

# The Jesus Prayer

## *Sanctifying the Present Moment*

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The Jesus prayer is a very short phrase: "Lord Jesus Christ, son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner." It springs from the word of Jesus that we have in the Gospel of Saint John, where Jesus in his last discourse to his disciples says, "You have never asked anything in my name. Now, anything you ask in my name will be given to you." The idea of asking in the name of someone is something we're not too accustomed to these days. We think instead of back door politics: Knock, knock, knock. "Who's there?" "George sent me." The door opens and out comes the little money bag and off we go.

In the Near East of Biblical times, "name" meant the presence or reality of the one whose name was called. That's part of the reason why the name of the God of Israel became unspeakable: the name was never adequate to the reality. So asking in Jesus' name is making present the full reality of what Jesus is, which is being present immediately to God.

This presence is not a confrontational one. It's not the presence of speaking with someone on the phone. It is an immediate and absolute union, like the presence of two people in love: not something you intellectualize, not even necessarily emotional. It's just there.

One of the best examples: two people who've been married a long time and have been through the good times and the bad together. One can be in the kitchen and the other in the living room, but they're completely aware.

Or one is doing a crossword puzzle and the other writing a letter, but they're absolutely present to each other.

The Jesus prayer is a vehicle to achieving that presence with God. Using words makes it easier for us, just as

between two people who love each other a glance or kiss makes it happen.

The Christian monastic tradition as a formal way of living goes back to the late third and early fourth centuries. The early monks, like the first Zen monks, were basically an uneducated people. They were the peasants of Egypt and Syria: hard-headed, ignorant, dumb people, at least according to the intellectuals of Alexandria and Jerusalem. At that time the name of Jesus was used as a prayer, in conjunction with various techniques. One of them, was even watching your breath, which is so common in Zen meditation.

The monks would go into their cells and sit on small benches, four to five inches high. In

Egypt they were made of papyrus; in Syria and Israel, probably clay or wood. Sitting on the bench, they would repeat this short prayer over and over again.

In repeating the Jesus prayer you are vocally making concrete who and what you are exactly at this moment. In Catholic tradition, we use the phrase "sacrament of the present moment," indicating the reality of God right here. God is present because we're sitting here, not because we would like to be walking outside. While fully conscious that I am sitting right here, I use this short prayer.

Tradition tells us that the prayer is a complete compendium of the Christian revelation. "Lord": a term reserved



for God, a translation of the word “adonai,” used in the Septuagint version of the Old Testament. “Jesus Christ”: Jesus the ultimate and full revelation, God’s self-giving to us. “Son of God”: expressing the Christian realization that God in this person has given himself completely.

“Have mercy on me, a sinner”: this phrase is the hang-up for many of us. “Sinner” seems to represent all of our faults, all our failures to live up to some standard. I shave my head, my colleague doesn’t: sinner, sinner!

But the term “sinner” has a different significance in this prayer: we accept our condition as limited human beings, with all of the aches and pains that involves. We don’t set ourselves up as being holier-than-thou. We don’t make moral judgments on ourselves or others. In fact, in the Christian tradition, if anybody is sin, it’s Jesus Christ. The Epistle to the Hebrews tells us, “he became sin for us.” In the same way, he becomes sin for the totality of humanity. Christians believe that in Jesus, God himself became man: there’s nothing outside of the human condition that is foreign to him. He became a human being exactly the way that you and I are human beings. All of my emotions, all of the things that transpire within me are brought into the loving compassion and mercy of God when I repeat the prayer.

The vocal repetition of this prayer creates a rhythm which becomes part of us as we go through life, especially when we go into meditation—and there’s no place like meditation for experiencing the limitations of what it means to be a human being. All of our pains and frustrations come back to us. The greatest problem in meditation is that we start chasing after all of these things, like a dog chasing its tail: around and around she goes, where she stops, nobody knows. “Why did I do this?” “Why didn’t they realize what I meant?” “But of course they should have known.”

To take all of that as it flows in and bring it to this prayer is to bring forgiveness. God’s forgiveness means we forgive ourselves, and in so doing accept ourselves for who we are.

Because I am who I am concretely, right here, right now, I am the totality of the pain of humanity. I am the pain of what’s occurring in Iraq right now. I am the pain of all those whom I hurt. The mercy of God is poured forth in me and through me upon the whole of creation.

One of the great aids to this prayer over the ages has been beads, such as the rosary. It’s amazing how just making a bead pass through your fingers as you say a short prayer can be helpful to you. It makes you do something simple and physical. The traditional Eastern Orthodox set of beads has one hundred.

A lot of people find it helpful to set a certain number of repetitions a day. In “The Way of the Pilgrim,” the seeker asks how to pray and is told, “Pray continually;

this is the way.” How do I do that? “I’ll say this Jesus prayer a thousand times a day. Twenty-eight beads: if I go around this many times a day, I’ll do a thousand.” You reach a thousand. “Then I’ll do two thousand.” You reach two thousand. “I’ll do three thousand.”

And you do it no matter what happens. If someone starts banging an ashcan and you think, “They know I’m in here meditating. Look what they’re doing!,” you’ll never get it done. But if you say, “I’ve got to go around this string twice in the next five minutes,” you’ll do it.

Gradually the prayer travels away from your lips. It’s a good thing to start off saying it aloud. There are even times when you have to go back to doing that. I’ve been in a monastery over thirty-five years. There are still days that I have to go back, moments when I’m as mad as can be with the people I live with. I go into church or go off by myself to meditate, and find that I’m strangling So-and-so. If they were there, aaarrggghh!

John Climacus wrote a book called *The Divine Ladder* in the sixth century. He says, “Here I am, walking around the monastery. I go by the cells of hermits and I hear these raging arguments going on. I go in and I knock on the door, figuring that someone is being killed, and a solitary hermit comes and answers the door.” John was one of the great teachers of this prayer.

Or I find myself starving for affection. I go off by myself in the woods and shout “LORD JESUS CHRIST, SON OF GOD, HAVE MERCY ON ME, A SINNER!”

Gradually, it goes from the mouth to the ear. You find yourself running out of breath, running out of voice, just forming the words with your lips. Then the lips stop, and it goes in deeper, to the inner ear. The words are still there. It goes from the inner ear to the breath, by itself, as you inhale, exhale: inhale, “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God,” exhale, “have mercy on me, a sinner.”

We are accepting the totality of our humanity and transforming it. Not making it into an angelic nature, because we’re not angels—we’re human beings. Transforming it into what it is: that is the work of the prayer. Not looking for experiences, visions, special states, the twenty-five levels of consciousness, to walk on water, but to know that this, right now, is Jesus Christ, present to the whole world, in me, through me, because of me.

And so the Jesus prayer becomes a refrain. Driving your car, the Jesus prayer can be in your car. Taking a shower, the Jesus prayer is there. Going to sleep, the Jesus prayer is there. But as you do it, don’t get attached to the Jesus prayer. In the quiet, be quiet. The name of Jesus after a while becomes, as St. Bernard of Clairvaux says, “honey on the lips, music in the ear, and a melody in your heart.”

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