

A Night in the Desert of the Holy Mountain

“– Is purification and salvation...attained only through the prayer, ‘Lord Jesus Christ have mercy on me’? Are other prayers not appropriate? Do they not help?

– Every prayer has enormous power. It is a cry of the soul. Divine help comes according to the faith and fervour with which we pray. There is liturgical prayer, individual prayer etc. The Jesus prayer, however, has boundless value, because, as St Isaac the Syrian says, it is that small key with the help of which we can enter into the mysteries which ‘no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man conceived’ (1 Cor. 2:9)... The Jesus prayer calls forth a lot of grace... because it is closely connected with humility and the awareness of our sin...

– The Jesus Prayer is quite limited, very short. How can the nous be fixed on it?

– The nous concentrates more on short phrases. But the Jesus prayer has an immense depth which cannot be seen externally...

– Since the Jesus prayer possess such power, allow me, Gerondas [Elder], to ask you how it is done...”

Significance of the Jesus Prayer

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“– Noetic prayer mainly requires renunciation of the world, submission to a Gerondas [Elder], a decision by the monk to remain in exile and to keep the commandments of Christ for a long period of time. In the beginning our attention concentrates on the fulfilling of the commandments of Christ and is occupied in practising abstinence and obedience. We know from the teaching of our holy Fathers that virtues do not unite man with God perfectly, but they create the appropriate climate so that prayer comes and unites man with God.

Virtues are a prerequisite for the granting of much grace, yet they also offer grace. When, therefore, the Gerondas, who has experience of the Jesus prayer, realises that his disciple's will has been cut off and he has been cleansed from the gross passions, only then does he decide to initiate him in the Jesus prayer. Even then, however, he does not tell him everything but only as much as he can endure and carry out. He guides him little by little in case he may fall into disappointment or error.

– What are these stages?

– There are primarily five stages.

Firstly, reciting the Jesus prayer vocally. We repeat the Jesus prayer with our lips, while trying at the same time to focus our attention on the words of the prayer.

Secondly, the nous takes the Jesus prayer and says it noetically. This is noetic prayer. Our whole attention is centred again on the words, but is concentrated in the nous, which is the most subtle attention. When the nous gets tired, we start again to whisper the prayer with the lips. This method, of course, or the use of the prayer rope, is still the elementary level of the Jesus prayer. A beginner should start, however, from this stage, and when he reaches what is more perfect, what is less perfect will then fade away. After the nous has rested, we start again to concentrate our attention there. St Nilos advises: 'Always remember God and your nous will become heaven.'

Thirdly, the Jesus prayer then descends into the heart. Nous and heart are united by the energy of the Holy Spirit. The attention now is centred in the heart and is immersed again in the words of the Jesus prayer, primarily in the name of Jesus which has an unfathomable depth. This immersion in the heart is accompanied by many tears.

Fourthly, the prayer now becomes self-acting. It is prayed while the ascetic is working, eating, discussing or in church, or even while he is sleeping. 'I sleep but my heart wakes', as Holy Scripture says (cf. Song of Songs 5:2).

Fifthly, the person praying feels a divine, soft flame burning within his soul and making it joyful. The grace of Christ lives in the heart. ‘We become the dwelling place of God, when He is established within us, by means of the memory. Thus we become the temple of God, when continuous remembrance of Him is not disturbed by earthly cares and the nous is not distracted by unexpected calamities. Fleeing all these things, the friend of God withdraws to Him, chasing away all provocations to evil, and occupying himself in a way which leads to virtue.’ [St Basil the Great] Thus he feels the divine presence within himself, and this grace passes to his body, which becomes dead to the world and is crucified. This is the highest stage which is sometimes connected with the theoria [vision] of the uncreated Light. This is, essentially, the course of the development of the Jesus prayer. Each stage has a corresponding grace.”

The Stages of the Jesus Prayer

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“– We have not said anything up to now about saying the Jesus prayer for others. How can one use the prayer for this purpose?

– When we want to say the Jesus prayer for other people who are in need, we should say the first time, ‘Lord Jesus Christ have mercy on Your servants’ or ‘Your servant’, remembering their names, but afterwards we should continue without mentioning their names and without fixing our nous on them, without thinking of them. God knows whom we are praying for then. Also you should not think about the problems that bother them. We only say, ‘Have mercy on Your servant’, and God will send His grace. And if he is worthy of receiving it, it will act according to his need.”

Saying the Jesus Prayer for Others