

*Heavenly Father, Open Our Hearts to the silent Presence of the Spirit of your Son.
Lead us into that mysterious Silence where Your Love is revealed to all who call.*

Contents

01	Heavenly Father	02
02	Open Our Hearts	04
03	The Silent Presence	05
04	The Spirit of Your Son	07
05	Lead Us Into That Mysterious Silence	08
06	Where Your Love Is Revealed	10
07	To All Who Call	12
08	A Closing Prayer for Meditation	13
09	The John Main Prayer & The Lord's Prayer	15
10	The John Main Prayer and The Trinity	16

Heavenly Father, Open Our Hearts to the silent Presence of the Spirit of your Son.

Lead us into that mysterious Silence where Your Love is revealed to all who call.

These reflections on the John Main Prayer were written by Noel Keating, a meditator from Carlow, Ireland. Noel loves the simplicity of this opening prayer which meditators say before their twice-daily practice of Christian Meditation. On the one hand there is something ironic in writing so much about a prayer which is not in itself discursive. But, on the other hand, because there is a danger than any form of words repeated often dulls their meaning, there is real benefit in any reflection that may lead meditators to a greater appreciation of its rich depths of meaning.

Christian Meditation communities across the globe often recite a longer, more discursive, prayer at the end of a weekly gathering of meditators in a local meditation group. Noel includes here (Reflection No 8) a simpler closing prayer which individuals may wish to recite after their daily meditation or at the conclusion of their group meditation. The final reflection examines the relationship between the John Main Prayer and the Lord's Prayer.

01 Heavenly Father

While Thomas Merton may have been the first in our time to open up to a wider audience the ancient tradition of Christian meditation, it was John Main who recovered and simplified the practice for ordinary women and men. Prior to that it was to be found mainly in contemplative monasteries. The practice of meditation by lay men and women grew as a result of John Main's work and led to the foundation of the World Community for Christian Meditation, led today by Laurence Freeman. Throughout Ireland there are Christian meditation groups which, before the pandemic, met weekly in homes, parishes, hospitals, schools, and prisons, to meditate together, while, typically, those who attend such groups meditate twice each day in their own homes. Throughout the pandemic many continue to meditate in groups online through Zoom.

John Main wrote a simple prayer which is recited before the start of meditation and which reads as follows: *Heavenly Father, Open Our Hearts to the silent Presence of the Spirit of your Son. Lead us into that mysterious Silence where Your Love is revealed to all who call.* Over the next few articles I'd like to reflect on the depth of meaning in this simple prayer, beginning today with the opening words '*Heavenly Father*'.

The first thing to say is that the prayer as a whole is centred on the Trinity. The prayer appeals to God to reveal to us the Spirit of God's Son who dwells within each one of us. John Main believed that when we entered the silence of meditation we entered the flow of love between the Father and Son which he saw as the Spirit.

The initial words of the prayer, '*Heavenly Father*', remind us that our intention in meditation is to be still in the presence of God, our Creator and acknowledges our understanding that we are God's children. It is fundamental to our Christian understanding that we are children of God and are called into personal relationship with God. Meditation deepens that understanding and that relationship. Of course, for many people nowadays, who may never have experienced a loving father in their lives, attaching a gender to God may be

unhelpful. But the bible also speaks of ‘the God who gave you birth’ so we may equally think of God as a loving mother. Or, simply, as Love.

Referring to God as ‘Heavenly’ reminds us that God’s nature is not like ours. God is the ground of all being yet we somehow, mysteriously, participate in God’s being. And John Main believed that it is in meditation that we come to experience that reality most deeply. So those opening words ‘*Heavenly Father*’ serve to clarify and remind us of our intention in meditation. And intention is a distinguishing and important feature of different kinds of meditation. Intention differentiates meditation as a *faith-based* practice from the secular practice of meditation in Mindfulness.

What makes Christian meditation distinctive is that it is Christ-centred and recognises the deep connectivity between the human spirit and the Holy Spirit. In the Christian tradition meditation is understood a form of prayer, silent, imageless, wordless prayer. We tend to think of prayer as a mental activity – hence the expression *saying* our prayers but prayer is ‘*the raising of the mind and the heart to God.*’ However, it is widely recognised that the Christian tradition has over-emphasised prayer as an activity of the mind rather than the heart.

But when we recite the John Main prayer at the start of meditation, we ask God to open our *hearts*, not our minds. So whatever we experience in meditation, it is heart-felt rather than mind-based. It moves us beyond rational thinking. It is not irrational but trans-rational, beyond the rational. It is a *movement beyond mental activity* ABOUT one’s relationship with the Divine, to a *communion WITH* the Divine, which Christians believe is mediated through Christ.

