



# The Essential Teaching

LAURENCE FREEMAN OSB

These talks focus on meditation as a necessity in every human life to strike a balance between action and contemplation. Christianity offers its own tradition of meditation drawing on the wisdom teaching on prayer from the earliest Christian monks. For modern people coping with the demands of a busy active life, Christian Meditation helps to re-connect us with our centre and bring mind and heart into harmony. These times of interiority bear fruit in the way we are and the way we work.

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## The Balance between Contemplation & Action

In the Gospel, particularly the Gospel of Luke, Jesus integrates the contemplative dimension with his active life. Jesus teaches not only by words of course but also by his example and by his very being. We see Jesus continually, regularly, withdrawing to a quiet place to pray, alone or with his disciples. And I'd like to look at this contrast between contemplation and action and how we, in our own lives and in our own vocations, can understand this relationship between contemplation and action and how we might better integrate and balance them.

There is no life that is purely contemplative. Human life and the Christian life is a combination of contemplation and action. Balance is necessary in any living organism; it's what we call health. When our bodies and our minds are in balance we feel healthy, we feel capable of realising our potential, of doing our work well, of living happily and productively. When our minds are sick, we call it being unbalanced. In most systems of medicine, even the body is seen as a balancing, self-regulating system in which sometimes we need to intervene with the right kind of medication or right kind of treatment to restore a balance to the natural processes and rhythms of the body.

So balance is just natural, and when we become unbalanced we become sick. We can see this is happening to our environment today. The ecological balance is being affected by human activity. Probably for the first time in history, what human beings are doing is seriously unbalancing the natural ecology of our environment. So everything needs balance. And balance in a living organism, whether it's my own body or the planet that we share, constantly

needs to be taken care of. We are constantly tending to one extreme or the other. And if we are not conscious of the need for balance, of looking after ourselves we might say, looking after the planet, having a healthy lifestyle, then very quickly we become unbalanced. Our bodies or our minds or our environment fall out of balance. So keeping balance is one of those necessary things in life that needs constant attention – daily work like eating, exercising or sleep. And this applies especially to the balance between contemplation and action.

These are abstract terms and they are difficult to define. Activity we know is work, it's planning and doing things, doing all the things we have to do during the day, ticking off things on our to-do list, dealing with unexpected events, trying to balance the routine with the unexpected. So activity is fairly easy to define. We don't really have to define it because activity happens anyway – just wait for the phone to ring or wait for somebody to knock on the door and you are in the active mode, responding. And I think a good priest is happy to do that, to respond to the needs of the moment or the requests that come every day.

Contemplation is a little more difficult to define. And perhaps that's why it's so easy for us to lose the balance between contemplation and action. We don't have to look for work to do. It comes to us, and it's very easy for us to become overloaded, overactive, and to lose the contemplative element in our lives.

St Thomas Aquinas defined contemplation as “the simple enjoyment of the truth”. The simple enjoyment of the truth. When you think of it like that, you begin to think of it differently. You also begin to understand why children have a natural capacity for contemplation. Children are simple by definition, “childlike”. They have the capacity to enjoy simple things in a simple way. You don't have to give children expensive presents or toys; a child can find great enjoyment in games that they make up. And a child has a capacity for joy that is quite infectious. So, simple enjoyment of the truth. And the truth that a child enjoys in a simple way is not some complicated answer to big philosophical or theological questions.

The truth for a child is *what is*. It's what it's doing, it's who it's with, the game that it's playing. That's the truth: reality as it is now. Truth isn't the complex philosophical answer to questions that are even too difficult to understand. Truth is the entirety of our experience. What is.

It's a little more difficult for the adult to enter into this state of contemplation. The child naturally does it. That's why children can meditate and like to meditate. When we teach meditation to children in schools, we see the immediate benefits. The teachers, the parents, the children themselves recognise that this is a good thing to do. They enjoy it. They feel the benefits.

But for the adult, by the time most of us become concerned about the balance of our lives, we've become quite complex. We have problems, we are distracted, and we have responsibilities. And the activities of our lives have often overwhelmed us.

We say we don't have time for contemplation; we can't fit it in. That very statement "we don't have time for contemplation" is a symptom of the problem. It's a symptom of the imbalance. St John on the Cross said, "If you say you don't have time for prayer, then double the amount of time that you give to prayer." But to make time for it, we have to do some work to understand what it is we are making time for.

Contemplation and action are poles apart. There is a tension between them. They are two different things. When we are making space for contemplation, we are not *doing* anything; we are *being*. We are not achieving anything. We are being. We are not ticking off all the things we've got to do. We don't get an immediate sense of efficiency or productivity. We don't get the immediate sense of satisfaction that we have done something. I think though that when and as contemplation becomes re-balanced in our lives, we do understand and feel the benefits of it, and we find a deep satisfaction in the practice of contemplation.

At first it seems difficult to re-integrate this contemplative dimension into our lives. We resist it. We think about it maybe or we read about it or we listen to talks about it, but when we are on our

own we've always got something else we could do. There is always a good excuse for not doing it.

