



Meditation: an authentic Christian way of prayer

by Kim Nataraja

Often when we tell people we meditate in the Christian tradition, they look at us in amazement. Christian meditation, surely that does not exist? When we tell them that it was in the early centuries of our era an integral part of Christian worship, their disbelief grows into scorn: "If that were so, why have I not heard about this in Church?" they protest. We can then gently explain that for religious, political and social reasons it is a way of prayer that was forgotten from the 6th century onwards in the Latin West, as we entered the 'Dark Ages', when the Roman Empire was besieged and finally overrun by Germanic migratory tribes. In Eastern Christianity, on the contrary, this way of prayer survived until the present day in the shape of the 'Jesus Prayer'.

But where is the evidence that Jesus meditated or recommended this way of prayer? Unfortunately there is no specific place we can point to in Scripture where it explicitly states that Jesus meditated by repeating a phrase. But the word 'Abba' was frequently on his lips and we do know that he recommended praying in few words: 'In your prayers do not go babbling on like the heathen, who imagine that the more they say the more likely they are to be heard.' And immediately following that admonition he teaches his disciples as an example of correct prayer to pray the 'Our Father' (Matt 6:7-13). This prayer when heard in Aramaic, the language Jesus spoke, is very poetic and rhythmic, and it is very likely that it would have been repeated. This is moreover supported by the fact that we hear Jesus recommend the way of prayer of the tax-gatherer, who constantly repeats the phrase: "O God, have mercy on me, sinner that I am." (Luke 18: 10-14)

This way of prayer has been set in the preceding verses in Matthew in the atmosphere of silence and solitude. Here we do know that Jesus, apart from praying with his disciples in community, would also go "out...into the hills to pray and spend the night in prayer to God." (Luke 6:12). We hear him recommend to us: 'But when you pray, go into your room, shut the door, and pray to your father, who is there in the secret place; and your Father who sees what is secret will reward you.' (Matthew 6:6) The meaning of this passage is beautifully explained by John Cassian, the 4th C monk: "We pray in our room when we withdraw our hearts completely from the clatter of every thought and concern and disclose our prayers to the Lord in secret, as it were intimately. We pray with the door shut when, with closed lips and in total silence, we pray to the searcher not of voices but of hearts."

In his emphasis on silence and solitude Jesus drew on the Judaic tradition he was steeped in. We find in the psalms 'Be still and know that I am God.' (Ps 46:10) and in the Old Testament: 'But the Lord was not in the wind...not in the earthquake....not in the fire: and after the fire a still voice (sometimes translated as a 'sound of sheer silence).' (1 Kings 19:13) Interior silent prayer with few words is therefore definitely part of the Christian tradition.