

Christian Meditation - Prayer of the Heart

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All over Singapore, small groups of Christians come together once a week for an unusual communion. For 20 minutes, they sit in silence, in darkness, in stillness. Anyone who stumbles on one of these groups may be forgiven for thinking this is a weird bunch of people – to sit doing nothing in the dark.

Yet this doing nothing is the most important task of all. For they are actually praying. Not praying with words, or with mental images, but praying with the heart.

The gatherings are groups engaged in “Christian meditation”, which just means a form of silent prayer of the heart.

Can prayer really be silent, devoid of words? It is true that there are many forms of prayer. There is praise and worship of God; prayers of requests or intercessions; penitent prayers; intellectual prayer where one grapples with God as Job did. But there are forms of prayer that go beyond words.

The Bible after all tells us that “We do not even know how to pray but the Spirit himself prays within us” (Romans 8:26)

The Psalmist, with divine inspiration, teaches us: “Be still and know that I am God.” Words are an essential part of modern life. But in this busy, noisy world, many of us find solace in silence, and stillness.

Christian meditation offers a simple way to reach that stillness at the core of our being. It is derived from an early Christian tradition, such as from the writings of John Cassian. Early Christians were taught to repeat simple prayer phrases like “Lord, have mercy on me a sinner”. The idea was that repetition of a prayer phrase helps still your mind, and helps the prayer phrase sink into your consciousness.

In the 20th century, Benedictine monk John Main helped re-introduce this ancient Christian prayer to thousands. He was first introduced to meditation when he was a diplomat in Malaysia. He subsequently became a novice but stopped meditating when his superior disapproved of the practice. His readings in subsequent years led him to realise that early Christians too had practised meditation – just that they didn't call it by that name.

He started meditating and found it beneficial, and began teaching it. Today, there are Christian meditation groups across the world, in over 100 countries. It was introduced to Singapore by Peter Ng and his late wife Patricia, who helped establish the community of Christian meditators here. Today, there are 27 groups who meet weekly in Singapore to meditate, mainly in churches including Holy Spirit, Holy Family and St Mary of the Angels, but also in prisons and hospitals.

In essence, Christian meditation involves sitting still, in silence, saying in your mind a single prayer word. Many meditators use the word "Maranatha" (Aramaic for "Come, Lord Jesus"). Other prayer words can be used: Jesus, Yahweh, or some Christian phrase. Repeating this mantra or prayer word helps the mind to come to silence. Meditation teachers of different traditions teach the use of focus to help silence the mental chatter of the mind. Some Buddhists observe their breath, others use a flickering candle as a visual focal aid. Christian meditators use a Christian prayer phrase for the same purpose. Most of us will encounter great difficulties in being able to sit still and interiorly say a prayer word for 20 minutes. Many of us will find our minds wandering, our bodies fidgeting. We may feel bored, or stupid sitting in the dark. It doesn't matter. The important thing is fidelity to the practice: just sit, and say the prayer word.

For Christian meditators know that the discipline of sitting still is a spiritual one. They know that it is precisely because our minds are so hyperactive, that we need periods without words to rest in God. They understand that even when nothing is said, when nothing seems to be happening, that the Holy Spirit is praying and the Spirit is working within us.

Praying with words is like talking to God. Silent prayer, the Christian meditation way, is like being with God in an intimate way. It is like a married couple who may need no words but enjoy the presence of each other. One wise meditator once said: "In meditation God smiles at me and my soul smiles back at God".

How To Meditate

1. Sit with your spine upright in a comfortable position, on a chair or on the floor.
2. Sit still, close your eyes.
3. In your mind, say silently to yourself your chosen prayer word. Be gentle with yourself. It doesn't matter if you can't manage to say your prayer word three times in a row without getting distracted. Each time you realise your thoughts have strayed, just return gently to saying the prayer word.
4. Meditate for about 20 minutes twice a day.