I got a letter once from a nurse in a refugee camp on the border of Thailand and Burma when they were having a lot of problems there. She told me the refugee camp was in a terrible state. Thousands of refugees had poured over. She was the only nurse at that time in the camp, and she was working flat out to deal with the medical problems. She said, "I just closed the door of my hut and I had a line of people still waiting for me there. But I've been working from 6 o'clock this morning and I am finished, I can't do any more. I have to close the door; I have to eat." And then she said, "I'm going to mediate now, and have a little sleep, and then I'll start work again."

Now, she had been meditating for some time. She knew her limits. She knew she wasn't God, She knew she couldn't solve all the problems of the camp. She knew that she had to look after herself if she was going to be able to look after them. And she had an understanding by this time of discipline, that the time to eat, time to rest, time to mediate, just had to be respected. Otherwise she would fall into total imbalance and become sick herself and of no use to the others.

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## The Practice of Meditation

The essence of meditation is simplicity. Meditation is about *being*. Being essentially is simple. Simple means not complex, not divided.

When we come to meditation, we very quickly discover that our minds are not simple. We are not even in the present moment. We're thinking about the past, we have anxieties about the future, we are thinking about ourselves or what other people are thinking about us, we're solving our problems. The mind is constantly engaged in the complex business of living. So when we come to meditation to learn it, we first of all have to learn to be simple, to lay aside our thoughts. The simplicity then leads us to stillness.

The stillness of meditation, the stillness of mind that we come to, is rooted to the biblical idea of our way of knowing God: "Be still and know that I am God." It is in this stillness of our mind and spirit, which includes the stillness of our body, that the knowledge of God naturally arises.

So in meditation, we are not thinking about God, not thinking about ourselves and our complex lives, we are not trying to get God to come in and solve our problems. But we are being, and being with God, and allowing God to be with us.

That stillness that we come to meditation is also a freedom from desire, because desire often makes us complex and fearful. We want what we don't have, or we are frightened that we might lose what we have. In meditation, we lay aside our desires and we open ourselves to the gift. Instead of desiring, we learn to receive the gift and we discover more and more deeply through the practice of meditation that the gift is of an infinite and eternal nature. It is boundless. It is the gift of God's own self to us.

In the Christian understanding of prayer we are not praying *for* something, we are not trying to ask God to *give* us something, but

we are entering into the prayer of Jesus himself, entering into his experience of the gift of the Father's love. And the sharing of that is the Spirit.

So in Christian meditation we are really entering into the deepest mystery of our faith, but in the most simple and immediate way. The simplicity and the stillness of meditation lead us into silence, and the silence is a laying aside not only of words but even of thoughts. In meditation we are moving into a deeper level of being, into a deeper potential of our humanity, the potential that we have to be one with Christ, to be with God in him.

So how do we do this, how do we put this into practice? In meditation we follow a very ancient tradition, a tradition that takes us back to the roots of our faith to the earliest Christian teachers.

We take a word, a single word, a prayer word, a mantra, and we repeat this word continually in mind and heart during the time of the meditation. So choosing the word is important because we stay with the same word, and we allow it to take root in our hearts through a daily practice. You could take the name Jesus, a very ancient Christian mantra, or the word *abba*, a word that Jesus made sacred in his own teaching. The word I would recommend is the word *maranatha*.

Maranatha is a beautiful Christian prayer word or mantra because it is in the language that Jesus spoke, Aramaic. It means "Come Lord". It is the oldest Christian prayer; St Paul ends the First Letter to the Corinthians with it. So it is a word of great sacred value and meaning. But we are not *thinking* about the meaning of the word as we say it. We say the word in order to let go of thoughts. Pay attention to the word as you say it, which means to listen to it. Give it your undivided attention. Say it as four syllables of equal length ma-ra-na-tha.

Articulate the word clearly in your mind and heart. Don't visualise it, because if you visualise it, it will still be staying in your mind. We're letting go of images as well as thoughts. Listen to the word. It's the listening that will lead you into that condition of silence, stillness, and simplicity.

Take a moment to sit upright. Whether you sit on a chair or a

cushion or a prayer stool, the important rule is to sit with your back straight. You should be relaxed. Let the muscles of your face relax; we often carry tension in our forehead or our jaw. Relax your shoulders. Put your feet on the ground if you are sitting on a chair. Put your hands on your lap or on your knees. So your body should be still. Try to sit as still as you can. You should feel comfortable but also alert and wakeful. Close your eyes lightly, breathe normally, and then silently in your mind, in your heart, begin to say your word. And the word again, I would suggest is *maranatha*. Ma-ra-na-tha.

As you say the word silently, say it with attention. Give your full attention to the word, listening to the word as you say it. Say the word gently, don't use excessive force; but say it faithfully. In other words, keep returning to the word whenever you become distracted. Allow the word to lead you from the mind to the heart, from thoughts to silence, from desire to stillness, from complexity to simplicity, and from being scattered to being present.