The important point here is that meditation is not what you think, it is about letting go of thought and allowing our hearts to be opened by God. So while it is *our* intention, it is *God’s* work – meditation is about allowing ourselves to be transformed in the silence. Meditation is more than just a practice, it is essentially about relationship. Not alone does meditation change our relationship with our thoughts, it also changes our understanding of who we are at the deepest level of our being. That new perspective changes how we see all of reality and hence our relationship with ourselves, with the Divine, with others and all of creation.

The fact that meditation is a prayer of the heart rather than the mind was captured beautifully by Alex, a twelve-year-old girl, when she said to her teacher ‘*When I hear the chimes at the start of meditation, I imagine it is God ringing my doorbell and I open my heart to let Him in.*’ I invite you now to spend some time in the stillness and silence of meditation where you can begin to experience that truth for yourself.

02 Open Our Hearts

John Main wrote a simple prayer which is recited before the start of meditation and which reads as follows: *Heavenly Father, Open Our Hearts to the silent Presence of the Spirit of your Son. Lead us into that mysterious Silence where Your Love is revealed to all who call.* Last month we began with the opening words ‘*Heavenly Father*’ and today I’d like to reflect on the words ‘*Open Our Hearts*’.

In asking God to open our hearts we recognise that while meditation is an expression of our intention to simply be with Him, it is God who works on us, not the other way around. We approach meditation from an attitude of being willing rather than wilful. And that calls us to be open to being changed by our meditation and to recognise that so often we are closed and wilful because of our conditioning and our desire for power, prestige and possessions. John Main liked to say that meditation opens the human heart as naturally as sunlight gives rise to the unfolding of a flower. And, as the heart unfolds, we discover a new depth of silence behind the noise of our distracting thoughts and preoccupations.

In the deep silence of meditation we leave ourselves open and vulnerable to a graced encounter which happens – and it is important to appreciate this – that graced encounter happens at a level of consciousness deeper than ordinary self-consciousness. So, because it is experienced in the heart rather than the mind, we will not be able to recall the experience after meditation. We will, of course, remember all the distracting thoughts we experienced, but not what happened in between those bursts of thought.

The prayer asks that our *hearts* be opened ‘*to the silent Presence of the Spirit*’. So this is a ‘*silent*’ presence, not something we hear or interpret with our minds, but something we intuit and experience with the heart. Meditation teaches us that silence is not so much the absence of sound, as the absence of self. Indeed, anything that you may hear is a distraction, so let it go and return to silently repeating your mantra in your heart. I lead a meditation group in Carlow, in Ireland, and I always have an electronic candle lighting when the others arrive. It symbolises God’s presence and the fact that God is always present to us. However, we are so busy most of the time, we don’t pay attention to that vital presence in our lives. As we say the meditation prayer, we switch on a second candle to symbolise that we are now intentionally making ourselves present to Him.

We usually say ‘Open our hearts’ even when we meditate on our own. In other words, we recognise that he is father to all people, all races, all genders, all colours, all nationalities; that we are all children of God, that we are brothers and sisters in Christ. The opening words of the prayer stress our common humanity and reminds us that God loves all that he created and that we are all equally loved by Him. It reminds us of the centrality of relationship in our lives - our relationship with Him and with one another. Meditation deepens our sense of interconnectedness with all of humanity and all of creation. These words also acknowledge that meditation is not simply something we do for our own benefit, but for the benefit of all.

And we are not asking that our hearts be opened merely for the time of our meditation but we wish them to remain open to God’s presence always. That is how meditation slowly but surely transforms us over time – because we become closer to achieving that awareness for more and more of our lives as our conditioning loses its hold on us. It heightens our awareness of the true-self – who we are in God and who God is in us and we begin to live life from that perspective. Motivational speakers often tell us that we can be whatever we want to be. But meditation offers us something much more profound – you can be what you already are. You can be yourself as a child of God, recognising – however obscurely – your intimate connection with the Divine. You can be who you are.

As John Main wrote: “The all-important aim in Christian meditation is to allow God’s mysterious and silent presence within us to become more and more not only a reality, but the reality in our lives; to let it become that reality which gives meaning, shape and purpose to everything we do, to everything we are.” As that happens, we begin to get a deeper sense of who we truly are, a deeper sense of our true-self. But, as the poet Denise Levertov expresses it,

*A feeling towards it,
dimly sensing a rhythm, is all we have
until we begin to utter its metaphors,
learning them as we speak.*

I invite you now to spend some time in the stillness and silence of meditation where you can begin to experience that truth for yourself.

03 The Silent Presence

We have exploring the John Main prayer which many people recite before their daily meditation. The prayer begins: *Heavenly Father, Open our hearts to the silent presence of the Spirit of your Son*. In this article, I’d like to reflect on the phrase ‘*to the silent Presence of the Spirit of your Son*’.

