conferences* 10.8, p.131.

consciousness itself.²⁸ As Anglican solitary Maggie Ross puts it, you use ‘*a word to leave words behind, to listen for the Word* [capital ‘W’]’.²⁹ English theologian Sarah Coakley has described silent contemplative prayer as ‘a regular and willed *practice* of ceding and responding to the divine’. It is an ‘*askesis*’ which is “‘internalized” over time in a particularly demanding and transformative fashion’,³⁰ so that our silence gradually comes to be internal as well as external.

How is this silent prayer so profoundly transformative? On the one hand, it’s a way of consenting to be with God at a level deeper than our surface mind. It ‘makes space’ for what John Main calls ‘the work of the love of God in the depth of our being’.³¹ Furthermore, it *enacts* the handing over, the deep surrender of the self-conscious, self-preoccupied self. Notice that this ‘self-effacement’ is not a violent suppression or negation.³² The basic contemplative insight, however, is that at a certain point we need to let go all thoughts and images since these are the means by which the centripetal energy of our consciousness is maintained, keeping us alienated from ourselves, from God and others.

This absolute surrender is not easy. John Main acknowledged the difficulty we experience in leaving self-consciousness behind, saying that: ‘It requires nerve to become really quiet. To learn just to say the mantra and turn away from all thought requires courage ...’.³³ There comes, he continues, ‘a delicate moment in our progress when we begin to understand the totality of the commitment involved in self-surrendering prayer, when we see the total poverty involved in the mantra’.³⁴ Cassian speaks of refusing the abundant riches of thought, ‘grasping the poverty of

²⁸ Centering Prayer teaches a slightly different way. It suggests the use of a ‘prayer word’ as an aid to refocus attention, but the basic practice is of ‘objectless attention’ or ‘naked’ awareness achieved by letting go thoughts without giving the mind a particular alternative object for continuous attention, such as a mantra or the breath.

²⁹ Maggie Ross, *Silence: A User’s Guide* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2014), p.56. Italics in original.

³⁰ Sarah Coakley, ‘*Kenosis* and Subversion: On the Repression of “Vulnerability” in Christian Feminist Writing’, in *Powers and Submissions: Spirituality, Philosophy and Gender* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2002), pp.3-39, p.34.

³¹ John Main, *Word into Silence* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1980), pp.13-14.

³² Coakley, ‘*Kenosis* and Subversion’, p.36.

³³ Main, *Word into Silence*, p.23.

³⁴ Main, *Word into Silence*, p.23.

this little verse', and 'saying it over and over again, ... meditating upon it without pause', so as to come to the blessedness of true poverty of spirit.³⁵ Likewise, *The Cloud of Unknowing* enjoins leaving behind all thoughts beneath a 'cloud of forgetting' since, no matter how good and holy they are, 'Thought cannot comprehend God'. To know God is the work of love, and only insofar as thoughts are left behind can the darts of desire and love pierce 'the cloud of unknowing that lies between [us] and ... God'.³⁶

John Main describes this letting go as the complete simplicity 'that demands not less than everything'. It is *this*, he says, that is the condition of entering with our whole beings into the movement beyond the self into the reality of love. It is the way we enter the dynamic of death and resurrection,³⁷ how we hand ourselves over, and hold nothing back – receiving our lives, our identities, and our prayer as gift.³⁸

It's important to stress that this practice of meditation, of silent contemplative prayer, does not replace the need for or value of verbal prayer and sacrament, of Scripture and theology in Christian life. For one thing, we are recollected or rendered present in our prayer, almost always, by means of words. The 'voice ... gathers us', says Chretien.³⁹ Just think of the prayer written by John Main, familiar to many of us, that gathers and leads us into the silent work of meditation: 'Heavenly Father, open our hearts to the silent presence of the Spirit of your Son ...'.

Furthermore, the meaning and possibilities of any silence are significantly related to the way silence is framed. 'To talk about silence', Rowan Williams notes, 'is always to talk about *what specifically* we are not hearing; or what we decide not to listen to in order to hear differently; or what specifically we find we cannot say'.⁴⁰ Words and silence interpenetrate – they signify together. Jesus' silence at his trial –

³⁵ Cassian, *Conferences* 10.11, p.136.

³⁶ *The Cloud of Unknowing*, chapters 6 and 7, pp.46-48.

³⁷ Main, *Word into Silence*, p.26.

³⁸ Main, *Moment of Christ*, p.114.

³⁹ Chretien, *The Ark of Speech*, p.22.

⁴⁰ Rowan Williams, *The Edge of Words: God and the Habits of Language* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), p.157.

which was to do with the impossibility of being truthfully heard – is very different from the silence of ineffable awareness, the contemplative breakthrough into wordless enjoyment of God.⁴¹ Silence can mean different things. In some contexts, the experience of silence is life-generating; in other contexts, it's a means of suppression and disempowerment.

So when we deliberately practise silence in prayer, when we intentionally leave words behind during the time of meditation, we are presupposing a certain faith and understanding. We are trusting that God is gracious, *and* communicative. We trust that God seeks to encounter and address us.⁴² In this context, our silence before God is an act of presence rather than of privation.⁴³ How do we arrive at *this* framing of our silence? How may we have faith in it? Because we have heard God's invitation to come near; we have encountered the grace of acceptance and new empowerment for living. And more often than not, this has been made possible by the witness of our tradition, mediated through communities of synagogue and church. To be able to recognise the silence of meditation as prayer is dependent upon prior acts of speech.⁴⁴

Yet, having said this, it seems to me that a practice of silent meditation *is* an indispensable and necessary dimension of the prayer of the church. This is because the perennial problem for religious life is its tendency to co-opt the very practices intended to draw us into self-dispossessing union with God into further strategies for buttressing the defensive and self-justifying ego. St Paul had criticised the legalistically minded religious establishment of his day in these terms. The gift of the law, given to Israel to help it embody dependence on God in every detail of its life, had been turned into something to 'get right', something whose successful

⁴¹ Cf. Martin Laird, *Into the Silent Land: A Guide to the Christian Practice of Contemplation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp.66-68.