Sit still, close your eyes, silently say your word.

Ma-ra-na-tha.

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## Brain Research & Meditation

We are hard-wired for this cooperation or this marriage of contemplation and action. It's like the left and the right hemispheres of the brain. Brain research now is quite advanced and we know many things about how the brain functions. We know how certain parts of the brain handle certain aspects of our moods, of our anger, of our happiness, sadness or depression, anxiety, fear. We can identify these in the electrical activity of certain parts of the brain. It doesn't explain everything, but it's quite clear that our brain registers or reflects these states of mind. One of the major distinctions in the brain is that between the right and the left hemisphere.

The left-hand hemisphere of the brain handles the active side of life – our planning or logical thinking, our analysis of a problem and our coming up with solutions to that problem. So it is your left-hand brain that says now we should have a parish meeting, now we have to write the schedule for the retreat, now we have to decide which priest should go to which parish in the coming year. So it's the organising aspect of the brain.

The right-hand hemisphere of the brain is different. It deals with the same questions, problems, and issues of life, but it approaches them in a very different way. It approaches them in a more intuitive way, less analytical. It sees connections between unexpected things which the left-hand brain will say that's nonsense, but the right-hand brain says no it's not nonsense. This is a deeper truth, a deeper wisdom.

The left- and right-hand hemispheres of the brain, although they are very different, they work together. There are billions of continuous interactions between these two sides of the brain. So a good judgment, a balanced view of a situation, a healthy way of

dealing with conflict, or suffering or grief arises from a collaboration, a healthy balance between these two sides of our mental consciousness. The brain is an electrical, electromagnetic organism running on electrical energy. Medical research has identified different types of brain waves that reflect different moods or different states of mind.

The beta brainwave activity is when the mind and we are tense and active, when you are dealing with a problem, when you are going to see a family who have suffered a bereavement and you're trying to think of the right things to say, or how to deal with a sensitive situation. Or when you are dealing with conflict in the parish; your mind is probably going to be very active and very tense, your beta waves are going to be pumping away.

Then there is the alpha wave. And when the alpha wave is dominant the mind is relaxed – when you are on retreat, hopefully, on a Sunday afternoon, or your day off, or time that you spend with family or friends, or when you're doing your lectio, or saying your office or celebrating mass. These will be times when the alpha wave is relaxing the mind. You are no longer tense and active.

The theta brainwave is active when the mind is in a kind of reverie state, daydreaming, fantasy. When you are not thinking about any particular thing but just letting your mind wander. Television is a kind of theta brainwave state. You turn on the television not because you may want to watch a particular programme but just to relax. It's not relaxation so much as just letting TV programmes do your daydreaming for you.

And then the delta brainwave is registered in a state of deep, dreamless sleep.

What's the value of knowing this? It doesn't explain the mystery of consciousness. It doesn't explain prayer. It doesn't explain our experience of God. But it does tell us something about ourselves. It gives us information, gives us a model of how we operate, and it is useful to know that. Just as when you have something wrong with you and you feel sick, you go to the doctor. You want the doctor or the hospital to do proper tests and to

eliminate various different possibilities as to what may be wrong with you, and come to a conclusion in a rational, logical, scientific way.

Today it's more likely in many parts of the world that you will hear about meditation from a doctor or a brain research specialist or psychologist. Because of all the work that has been done in brain research and in particular meditation and the brain, we now can say with scientific authority that meditation is good for you.

The scientist will say that it strengthens concentration and it gives good feelings in the free, frontal cortex of the brain. And these are some of the benefits that the practice of meditation will give you in a purely natural way. It helps you to relax. It deals with stress, reducing stress levels and cholesterol even. It's good for people who are suffering from panic attacks, from anxiety, from irritability, or people who can't control their anger. It's good for people who are suffering from low self-esteem and insecurity or insomnia. It helps people in their relationships, in their marriages or in their professional work.

It's helpful in the control of physical pain, chronic pain, or of grief, bereavement. And the same research shows that people who meditate usually respond better, for example, to cancer treatment. It is good for those who want to avoid or deal with heart disease or chronic fatigue and so on. My own small contribution to this medical research into meditation is very simple. After thirty years of meditation, I can confidently say that meditation does not restore your hair, but it does many other useful things.

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## Secular Meditation & Christian Tradition

In many parts of the world now, mindfulness training has become very well established and popular and has even entered into secular schools. Twenty, thirty years ago Transcendental Meditation, coming from the Hindu tradition, hit the Western world, Western mentality, and TM became very popular. It came from a mystical tradition, the great mystical wisdom of India, but it was secularised. The religion, the spirituality was taken out of it, like putting it through a filter, and the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi who introduced it to the West said, "I'm going to sell it". It was nicely packaged; and if you prove it's good for you then people will buy it. And TM became a very major force in many people's spiritual development.

