

## The Jesus prayer

The Jesus Prayer has been described as one of the treasures that the Eastern Christian tradition has to offer Christians in the West:

‘Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner.’

There are differences of emphasis between Eastern and Western Christianity. In the West salvation has been understood as release from the legal penalty due to sinners for breaking the law of God; in the Christian East sin is understood as a disorder which needs healing, and salvation as the gift of new life. The difference between the Christian East and West has never been absolute, and contemporary Western Christians might object that an emphasis on new life is not at all foreign to their experience of Christianity. Methodists should be aware, though, that John Wesley’s influence, and his rootedness in Eastern Christian theology, helped to enrich Western Christianity in this way.

It is easy to interpret the words of the Prayer in terms of law and judgement but we need to see its origins in the cry of blind Bartimaeus, ‘Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!’ and the tax-collector standing at the back of the Temple praying, ‘God have mercy on me a sinner’. The judgment on the tax-collector is his own; the point of the parable is the gracious love of God. Russian Archbishop, Anthony Bloom, says that the Slavonic word for ‘have mercy’, *pomiluy*, has connotations of endearing tenderness, so the Prayer is actually a request for love.

The primary use of the Prayer in the Eastern Orthodox tradition is not as an ‘arrow prayer’ in moments of particular need. Rather, it serves as ‘the prayer of stability’. Anthony Bloom describes the Prayer as a ‘walking stick’: after committing the day to God in prayer each morning the repetition of the Prayer during the day provides support in the different situations of life.

It is *repetition* which characterizes the normal use of the Prayer but the Prayer is repeated as a *prayer*; it is not meaningless repetitive. It is also referred to as ‘the prayer of the heart’ because with constant repetition the Prayer settles into the heart and continues almost like a background rhythm, holding the person in the experience of God’s presence, while the mind deals with the business of life. In the Eastern Orthodox tradition it is regarded as the means of ceaseless prayer (1 Thessalonians 5:17).

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