We are asking that our hearts be open to the silent Presence of the Spirit. We are not seeking a talking presence or a mental experience but a silent presence. This clarifies and names our intention in meditation which is to simply be in God’s presence, open and vulnerable to being transformed by the experience.

My granddaughter is three years old now and I can’t tell you how many times over the last three years that she has sat on my lap, alert but resting, both of us gazing out at the garden and watching the birds feeding in the early morning light. On many of those occasions, not a word was spoken but there was deep communion between us. Love is a universal language that can be understood in silence – even by children, perhaps especially by children. Love can be experience without being expressed in words.

Have you ever sat with a friend who was feeling low? Or perhaps your friend sat with you when you were suffering from some heavy loss or heartbreak. What is needed at such times is not words but a loving presence; a sense of being loved and supported, of being held by love. At times like those, words are neither needed nor sufficient. A silent, loving presence is all that is required.

Although meditation is in part about letting go, letting go of thoughts and images, letting go of desires and emotional reactions, although meditation is about letting go it is not about absence. We let go of those things to make room for something else, to allow love to enter the space we have cleared by letting go. This understanding is captured beautifully in the poem ‘Come Home to Yourself’ from the book Meister Eckhart’s Book of Secrets by Jon Sweeny and Mark Burrows. The poem reads

*If you want to discover the truth about God,
don't strive for things that lie beyond you.
Draw your thoughts inward to the centre, and
seek to become one and simple in your soul.
Let go of all that distracts you, all you desire,
and come home to yourself, and when you do,
you'll become the truth you first sought.*

Meditation is about being open to the mysterious presence of Love in our hearts, a mysterious presence that awakens us to a new kind of knowledge – the wisdom of the heart. This kind of knowing opens a gateway to our innate spirituality – it awakens and then deepens our desire to discover who we truly are at the depths of our being – who we are in God and who God is in us.

Meditation then is a practice, a daily practice in which we set aside our everyday concerns and preoccupations, we set aside all of the things that bother or delight the ego, we let go of our egoic identity, our public face as it were and we simply allow ourselves to be. In letting go of those things we also let go of all that we cling to, including religious belief and non-belief, including doctrine and dogma. For our period of meditation, we let go of all of those mental categories and we allow ourselves to experience reality in practice; we allow reality to penetrate our heart.

As we meditate together, having left our masks, as it were, at the door, we experience that are all equal in the meditation space. We leave our cleverness, our foolishness, our diverse gifts and our various shortcomings – we leave them all outside the meditation room as we move into our inner space. And we discover that, mysteriously, we share this inner space with one another. We discover that through the practice of meditation, not by thinking about it. I know that I am using words now – however badly – to try to describe this truth but, like learning to the joy of riding a bicycle, it is a truth that you can only discover ultimately through practice. In meditation we discover that the silent presence our opening prayer speaks of is rooted in us and that we are rooted in it. In fact, it is who we really are. This truth is captured imaginatively and joyfully in another poem, *A Horse in the Meadow*, from Meister Eckhart's *Book of Secrets*:

*Have you seen how a horse,
On a summer's afternoon
In a wide green meadow
Gallops and dances and springs
About in the sun and wind?
This is just how God delights
In pouring God's self into you.
Just like this.*

I invite you now to spend some time in the stillness and silence of meditation where you can begin to experience that truth for yourself.

04 The Spirit of Your Son

We have exploring the John Main prayer which many people recite before their daily meditation. The prayer begins: *Heavenly Father, Open our hearts to the silent presence of the Spirit of your Son.* In this article, I'd like to reflect on the phrase '*the Spirit of your Son*'.

We are asking that our hearts be open to the Presence of the Spirit of God's Son. It is important to remember that we are not seeking a mental experience but we are leaving ourselves open to a silent presence which has the power to transform us. We enter this Presence in a spirit of willingness rather than wilfulness: we accept that we cannot bring anything other than ourselves to the table; the rest is up to God. And because it is a silent experience which we apprehend rather than comprehend, we only come to appreciate over time the fruits it brings about in our daily activities and behaviours.

John Main reminds us that all religious traditions assert that '*it is only in accepting silence that we can come to know our own spirit, and only in abandonment to an infinite depth of silence that we can be revealed to the source of our spirit*'. Faithfully repeating our sacred word in meditation brings about stillness of mind and body and leads us '*through the spheres of silence to see with wonder the light of our own spirit, and to know that light as something beyond our spirit and yet the source of it*.' This experience awakens us '*to the eternally fresh source of our being*.' But this awakening occurs in the heart, not the mind. Although it remains a dim apprehension, we do not doubt its authenticity as '*day by day we are inwardly renewed*' (2 Cor 4:16). As a daily practice, meditation makes us keenly aware of the mystery alive within us at all times and that awareness changes how we live in the world; it changes our relationship not just with our thoughts but with our self-understanding; and it changes our relationship with others and all of creation.