Today, mindfulness training is doing the same thing from a secular point of view. It has also been subjected to and builds upon this medical research. And mindfulness training comes from the Buddhist tradition. There is a great respect in the world today, particularly in Westernised culture, the Western mind, for Buddhism as a rational religion, not based on revelation but upon experimentation. This is one of the reasons why Buddhism is so popular. Not surprisingly perhaps, the latest secular form of meditation has come to us from the Buddhist tradition.

I am in no way saying that these are bad things. People will go to find what they think they need. Some years ago, I was speaking to an old friend of mine who died last year in Dublin, Father Tom Fehily, with a contemplative awareness. At a certain point in his life as a priest he hit a crisis in his vocation. He felt he was beginning to burn out. He was beginning to lose a sense of why he was doing this. Of what it all meant. In the middle of this vocational crisis, a man knocked on his sacristy door one day as he was preparing to celebrate Mass in his parish, and he said, "I am a priest, I am a Benedictine visiting from London. I will be here with my family for a week, and I was wondering whether I could come and say Mass in your church while I am here. Tom said to him, "Yes of course.

What's your name?" He said. "My name is John Main." And Father Tom said, "I've heard of you. I hear you are teaching meditation in the Christian tradition." And he said, "you're very welcome to say Mass in the church on the condition you teach me to meditate."

So John responded to this and introduced him to the practice of meditation and began to meditate with him during that week. And it changed Tom's life. He went on to become the chairperson of the Christian Meditation Council in Ireland, a very much loved and respected figure in the Irish community.

Tom started many meditation groups. There are now three or four hundred groups around Ireland. When he was just beginning, he kept it very simple. He would start a group in his parish and tell people that he was going to be there. And once a week the group arrived. They would meet. He would give them a short talk. Later he would play one of John Main's recorded talks. They would meditate twenty, twenty-five minutes, and they would share a few words and then they would leave.

He said to me one day he was walking in his parish and he met a woman in his parish who was just leaving the house. She was in a hurry, but when she saw him she stopped and she looked a bit confused. She said, "Oh Father I feel a bit bad seeing you now." He said, "Why?" And she said, "Well I'm going off to learn to meditate with TM, Transcendental Meditation." And she said, "Somehow I don't feel very comfortable doing this but I just feel I need it. I need something to balance myself. I am just so full of stress, anxiety; I am getting angry with the kids. I just know I'm not healthy, I'm not balanced." And she said, "Somebody told me about TM and that it would be good for me. So I paid a hundred pounds and I'm going off to do the course." And he said to her, "Well, did you know we have a group in the parish?" And she said, "Oh no, I didn't know that. How much does that cost?" He said, "It won't cost you anything."

But what he said to me was that that incident and many others like it, told him, was how necessary it is that we in the Church are presenting and teaching this contemplative dimension of our faith. It's not that we are in competition with mindfulness training or with TM or with any other religion. Christ is not a competitive kind of person. He doesn't need to be competitive. You're competitive only if you are insecure. So we are not competing with anybody, but we do have a deep and rich contemplative tradition. Meditation is to be found, it exists within our own Christian tradition. We don't have to

invent it. We don't have to take it from the East, from Buddhism or Hinduism and baptise it. It's already been baptised from the very beginning of our Christian tradition.

So where is the Christian influence on this contemporary, secular interest in contemplation? Over the last thirty years, since John Main started that first meditation centre in London at his monastery where I first began my own monastic journey, Christian meditation has spread around the world. There's this hunger for contemplation in the lifestyle we have created for ourselves, a lifestyle of imbalance, reflected in the way we handle our environment, the high level of stress, anxiety, fear. In this kind of culture – and it's worldwide, it's not just London and New York – it is in this culture I think that the Church needs to draw deeply upon its own contemplative wisdom, and to teach in the places where it celebrates its faith – in the parishes, in the religious communities, in the schools where we teach and transmit the faith to the next generation. It's in these places that the balance needs to be set.

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## The Two Halves of the Human Soul

The story of Martha and Mary from the Gospel of Luke is the great scriptural, classical description of the need to balance contemplation and action. I'll just remind you of the story, re-tell the story again. Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem. He stops at the house of Martha and Mary. They're friends. We know Mary and Martha, the sisters of Lazarus, the one that Jesus loved, we know that he had some close personal connection with these three people. In the story we just see Martha and Mary. Martha comes out of the house to greet him. Mary sits at his feet and stays there, listening to his words.

So immediately we see a distinction of personality type between Martha and Mary. Martha is the one who sees him coming down the road and runs out of the house to greet him. She is proactive, planning, going out to greet him. But Mary sits at his feet in stillness, silently listening. Stillness and silence. So she is a different type of personality. She doesn't need to do anything or get recognition. She is quite happy just to be a fly on the wall sort of thing.

Then we're told that Martha becomes distracted by her many tasks. That is the only criticism made of Martha, that she becomes distracted. We are not told exactly what she is doing, but we can imagine. She went into the kitchen to prepare the meal, then the microwave broke down, or she discovered she didn't have any rice, or she suddenly felt overwhelmed. And she comes out of the kitchen and she attacks Jesus, "Lord, don't you see that I'm doing all this work by myself? Tell my sister to give me a hand."

