

# Introducing prayer 5: contemplative prayer

Think of Darby and Joan—married for sixty years and sitting either side of a warm log fire. And they say not a word. This tiny image says something about the nature of communication. True communication does not always require words; indeed, in the case of Darby and Joan, words spoken aloud would have got in the way.

It can be the same when we talk with God. We can either talk *at* God with ceaseless chatter, or we can wait in loving attentiveness, taking Him into our heart, as it were, with each breath. Contemplative prayer is a form of prayer that uses no words, or at least, very few indeed. It is sometimes called ‘affective prayer,’ because it uses our affections and feelings. Some people call this the ‘prayer of relationship,’ and others call it ‘the respiration of faith.’

The Bible tells us that God is the source of love; he is the embodiment of love; and ultimately, he *is* love. That is his essence. So every time we seek to love, we experience something of God. Every time we try to love, we are immersed in God for he is love. He is the ‘glue’ in any loving relationship.

Contemplative prayer becomes a loving waiting on God. For this reason, the Greek Orthodox monk and hermit Brother Aidan said, ‘For me, praying is ‘wasting time with God.’

So the idea of contemplative prayer goes something like this: if we actively try and direct our love toward God, then God is in us. The love we direct toward God is also God. In effect, the God in us (love) is loving the God in heaven, who is love. Think of a man standing on a canal bank, throwing a rope around a beam on a narrow boat. The man holds both ends of the rope. By pulling, the rope, the barge moves closer to the man. In exactly the same way, God sends His love to us, which we then redirect back to Him. In this way, we are drawn closer to God.

Indeed, in his description of contemplative prayer, *The Spiritual Canticle*, the Spanish saint John of the Cross described such prayer with the metaphor, ‘The iron is in the fire, and the fire is in the iron’: the love of God for us and our love for God become utterly indistinguishable.

If we truly love God then, using the love that is God, we can actually experience God. As it says in *The Cloud of Unknowing*, a fourteenth century book of instruction on prayer for novice monks, ‘By love may God be gotten and holden, but by thought never.’ So, by prayer, we no longer

know merely *about* God but actually start to know Him, directly. We will experience his touch, which is absolutely ravishing. We will grow to resemble him, and become more Christ like.

## **Exercises :**

*Try to empty your mind of all thought (this is not at all easy).*

*After a while, imagine your hands cupped before you, and lifted up toward Heaven. In this imaginary scene, God (while unseen) is looking down at your hands. Let your hands contain your love, which you are offering up to God.*

*Don't worry if you find yourself distracted easily: Each time, gently draw your attention back toward God, and offer Him your love. Some people may find it useful to repeat a very short phrase, or even a single word, such as ‘Jesus’ or ‘love’ during this process. Writing notes in a pad will often help to remove from circulation those thoughts and worries which continually distract you during prayer.*

*Try to offer your love to God for perhaps three or four minutes at a time. Rest between each attempt, or do something different. For example, during these periods of rest, notice how many times the Bible tells us to love:*

## *The first and greatest of the Commandments:*

‘What does the Lord your God require of you, but to show the Lord your God due reverence, to walk in all His ways, to love Him, to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul. **Deuteronomy 10:12**

## *The New Commandment:*

I give you a new command, ‘Love one another.’ Just as I have loved you, so you should love one another. **John 13:34**

‘By this everyone will recognise that you are my disciples, if you love one another.’

**John 13:35**