

1454
1887

Midday Prayers - 995

11.10.84
11.10.90

995

There's A.W. Deane (Love Divine)
Earthen Vessels
id 2'

There is a very old prayer form which comes from the Russian Christian tradition, and is now common except in the Orthodox spirituality as well as being really quite like some of the Indian mystical and spiritual methods that have found such attraction in the West in recent decades. In one form or other the method of prayer is as solidly Christian as it is Hindu or anything else, and I think does deserve to be better known and practised, in so far as it's helpful to prayer and contemplation. I'm talking about what's called "The Jesus Prayer" — the name and what it is was popularised and perhaps made familiar by a book called 'The Way of a Pilgrim', a classic of Russian spirituality that was written somewhere about 150 years ago. It's the story of a man who wanted to learn how to "pray constantly", as the New Testament prescribes. At the man whose experiences are related in the book is a pilgrim, a great many of his psychological characteristics, and the way in which he learned and applied the 'Jesus' prayer, were conditioned by the fact that he lived in the particular way he did. So the book is maybe less universally applicable than it might otherwise have been: but all the same it is probably the best introduction to this prayer, the Jesus Prayer, one of the greatest treasures of the Orthodox Church and of Oriental Christianity. The prayer is profoundly rooted in the spirit of the gospel, and it is not in vain that the great teachers of Orthodoxy have always insisted on the fact that the Jesus Prayer sums up the whole of the gospel. That is why the Jesus Prayer can only be used in its fullest sense if the person who uses it belongs to the gospel, is a member of the Church of Christ. "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner. Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on

me, a sinner." The first words of the constantly-repeated prayer express with exactness and integrity the gospel faith in Christ, the historical incarnation of the Word of God: while the end of the prayer expresses all the complex and relationships of love that exist between God and his creatures. This Jesus Prayer is known and used by Orthodox Christians either as a rule of prayer or in addition to it as a form of devotion, a short focal point that can be used at any moment, whatever the situation. Many writers and teachers talk about the physical aspects of the prayer, the breathing exercises, the attention which is paid to the beating of the heart and a number of other minor features. There is, in Russian, a great collection of mystical and ascetic writings by Fathers of the Eastern Orthodox Church over a period of eleven centuries — it's called the "Philocalia", the 'Love of Spiritual Beauty'. This collection is full of detailed instructions about the prayer of the heart, even with references to the Sufi technique. Ancient and modern fathers have dealt with this subject, but always coming to the same conclusion: never to attempt the physical exercises without strict guidance by a spiritual father. What is of general use, however, and God-given, is the actual praying, the repetition of the words, without any physical endeavour (not even movements of the tongue) and which can be used systematically to achieve an inner transformation. More than any other prayer, the Jesus Prayer aims at bringing us to stand in God's presence with no other thought but the remembrance of our standing there and with God with us, because in the use of the Jesus Prayer there is nothing and no one except God and us. The use of the prayer is double-sided: it is an act of worship as is every prayer: and on the

ascetical level, it is a focus that allows us to keep our attention still in the presence of God. "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner"

MUSIC

PRAYERS

"The Way of a Pilgrim" begins like

this: "By the grace of God I am a Christian man, by my actions a great sinner, and by calling a homeless wanderer of the humblest birth who roams from place to place. My worldly goods are a knapsack with some dried bread in it on my back, and in my breast-pocket a Bible. And that is all. On the 26th Sunday after Pentecost I went to church to say my prayers there during the Liturgy. The 1st Epistle of St Paul to the Thessalonians was being read, and among other words I heard these: 'Pray without ceasing'. It was this text more than any other which forced itself upon my mind, and I began to think how it was possible to pray without ceasing, since a man has to concern himself with other things also in order to make a living. I looked at my Bible, and with my own eyes read the words which I had heard, that we ought always, at all times and in all places, to pray with uplifted hands. I thought and thought, but knew not what to make of it. "What ought I to do?" I thought. "Where shall I find someone to explain it to me? I will go to the churches where famous preachers are to be heard: perhaps there I shall hear something which will throw light on it for me." I did so. I heard a number of very fine sermons on prayer: what prayer is, how much we need it, and what its fruits are; but no one said how one could succeed in prayer. I heard a sermon on spiritual prayer, and unceasing prayer, but how

it was to be done was not pointed out. Thus listening to sermons failed to give me what I wanted, and having had my fill of them without gaining understanding, I gave up going to hear public sermons. I settled on another plan — by God's help to look for some experienced and skilled person who would give me a conversation that teaching about unceasing prayer which drew me so urgently."

Keegan, Kathleen

2nd (Jesus Prayer)