

9. December 2020

The birth of the Lord in us, Part 4 “The prayer of the heart”

Already in 2019 I have written down three revised reflections on the prayer of the heart practised in the Eastern Church and recommend reading them in our archives (<http://en.elijamission.net/?s=prayer+of+the+heart>), as well as searching for further literature if one wants to get to know this precious prayer and its history better¹.

If this week is about deepening our relationship with Jesus - about his deeper dwelling in our hearts - then I always come back to this prayer, which is almost indispensable for souls seeking silence and union with God. I myself have been practicing it for almost forty years and it has become an integral part of my life. Anyone who has tasted the spiritual taste of this prayer will agree with me and understand why I recommend the Jesus Prayer to all Christians, because it is unsurpassable in its simplicity and is suitable for praying it everywhere.

For this reason, and also because I have noticed the interest in some of the comments on my lecture from the second Advent, I would like to give some more indications of this precious prayer. It can also help us more in a time of reduced ecclesial life, so that we may preserve the “vigour of the soul” and not minimize communion with the Lord because of external adverse circumstances. The opposite should be the case: The right response to external limitations is the deepening of inner life. There, in the “chamber of our heart”, in intimate communion with the Lord, no one can close the doors. There we are able to celebrate Christmas even if the ways to Holy Mass were closed to us. There we are not alone, even if even “our dearest ones” have no physical access to us. There in our hearts, where we have given shelter to the Holy Family and where our hearts are transformed into a temple of God under the influence of the Holy Spirit (*cf. 1 Cor 3:16*), there the devil must remain outside, walking around like a lion to devour us (*cf. 1 Pet 5:8*). In front of the temple of our heart we can ask the angels for their special presence and guardian task, so that the worship of the Lamb of God never stops on earth, even in an increasing antichristian persecution.

The prayer in its classical form is: ***“Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me (us).”***

¹ One of the best known books on this subject is "The Way of a Pilgrim".

In order not to let any misunderstandings arise: This prayer belongs to the rich treasure of the Church and is prayed especially by believers of the Orthodox Church! It is not a borrowing from the meditation practices of other religions, but is genuinely Christian! At present, this way of prayer also finds more access to the Roman Church and can fruitfully answer the desire for silence and internalisation! A Metropolitan, named Dr. Serafim Joanta, writes:

“The Jesus Prayer is also a Trinitarian confession of faith in a very concentrated form. In it we confess Jesus as the Son of God and true God; we also confess God the Father as the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ and we confess, even if indirectly, the Holy Spirit, because no one can say that Jesus is God unless he is in the Holy Spirit (cf. 1 Cor 12:3). In fact, the Holy Spirit prays in us and for us, with unspeakable sighs (Rom 8:26). The Jesus Prayer, like any other prayer, is a prayer in the Holy Spirit”.

You can say it calm and softly, you can sing it as Harpa Dei did in the video, you can speak it in your heart, which in the long run is probably the most appropriate way to do it, once you have acquired a certain amount of practice.

For beginners it is advisable to start with a few minutes, especially in the morning! Some people also associate prayer with conscious breathing, so that when they inhale they pray the words “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God”, and in the phase of exhalation: “Have mercy on me”. Helpful and very common is a prayer-chain, the rosary can also be used.

As the spiritual teachers of this prayer teach us, through prayer the heart is purified, thoughts are ordered and by invoking the name of the Lord we are directed towards God and our own heart! We thus enter deeper into the interior of the soul, where God, according to his own Word, settles down (*Jn 14:23*) and we meet him more and more! The grandiose simplicity of prayer, which helps us to restrain our outer senses, allows the Holy Spirit to immerse His presence so deeply in us that it can even be felt! The Fathers of the prayer speak of the inner warmth that comes from intense prayer in the heart!

If we practise this prayer regularly, we will notice how our hearts, in time, will ask us to multiply it, according to our objective possibilities. Again and again we will seek suitable moments to withdraw into prayer. Once we have practised prayer a little, we will see that it is in its simplicity a wonderful way to pray everywhere! We could say that with the help of this prayer a kind of “inner monk's cell” is formed, which we can enter even in the case of external turbulent circumstances:

For example when driving a car, in waiting rooms and on many other occasions. This prayer will help us to enter into the inner silence even when there is no silence outside!

With this reflection I would like to end this little view of the "prayer of the heart", which is a very suitable prelude to contemplation, to deepen our love for Jesus, so that He dwells more and more in our hearts and His love shapes us in everything!