Does that sound familiar? Ever felt like that? That you are alone, nobody's helping you, nobody cares. The people who should be working with you have gone off for the weekend or are doing



their own thing. And she is angry, she is sad, she is displacing her anger onto Jesus. We have to see that she is suffering. She is suffering from a condition that we understand very well in the modern world. We call it, stress, imbalance – not enough time to do all the things I got to do, not performing as well as I would like to perform, feeling a failure, feeling inadequate.

Martha is suffering because she has become the centre of her universe. She is out of touch, out of balance. She is totally collapsed into her own ego. She can only see the world from her perspective. That's egotism and it's a condition of extreme misery, isolation, loneliness, anxiety and sadness. She is in pain. And therefore Jesus responds to her with compassion and wisdom. He says to her first of all, "Martha, Martha". And that's what you do to somebody who is out of control. You try to get them back into touch with themselves so that you can communicate with them, because you can't communicate with somebody that's no longer in touch with themselves. So being restored to yourself. That's the first step. And then he says, trying to help her to understand what's happening, you're fussing and worrying about so many things, your mind has become fragmented. The multiplicity of life, the feeling you are just overwhelmed by things – endless problems, endless demands upon you and you can't cope.

She has become fragmented and uncentred; she is suffering. And Jesus heals people when they suffer. He doesn't preach at them. He goes *out* to them and touches them and brings healing from his own profound wholeness. But then he says something very mysterious, and it might be something you'd like to think about: "You are fussing and worrying about so many things, but only one thing is necessary. *Unum necessarium*; only one thing is necessary. He doesn't define what this one thing is. But it is obviously important if there is only one of it, and it's necessary.

So we might consider what that means. I think he suggests what it means in the next thing he says when he defends Mary. He says, "Mary has chosen the better part, and it will not be taken away from her."

This is a very strong defence and affirmation of the contemplative dimension of the Gospel, and it has been invoked throughout the history of the Church to defend what we call canonically the contemplative life. It justifies having the Poor Clares or the Carmelites or the Trappists or the Carthusians living a life that does not seem to have much economic or social or pastoral benefits for the world. Nevertheless, it's justified. But these words of Jesus give the fundamental defence and affirmation of the contemplative aspect or element in our lives.

I remember telling the story once, some years ago, when I was taking part in a Buddhist-Christian dialogue and I finished the story. When I sat down a friend of mine, a Buddhist monk, said to me, "Laurence, that's a very good story; I never heard that before. But you did not say what happened next."

I never thought about that before. So what happens next? Does Martha say "Thank you Lord for putting me right, I'm so grateful"? Or does she walk out of the room and bang the door and say "Men!" I don't know what she says but what really matters is how we respond, because we are what happens next in this and many of the other stories in the Gospel. We don't know, but we are what happens next, because how we respond to this word of God as an active force that is touching ourselves and our lives is how we become what happens next.

I think the one thing we can say is Martha and Mary at the beginning of the story are like two personality types, like the right- and left-hand hemispheres of the brain. Like yin and yang. By the end of the story, we move into a deeper sense of mystery of the human being. Martha and Mary now become the two halves of the human soul, but need to be married, need to be in friendship, need to be in balance, in harmony.

When Jesus says that Mary has chosen the better part, he's not putting Martha down. He is not saying that Carthusians are better than Benedictines or Benedictines are better than whatever. He is not putting the right-hand hemisphere above the left-hand hemisphere. What he is saying I think is something of great

importance to us if we want to achieve this balance in our lives. He's saying, *being* comes before *doing*. The way you are, how your mind and heart are balanced, that is going to decide how you act and the way you do your work, the way you speak to people, the way you celebrate Mass, the way you take communion to the sick. It's not just the doing of those jobs obviously, but it's the way you do it. It's what you carry with you when you take communion to a dying person or you go to sit with the bereaved. It's the way you are that matters.

So Mary has chosen the better part doesn't mean that we should spend the whole of our day sitting in meditation, but it means that the times we spend in meditation will have a direct effect, as scientific research tells us, will have a direct effect upon the way we live and act and speak and think and feel. And in that sense, there is a kind of priority for the time of contemplation that we need to make in our lives, even though the time of contemplation for most of us will be quite short compared with the other twenty-three hours of the day.

We recommend people to meditate for about half an hour in the morning and half an hour in the evening. That's one twenty-fourth of the day, but the effect of that regular, steady dedication to this contemplative dimension has a transforming effect upon the way we live.

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## Origen on Prayer

Let's listen to a definition of prayer by Origen, the second century Father of the Church, one of the great founders of the theological tradition and one of the great exegetes of the Bible – he probably wrote a commentary on nearly every word of the Bible. This is what Origen in his treatise on prayer says: “We do not pray in order to get benefits from God but to become like God.” We do not pray in order to get benefits from God but to become like God. Then he goes on: “Praying itself is good. It calms the mind. It reduces sin, and it promotes good deeds.”

