

## Centering Prayer

‘Be still and know that I am God.’ Psalm 46.10

In his book, *Invitation to Love*, Thomas Keating says that ‘Silence is God's first language; everything else is a poor translation’. Silence is part of various traditions of Christian spirituality. At a recent ecumenical gathering a Black Pentecostal bishop told how he had introduced silence into the worship of his congregation. His people struggled at first but they had grown into the use of silence. Others have struggled with its opposite. The Quaker poet, JG Whittier, protested against the influence of 19<sup>th</sup> century Methodist revivalism on Quaker worship in his well-known hymn, *Dear Lord and Father of Mankind*. We don't have to reject lively singing and vocal prayer to appreciate what Whittier points us to.

With that deep hush subduing all  
Our words and works that drown  
The tender whisper of thy call,  
As noiseless let thy blessing fall  
As fell thy manna down.

Centering Prayer aims to move us into deep listening mode, to make us receptive to what God has for us in the experience of ‘God's first language’. Thomas Keating was part of a group of monks who, in the 1970s, developed the method out of concern for the numbers of young people who travelled to the East on a spiritual quest unaware of the riches of the Christian tradition. Centering Prayer offers a way into Christian contemplative prayer, packaged for people living in contemporary society.

The method is very simple. Commit to two periods of silent prayer, at least twenty minutes each, twice a day – preferably morning and evening. Each session should be preceded by some preparation, perhaps a short reflective reading of scripture. (See the article on *lectio divina* in this series.) To keep oneself before God in the silence, a single prayer word is used, for example, *Lord*, *Abba*, *Jesus*, *Peace*, or *Maranatha*. (A gesture, like cupping the hands, may be used instead so no words are needed at all.)

Keating is clear that this ‘sacred word’ is not a mantra. It is a prayer, not a way of emptying the mind. Nor is it used to focus attention on God or on passages of scripture as in some forms of Christian meditation – important as they are in Christian spirituality. The prayer word is a means of directing one's intention towards God. It is not an instrument to resist the distracting thoughts which will inevitably arise when we begin to practice silent prayer. It does not have to be repeated continually. It is there to be used whenever necessary to direct our intention to God again. Ideally, as progress is made in ‘the practice of the presence of God’, the need to return to the sacred word will become less.

The purpose in practising Centering Prayer is to open the heart and mind to God. It is meant as a peaceful practice, not requiring effort and energy. Keating suggests simply letting intrusive thoughts pass by without allowing them to draw attention. As he puts it, just return, ‘ever so gently’, to the sacred word.

In his books on prayer, Anthony Bloom also speaks about silence. He points out that when two persons love each other, it is not necessary for them to rely continually on language to maintain their relationship. The bond of love enables them to be silent together. But what of our love for God; and God's love for us?

The God whose presence we seek to realise in Centering Prayer is portrayed by Jesus in the figure of the father of the prodigal son, who waits longingly for the return of his son and runs to embrace him with open arms. We are always in the presence of that loving God, in whom 'we live and move and have our being' (Acts 17.28). In Centering Prayer we open ourselves to that inescapable, all-compassionate Presence. In the words of Whittier we put aside the 'words and works' that drown the tender whisper of God.

If we accept the reality of God's love, there is no need to worry about whether or how much we love God. We are not called to have particular feelings or to try to produce them. It is enough to be silent and to rest in the loving presence of God. Being concerned about feelings distracts us from directing our intention toward God. Keating counsels us also not to look for any change within ourselves during our periods of silent prayer. His advice is, 'Just do it!'. The transformation that prayer brings about will be evident in God's good time.

Just do it. Be silent in God's presence, for twenty minutes twice a day, whatever you may feel or not feel. And if we find that even that minimum commitment is beyond our capacity then perhaps Thomas Keating's instruction can be tempered by some advice from Anthony Bloom. If twenty minutes is too much for you then don't lower your aim but make a start with two minutes. Begin to do it, '... and the God of peace will be with you' (Philippians 4.9)

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