⁴² Cf. Nicola Slee, 'Word' in *Renewing the Eucharist*, ed. Stephen Burns (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2008), pp.36-61.

⁴³ Chretien, *The Ark of Speech*, p.26.

⁴⁴ Cf. Williams, *The Edge of Words*, p.162. 'Where silence comes in is all-important; ... we cannot in fact discuss it without the closest attention to the speech it interrupts or refuses'.

performance justified a “claim” on God’s favour’ and had become ‘a means of oppressing self and others’.⁴⁵

Jesus stood against this kind of religious belonging and practice. Relationship with God, he showed, is a matter of gift and grace, not something we possess or deploy to exclude those we deem ‘unsatisfactory’.⁴⁶ Yet Christianity, in turn, has all too often done just this. The practices given to the church to draw it into Christ’s way have been co-opted to function as possessions, guarantors of security and status. Baptism and Eucharist become badges of righteousness or criteria for membership of an elect community, rather than invitations into the transforming journey of death and resurrection. When that happens, worship becomes a means of avoiding the very transformation it ostensibly invites and promises.

Silent meditation is more difficult to co-opt for such purposes. Of course, even in our contemplative prayer we can be deluded about the extent to which we have genuinely handed ourselves over, let go self-righteousness. John Cassian speaks of the temptations of the ‘*pax pernicioosa*’ (ruinous peace) and the ‘*sopor letalis*’ (lethal sleep), both of which John Main considers aspects of ‘the prayer of anaesthetized, floating piety’.⁴⁷ Cassian connects the false peace with the illusion that we have ‘arrived’ at a spiritual resting place which is now ours to possess and enjoy, and the ‘sleep’ with the failure even to notice that we have been carried away by our distracted thoughts.⁴⁸ Both states constitute blockages in authentic growth towards union with God. As by grace we recognize and leave behind these false resting places, however, the disciplined practice of silent contemplation constitutes a

⁴⁵ Rowan Williams, *The Wound of Knowledge: Christian Spirituality from the New Testament to Saint John of the Cross*, second edition (Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 1991), p.16. See also Rowan Williams, ‘Resurrection and Peace: More on New Testament Ethics’ in *On Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), pp.265-275, p.266.

⁴⁶ Not that he ‘preached a programmatic disregard for the Torah as such’, but he is remembered for ‘defining the conditions for entering God’s kingdom in terms of the readiness’ to be like a child, to belong and trust, to make a simple commitment to follow his way, and so on. Williams, *Wound of Knowledge*, pp.16-17.

⁴⁷ John Main, *Christian Meditation: The Gethsemani Talks* (Tucson, AZ: Medio Media, 2000), p.37.

⁴⁸ John Cassian, *The Conferences*, trans. Boniface Ramsey (New York: Newman Press, 1997), IV.7 and X.8.

peculiarly direct subversion of the controlling religious ego. And that makes a difference to every other form of prayer and spiritual discipline.

Martin Laird speaks of the mantra as ‘excavating’ the present moment. ‘We discover in the process’, he writes, ‘that there is more depth within us than we ever dreamt. There is not only chaos, confusion, emotional attachment, anxiety and anger’s nettled memory; not just the marvel of discursive reason, imaginative insight, and unconscious instinct, but also an abyss of awareness that is always flowing with bright obscurity, grounding all these mental processes, one with all and one with God’.⁴⁹

To begin to touch into this awareness, as anyone who meditates can testify, means that how we hear the words of liturgy, intercession and Scripture, and our sense of the divine presence in the Eucharist, community and daily life, is immeasurably deepened and liberated. And this is why Williams says that contemplation is ‘very far from being just one kind of thing that Christians do’. It is in fact, he says, ‘the key to prayer, liturgy, art and ethics’,⁵⁰ the key to ‘a renewed humanity’ capable of true love and true justice.

The Prayer of the Church

I have spoken of transforming prayer in terms of radical obedience and self-dispossession. Father Laurence has said that the essence of this kind of obedience is not doing what you are told, but becoming the Word you hear.⁵¹ This is growing into Christ-likeness, receiving God’s self-communication such that our lives are transformed, such that our lives begin to participate in and communicate something of the reconciling, life-generating love of the Trinity. In this talk, I have been focusing on the prayer of the individual – how each of us is called to show up and hand ourselves over, deepening our availability and receptivity, through practices of

⁴⁹ Laird, *Into the Silent Land*, p.70.

⁵⁰ Williams, *Address to the Synod of Bishops*, s.8.

⁵¹ Laurence Freeman, *First Sight: The Experience of Faith* (London: Continuum, 2011).

presence, consent and attention, practices enacted by means of words and, necessarily, by disciplined contemplative silence.

Our gathering, however, is concerned not just with our individual journeys – our personal availability for transformation. We are also here to explore the broader question of spiritual renewal in our world. And we are wondering about the role of contemplative communities, particularly, in encouraging renewal both within the church and beyond. Of course, the possibility of making such a contribution will be directly related to the spiritual vitality of any particular community. And it should be obvious by now that this is directly related to the depth of our prayer.

Having said that, what is it that we expect such renewal to look like? What is the being of a prayerful, transforming, contemplative community, and what contribution might it make? These are questions for my final talk.