I think that is such an amazingly clear and simple Christian understanding of prayer. Beginning by reminding us that prayer is not magic. You do not pray to get benefits from God, but to become like God. The goal of prayer is to bring us closer to God, to enter into the mystery of God's life through the mind of Christ, and in that process to be divinised.

One of the repeated phrases of the early Fathers is this: God became man, God became human, so that we might become God. Such a simple and dramatic statement, and we might think there is something wrong with the translation. He doesn't say we *are* God but he does say we *become* God – divinisation, theosis, the ultimate stage of the human journey. We do not pray just to get benefits from God but in order to become *like* God. So immediately prayer becomes something deeply connected with human existence, with our humanity. Not just with getting this or getting that, or dealing with that problem or getting over that other problem, but something essential to our human existence.

Then he says that prayer does bring benefits: “It calms the mind, it reduces sin, it promotes good deeds.” So clearly to enter into prayer is to find benefits, but these benefits are associated with

the process of our sharing in the life of God, St Peter says.

It tells us praying itself is good. How many things in life can we say are good in themselves? Not justified by any external benefits or consequences but in itself it is good. How many things in our life can we say that of? Love – it is good itself to love, not because of what you can get out of it. Celebration of the Mass is good in itself. The few things in life we can really say are worthwhile and self-justifying include prayer because it is so essential to our human nature and our human meaning.

The benefits that come from prayer – the calming of the mind, the reduction of sin and the promotion of good deeds – these are as if they were side effects, benefits. These are not the *reasons* that we pray, but these are among the natural benefits of prayer. Who would not prefer to have a calm mind rather than an agitated mind? Who would not prefer to reduce the level of egotism in their life?

That I think is what he means by saying that prayer reduces sin. It shrinks the ego back to its proper size. Clearly when the ego becomes inflamed and we see ourselves only as the centre of the universe and God as revolving around us, and we tell God what to do, then the ego is a source of trouble and suffering not only for ourselves but for anyone who might happen to cross our path that day. We are dangerous when the ego is inflamed like that. You have to take some anti-inflammatory medication to reduce the inflammation in the body. Well, we need prayer, deep prayer to reduce the inflammation of the ego that can happen so easily.

And it promotes good deeds. Jesus tells us that when we do good deeds we should do them unself-consciously. We shouldn't be drawing attention to our good deeds. Perhaps we shouldn't even know what we are doing ourselves. Your left hand shouldn't know what your right hand is doing. The more self-conscious you are about doing a good deed, the less good it is, because your ego, which is your self-consciousness, is blocking the free flow of the divine life through you, which produces good deeds. So the promotion of good deeds happens through prayer because as the ego shrinks we become channels of God's grace even without

knowing it. We do good deeds in ways we may not recognise ourselves.

So here is a little formula for approaching the meaning of Christian prayer:

*We do not pray in order to get benefits from God but to become like God. Praying itself is good. It calms the mind, it reduces sin, and it promotes good deeds.*

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## The Teaching of Jesus on Prayer

I'd like to look at some scriptural foundation for what we are doing when we take our time of meditation. Let's take a few passages in the scriptures and see how they speak to us about prayer, and where and how we might understand our meditation, or not, in the light of the scriptures, because if we can speak about Christian meditation then obviously meditation has to be a way of prayer that is consistent with the teaching of Jesus, with the Gospel, with the scriptures.

So let's just look at some of the specific statements that Jesus made about prayer in the Sermon on the Mount in Mathew 5 -7. The first thing he warns us against in prayer is taking satisfaction or an ego satisfaction from the external aspects of our prayer, standing on the street corners, he says, gaining people's admiration. We all like to be admired. Who doesn't want someone to say, "Oh that was a great homily, that was a beautiful liturgy. Father, thank you very much." That's perfectly natural. We need affirmation. But the warning of Jesus here is the warning against getting hooked in an addictive way to the admiration of others. Or to a standard of evaluation which is based on externals rather than upon interior experience. That is not what prayer is about. And he said, if you get that kind of ego satisfaction, that's what you get, all you get, and you are not opening yourself to the real benefits of prayer.

Then he begins to tell us specifically what prayer is and how we should pray.

### **Go into your inner room**

The first thing he tells us is "go into your inner room", that inner space, the heart. Go into the inner room, close the door and pray to

your Father who is in that secret or mysterious place. Clearly the first thing he tells us about prayer is interiority - the inner room of one's heart.

### **Do not go babbling on**

Then he tells us, "When you pray do not go babbling on like the heathen who think the more they say, the more likely they are to be heard." A very important statement when it comes to Christian prayer, that it is not based on the multiplication of words, however beautiful, and it is certainly not meant to be a technique or a magical method of attracting God's attention, getting God to listen to you. This is something we have to explore. Do not go babbling on like the heathen, who think the more they say, the more likely they are to be heard.

