

Good Friday addresses, 2008

### **Meditation 1 – Waiting with the Lord in the Jesus Prayer**

The prayer we have just said together – Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on us, sinners – is a version of the ‘Jesus Prayer’; perhaps it is more usually used in the singular form ‘...have mercy on me, a sinner’, but both forms are valid, and within a period of prayer one can switch from one to the another.

The Jesus Prayer comes to us from the Orthodox tradition, and has very ancient roots. Some see it as the perfect prayer – it confesses all that needs to be confessed about Christ; and it says all that needs to be said about us. So it is a prayer of acknowledgement – adoration even – and of penitence and petition – all in four short lines.

It is the prayer which devout Orthodox Christians – and, increasingly, many Western Christians, too – use to wait upon God, by repeating it over and over in their hearts, (or sometimes out loud) in time with their breathing. If you pray the first line with an inbreath – ‘Lord Jesus Christ’ – it is as though you are taking in the wonder of all that Jesus is to us – Lord, Saviour, Messiah. The second line, on an outbreath, is a profession of faith in who he is in himself – the Son of God. With an inbreath for the third line, we prayerfully receive all the gifts he has to offer, summed-up in that lovely word ‘mercy’. The confession of ourselves as sinners, in the fourth line, expressed with an outbreath, symbolises a letting-

go, a laying-aside of what the Epistle to the Hebrews calls ‘every weight, and the sin which clings so closely’.

So – *Lord Jesus Christ,  
Son of God,  
Have mercy on us,  
Sinners.*

People who love this prayer find that it helps them just to wait upon God with empty hands, letting go... acknowledging... loving... and receiving – or, to use another image, when one says it one is dipping into the stream of his truth and love, which is constantly flowing around us. Different images or concerns may occupy the surface of our minds while our heart is praying this prayer, and the prayer can carry them, and hold those concerns before to God without an excess of words. Sometimes people use a prayer rope, like this... to occupy their hands by secretly counting off each knot as the prayer is prayed within.

I shall be taking the themes of this prayer as the basis of short meditations for the rest of this hour, and then after each there will be a few minutes silence. If you would like to try using the Jesus Prayer in the silences please do – but don’t feel obliged: it isn’t everyone’s way of praying. If having a prayer rope would help you to keep focused, there are a few which may be borrowed, on the table at the back. Please pick one up. But now let us enter into silence, to wait awhile with the Lord, beneath his cross. *Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on us, sinners.*

12.15.....Hymn 68 – O Sacred head, Sore wounded

### **Meditation 2 – ‘Lord Jesus Christ’...**

We call out to Jesus because we know of him. We have heard of him from others. Like blind Bartimaeus, who called out, ‘Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me...’, we believe in the inner meaning of his name, Jesus – ‘Saviour’. We want to experience his salvation, his healing, at the point of our own deepest need. We want to meet him in our prayer and so be helped up, to follow him along the road, as a disciple follows a Master, as a servant follows a Lord. We acknowledge that he is Christ, the anointed one, come among us to bring in God’s kingdom of justice and mercy and love..

But we know what Bartimaeus couldn’t know when he cried out from the roadside on the way out of Jericho - that the Jesus we call out to is the one anointed not in a royal coronation, but by the oil of a tearful woman, who prepared his body for burial before the time; he is the Lord and Master, who humbled himself to wash his own disciples’ feet; he is the Saviour who brings healing not from a serene store of invulnerable power, but from that point where he was most utterly weak and shattered; he is the king of a kingdom whose authority is rooted in the abomination of a cross. This is the Lord and Saviour, Messiah and King, on whom we call and with whom we wait.

*Lord Jesus Christ,  
Son of God,  
Have mercy on us,  
sinners.*

12.25.....Hymn 487, Lord Christ we praise your sacrifice

### **Meditation 3 – ‘Son of God’...**

‘You are the Christ, the *Son of the living God*’. This is what St Matthew tells us that Peter confessed at Caesarea Philippi. But if he did say it, what could Peter, a monotheistic Jew, have meant by calling Jesus ‘Son of God’? And how could a moment of such exalted mystical insight into divine mystery have been followed so swiftly by the complete lack of understanding which led Jesus to say to Peter, ‘Get behind me, Satan’?

The centurion who directed events at the crucifixion called Jesus ‘the Son of God’, according to St Matthew. What might he have meant by this exclamation at such a terrible time? Pilate, we’re told by John, had been frightened by the title. The Chief Priests and elders of the Jews had been scandalised by it.

What does it mean to us, ‘Son of God’? A mystery. Something our society is finding it harder and harder to come to terms with, as people prefer to call Jesus ‘a holy prophet’, ‘a great man’.. And yet *we* go on confessing this mystery, standing in the faith of the church throughout the ages. And in it we find assurance that Jesus in his Passion brings us the very passion of God for humanity; and in his death he gives birth to new life - new life that humanity could never have created for itself. God’s direct involvement was necessary..  
*‘Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God,  
have mercy on us, sinners...’*

12.35.....Hymn 66, Glory be to Jesus

#### **Meditation 4 – ‘have mercy on us...’**

‘Mercy’ – what a beautiful word. ‘ The quality of mercy is not strain’d, It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven...’ We see the exercise of mercy in Jesus’ death, in his words to the penitent thief – ‘today you will be with me in Paradise’. Surely this was a promise that this man would know what it was to be ‘ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven...’

The beloved Russian Orthodox Archbishop, Anthony Bloom, once suggested that the New Testament word for mercy, *eleos*, might share a root with the Greek word for olive tree, *elia* – and thus that mercy shares all the associations of that tree, whose leaves signal peace, whose oil brings healing and light, and is used in the anointing of priests and kings.

‘Have mercy on me’ – a cry for forgiveness, certainly – the words uttered repeatedly with downcast eyes and beaten breast by the publican in the Temple, in Jesus’ parable. But it is *more* than a cry for forgiveness alone – it is also an opening-up to all the gifts that God can give – peace, reconciliation, healing, and light to guide; his merciful restoration to us of our royal status as his children, his priests for the world. The gifts of the Holy Spirit, who - St John would have us to understand - was released in the world with Christ’s dying breath.

*Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on us, sinners.*  
12.45.....Hymn 137, There is a green hill far away

#### **Meditation 5 – ‘sinners...’**

We wait beneath Jesus’ cross as sinners. We’re more aware of our sin than at some times than other times. Sometimes we’re conscience-stricken, at other times merely frustrated or irritated at our own weakness. At other times, sublimely unaware of the shortcomings which others may see.

But here, measuring our limited and fractured love against his great love, our inconsistency against his firmness and his faithfulness, we stand ashamed. How well can we offer the words, ‘Not my will, but *thine*,’ even as we sweat an agony of blood?

But in waiting on God as ‘sinners’, we do so not only by becoming aware of our actual failure. In stretching out our hands to him for grace, we acknowledge also our fundamental weakness – without him we can do ‘no good thing to help ourselves’, as Cranmer put it. Quite simply – we *need* him if we are to do anything *for* him.

Frail, mortal, needy, failing – such are the sinners Christ came for. Such are the sinners he loves, restores and uses - the Peters, Levis, Zaccheuses, Mary Magdalenes and Pauls, who have given up the pretence of being particularly admirable, beneath the shadow of his cross.

*Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on us, sinners.*  
12.55.....Hymn 64, All ye who seek for sure relief