

Pentecost 19 2025 All Souls'. **THE JESUS PRAYER**

From today's Gospel, Lk 18.13 *But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, "God be merciful to me, a sinner".*

The ancient Orthodox meditation known as The Jesus Prayer is very influenced by the parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector. The full words of the Prayer are: *Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.* I want to expand on this Prayer today and some of this was shared in an edition of our Parish News back in June this year.

When beginning his first letter to the Corinthians (1.2), Paul addresses not only the Church in Corinth but 'all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ'. Such invocation of the name of Jesus the Christ is frequent in the Acts of the Apostles and the story of the early years of the Church. In later centuries it acquired such importance as to give rise to a whole school of spirituality. Above all, it gave rise to a form of prayer which is still in existence and popular use today, particularly among the Orthodox. I would point out from the start that the term 'Jesus Prayer' does not refer to Jesus' particular manner of praying, but to the invocation of the name Jesus.

In order to grasp the depth of this prayer we need first to understand the significance of the 'name'. A name is a sacred and mysterious thing in Semitic culture and the traditions of the eastern countries generally. Knowing a name means possessing a treasure of wealth. It means having a knowledge of something inherent to the person who bears the name. Some early Christians used a secret code IΧΘΥΣ, the Greek word for fish, each of the letters standing for 'Jesus Christ, God's Son, Saviour'. The ancient Christian sign of the fish, still used today, gets its real prominence from the names. (Wooden carved Symbol on display)

Names have lost something of this mysterious and profound quality among western people, including western Christians today. Jewish tradition related that God needed only to utter his name in order to create heaven; that Moses was a knower of the name, the great "I am". (Ex 3.14) The power of this is picked up in John's Gospel where Jesus says, "...before Abraham was, I am" (Jn 8.58)

There are two New Testament texts, among others, in which we can source the Jesus Prayer: The Great Confession: Matthew 16. 16 'Simon Peter answered, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God' and from Luke 18.13 'But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!" The words, 'Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner' combine the confession and invocation of the holy name with a state of humility in the divine presence. Those who use this prayer recognise, like Moses, that they are on sacred ground and that God is as close as breathing. In the breathing in: 'Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God', and the breathing out: 'have mercy on me a sinner', we breath in the sacred name that is above every other name, to be the centre of all we are; we breath out all that blocks our way to God, that our sins may be blown away by his infinite mercy and that we may be made whole. There may be variations on the words: 'Jesus, have mercy' is a shorter form. Some people use the 'Kyrie Eleison, Christe Eleison...' This is the most ancient form which has wonderfully stood the test of mystical and liturgical time. Some people chant the Taizé song taken from the words of the dying criminal, next to Christ on the cross, "Jesus remember me when you come into your kingdom" (Lk 23.42)

The Jesus Prayer can be used in two ways: as a formal meditation, say over 20 minutes, and as an integrated 'whole of life' prayer which is always there in our going out and coming in. e.g. under the shower; in the car; in critical moments. I use it in both ways and have done so since my early 30's. I also teach the Jesus Prayer one-on-one. Come and see me if you are interested.

Sing some Taizé ?