There is a danger in all religion, at a popular level, to turn prayer into a kind of white magic, that by certain formulas, certain prayers, done in a certain way, you will get what you want. You will get God to see things your way. You could say this little bit of white magic doesn't do any harm. We're all a little superstitious at times. But on the other hand, we would also say that this is not what the Gospel is really about. Using little techniques, little magical operations to win God's attention or to get what we want certainly may not do any harm; it's not black magic which brings about harm to other people. But even so, the Gospel is not about white magic. It's about faith.

What I think Jesus is saying here, in this teaching on prayer "do not go on babbling like the heathen" is that you don't need to practise this white magic to attract God's attention because, as he says, "Your Heavenly Father knows what you need before you ask." So that's faith and trust in its purest form.

### **Do not worry**

And then he tells us, when you pray do not worry, do not be anxious. Don't become pre-occupied and be diverted by your material anxieties or the problems of the day. And his cure for this state of

worry and anxiety is to contemplate the beauty of creation, which will include the beauty of our own creation, of our own true selves, the birds of the air, the lilies of the field, in which God's care and love for creation, us included, is evident. When we can contemplate the goodness of creation and God's active concern for the well-being of his creation, then we are freed from the persecution of our anxieties and our worries. So lay aside your worries and anxieties at the time of prayer. Don't bring them into your prayer, he tells us, but turn towards that contemplation of beauty and goodness.

### **Set your mind on God's Kingdom**

Then he tells us, when you pray set your mind on God's kingdom before everything else and everything else will come to you in due course. Mindfulness, recollection, single-mindedness. Set your mind on God's kingdom. In other words, be clear and consistent about your priorities. Don't allow your mind to be so preoccupied by the worries, sadness or disappointments of life that you forget the kingdom of God, which is God's presence within you and around you. Set your mind on God's kingdom.

### **Don't worry about tomorrow**

Finally in this passage he tells us: "When you pray, don't worry about tomorrow." Every day has problems enough of its own. In other words, live in the present moment. Be fully present to whatever you are dealing with now, and open to God's presence in the here and the now.

Take these elements on Jesus' teaching on prayer here:

- Interiority
- Reduction of our words and magical formulas
- Trust in God's loving kindness – the laying aside of worry, anxiety and agitation,
- Mindfulness – learning to concentrate, to be still, and
- Being in the present moment.

We have all the essential elements of contemplation, and so we can say Jesus is a teacher of contemplation. Prayer for him is not an obligation. It is the essence of our relationship with God and our growth in the process of becoming like God.

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## The Christian Tradition of Meditation

I'd like to look at the tradition of prayer we've been practising in meditation. John Main had an awakening here in Malaysia as a young man when he met a holy and active Indian monk. The turning point for John Main in bringing what he had learnt here in Malaysia into touch with what he discovered in his own tradition came some years later, actually at the busiest time of his monastic life. He had been sent to Washington DC as headmaster of a Benedictine school. This was in the late sixties. The country, the Church, education was in crisis. The monks were leaving to get married and everybody else was not getting married anymore, the children were in rebellion and drugs, and there was a financial crisis in the school. John Main who was a very practical and good administrator, a good leader and team builder was sent to bring order into this chaos. And one of the first things he had to do was to raise a million dollars for the school, get the school faculty and the students working together again. And he was very successful.

In the middle of this, a young man came to the monastery. He'd just come back from Asia. He had been travelling for a year around the ashrams of India and the zendos of Japan and the Buddhist centres of Thailand. He had been exploring meditation. He'd come from a Catholic background but was now gone a long way from it. But he came back home and he visited at the monastery because, he said, "I wanted to find out if there's anything in Christianity that can relate at the same level to what I learned in Asia, in the East." He went to see the abbot. He hadn't any connection with the monastery before; he just thought, he'd go to a Christian monastery as he'd been visiting monasteries in the East. The abbot didn't quite know how to handle this, so the abbot took the normal course – if you've got an extra job to do give it to the busiest person.

So he gave it to John Main. He said to John, "Could you have a chat with this young man. He wants to stay for a few days and he wants to find about Christian mysticism or something like that."

So John Main sat and listened to this young man's sincere search for truth, a deeper experience of God, and gave him a book to read by Augustine Baker, a seventeenth-century English Benedictine monk. It's a great classic of the English tradition and like most classics it is not read very often, but he thought there was a lot of material in it and it might keep this young man occupied. And he was a little surprised when the young man came back later in the day and said this is a fantastic book, I didn't realise there was all this in Christianity. So John Main said, I'd better look at this myself, again.

So he looked at the book and the book was drawing a lot upon the early monastic tradition, actually a pre-Benedictine tradition that goes back to the monastic wisdom of the Desert, the Egyptian desert which was the first great flowering of the monastic life in Christianity. And for about 150 years the deserts of northern Egypt were the epicentre of Christian spirituality. People from all over Christendom would go there to sit at the feet of the great teachers of the Desert.

One of these great figures that emerged from the Desert movement was a monk called John Cassian. John Cassian probably came from what is now modern-day Romania, and with a companion at the end of the fourth century he travelled to Jerusalem, entered the monastery of St Jerome but didn't find it was deep enough for him, and he went over the border to meet with the Desert Fathers of northern Egypt. And he spent we think about twenty years there. He sat at the feet of the great fathers, the great abbots of the Desert

At the beginning of the fifth century, he left Egypt, went to Constantinople, was ordained a priest by St John Chrysostom, and the next we hear about him is that he has turned up in Marseilles in the south of France. There he established a double monastery, one for men and one for women.

The connection with John Main in Washington DC in 1969

came through his re-discovery of Cassian. When Cassian settled in the south of France, he was approached by a local bishop who was concerned about the wild monks that were running around his diocese – in those days, monks were much wilder than they are now.

They hadn't been clericalised and they hadn't been tamed by canon law. They were probably the expression of the prophetic, the bands of prophets that used to wander around in the Old Testament times, a little difficult to control, and some of them may be very holy, some of them completely crazy. So the bishop said we need to put a little bit of order into this monastic movement. Could you write something about it; you've been out there in Egypt. Put some theology into it; put some order, put some structure to the monastic movement.

So Cassian set himself to write and produce two great works of Western spirituality. One is called the *Institutes of the Fathers* describing some of the basic principles of monastic living and the second book, his more famous book, the *Conferences of the Fathers*. There are 24 conferences and in these conferences, he compressed and compounded a composite teaching of the Desert tradition. He puts these teachings into the mouths of a number of great legendary figures of the Desert.

At the centre of the structure of this great work, there are two conferences on prayer delivered by Abba Isaac, Conference 9 and Conference 10. Conference 9 begins with John Cassian and his friend Germanus, two young friends, eager novice monks. They go to Isaac and they say teach us about prayer; that's why we're here. That's why this monastic movement had started here in the desert. People wanted to come to a place free of distraction and busyness and noise, away from the cities. They came into the desert to pray. We know the importance of the desert in biblical tradition as a place for meeting God, for achieving a radical simplicity of mind and desire, a place of focus, a place of concentration, a place where you can be really present to yourself and to God.

So they came to Isaac and said we want to know more about prayer. What can you tell us about prayer? And Isaac begins to

speak about the different forms of prayer. He uses St Paul's description of the different forms of prayer, supplication, petition, thanksgiving and so on. And in each of these descriptions of prayer, he says, there is a movement, a sense of direction in prayer. In prayer we are not just like turning a prayer wheel. There is a repetition, of course, in prayer. For example, we have daily mass, we say the Office and we repeat forms, we repeat words in prayer. There is a repetition, but it's not a mechanical repetition.

This is very important, if you want to understand meditation and the saying of the mantra, the repetition of the word. It is repetition, but there is an important difference between different kinds of repetition. There is a mechanical repetition which deadens the spirit after a time, that makes us restless and impatient and hungry for change and angry because we feel trapped in this mechanical repetition. Repetition, you know, can be either faithful or mechanical. Abbot Isaac, if you read the 9<sup>th</sup> Conference, speaks about prayer and he recognises that these different forms of prayer have a repetitive aspect to them. We come back to these different forms of prayer, we pray in different ways at different times, we have a limited range of forms of prayer, perhaps. But at the same time, he had a sense that prayer was moving us in a positive direction. It's like the wheels of a car; they're revolving around and around repetitively, but they are moving you. They are not in the same place.

What does Isaac say about where all this is taking us, the goal of prayer? By the end of the 9<sup>th</sup> Conference, he has a beautiful passage where he describes the prayer of fire. He says eventually we are led into this prayer of union where we join with the prayer of Christ. We are united with his prayer in the way that fire unites itself with what it is burning. So we are involved in the same fire of love that Christ is experiencing in his worship of the Father.

So this beautiful idea of the goal of prayer, union with the prayer of Christ reflecting one of the most ancient ideas of the Christian tradition, is that the goal of life is contemplation.

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*Contemplation and action are poles apart. There is a tension between them. They are two different things. When we are making space for contemplation, we are not doing anything; we are being. We are not achieving anything. We are being. We are not ticking off all the things we've got to do. We don't get an immediate sense of efficiency or productivity. We don't get the immediate sense of satisfaction that we have done something. I think though that when and as contemplation becomes re-balanced in our lives, we do understand and feel the benefits of it, and we find a deep satisfaction in the practice of contemplation.*

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*The essence of meditation is simplicity. Meditation is about being. And Being is essentially simple. When we come to meditation, we very quickly discover that our minds are not simple. We are not even in the present moment. So when we come to meditation to learn it we, first of all have to learn to be simple, to lay aside our thoughts. The simplicity then leads us to stillness. The stillness of meditation, the stillness of mind that we come to, is rooted to the biblical idea of our way of knowing God:*

*"Be still and know that I am God."*

*It is in this stillness of our mind and spirit, which includes the stillness of our body, that the knowledge of God naturally arises.*

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*In meditation, we lay aside our desires and we open ourselves to the gift. Instead of desiring, we learn to receive the gift and we discover more and more deeply through the practice of meditation that the gift is of an infinite and eternal nature. It is boundless. It is the gift of God's own self to us.*

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