We come to understand that we are called to grow into full personhood and to appreciate that the divine spark within us is also in every other person and thing. As we begin to appreciate that this growth to personhood is not narrowly individualistic we come to know ourselves as an integral part of the whole of creation. We come to experience ourselves and others as loved by God, as intimately connected to the reality that is Love. As John Main expresses it: '*The first step in personhood is to allow ourselves to be loved*.'

It is our understanding as Christians that the Holy Spirit dwells within each person, awakening us to our true identity and living out the divine mystery within us; that, through the Spirit, Jesus is a living personal presence at the centre of our being, calling us to become fully conscious of who we are at this deepest level of our being. Through meditation this consciousness can develop in the twinkling of an eye and grow '*to consciousness of the communion within God in which we are called to share*,' to an awareness that '*we are alive with the life of God*' (1 Peter 4:6).

While we tend to think of prayer as a mental activity where we say our prayers and while some see prayer as a duty we perform to please God or to appease God or to invoke God to grant a request, John Main asserts that we are most truly praying when we are awakening to the presence of the Spirit in our hearts. He says that '*Prayer is the life of the Spirit of Jesus within our human heart*' (my emphasis) and reminds us that while we remain silent '*the Spirit is pleading for us in our inmost being, beyond words, beyond thoughts, beyond images, with sighs too deep for words*' (Romans 8:26). In other words, for John Main, prayer then is '*the stream of love between the Spirit of the risen*

Jesus and His Father, in which we are incorporate.' That prayer is always going on within us, whether we are aware of it or not. But in meditation *'we make a complete turn of consciousness toward this ever-present reality'* and there can come a level of awakening when *'our awareness of this reality remains constant'* as we go about our daily activities and live out our lives.

Our faithfulness to the mantra becomes *'our echoing response to the love-cry of the Spirit'* to the extent that we *'persevere in our renunciation, at the time of our meditation, of our thoughts, imaginations, of our very self-consciousness.'* As our mantra, our sacred word, becomes rooted more deeply with our consciousness, it promotes the *'integration of all levels of our being with the source of our being, the source that calls the whole person back into itself, awakened through the Spirit of Jesus.'* The aim in meditation then is to realise who we are at the deepest level of our being, as children of God. The repetition of our word is our pathway to *'acceptance of the absoluteness of God's love flooding our heart through the Spirit of the risen Jesus.'*

05 Lead us into that Mysterious Silence

We have been exploring the depth of meaning in the John Main prayer which Christian meditators say before meditation. The second sentence of the prayer reads: *'Lead us into that mysterious Silence where Your Love is revealed to all who call.'* In this article I want to reflect on the phrase *'Lead us into that mysterious silence'*.

We have seen already that meditation is a practice that takes us beyond mental activity to an experiential appreciation of who we are at the deepest level of our being. James Finley is one of many people who have written much about Christian meditation. He says that in meditation *'we freely choose to offer the least resistance to the tyranny of thought'*. Isn't that a lovely expression *'the tyranny of thought'*? And he goes on to say *'we open ourselves to the mystery of knowing God in ways that utterly transcend what thought can grasp or contain.'* As John Main expressed it: *The beauty of the Christian vision of life is its vision of unity. It sees that all [people have] been unified in the One who is in union with the Father.* He goes on to add that the central task for each person is to grow into this vision in their own personal experience.

And, so in this contemplative prayer, we ask God to lead us into that mysterious silence. We ask because we know this is not something we can achieve of our own volition. We can leave ourselves open to it through contemplative prayer but we cannot bring it about through our own efforts. But we trust that in the stillness and silence of meditation God will lead us into a graced encounter with Silence. Pope Francis points out that *'trust-filled prayer is a response of a heart open to encountering God face-to-face, where all is peaceful and the quiet voice of the Lord can be heard in the midst of silence'*.

And it is a deeply *mysterious* experience because it occurs at a level of consciousness deeper than ordinary, everyday consciousness and for that reason the experience cannot be captured in words. Whatever words we use merely point us towards it, but to apprehend the depth of the silence we must experience it for ourselves. When we first begin to practice meditation we may be hugely surprised at the amount of pointless thinking and interpretation that goes on inside our heads. And we may be almost overwhelmed by how continual and the relentless thought can be. But the more we observe our thoughts and interpretations, the more we begin to realise that they are not reality – they are merely thoughts and they can be let go.

And when we let them go we begin to encounter that which lies beneath – we begin to apprehend the deep, mysterious silence beneath the noise. I deliberately use the word apprehend rather than comprehend. We perceive the silence, we experience it at the level of the heart without fully understanding that experience at the level of the mind. It lies beyond the rational but it is real and deeply meaningful; it is a trans-rational heartfelt experience.

What we apprehend is that we are loved – not for our talents or our achievements, not for our ego or our performance – but that we are loved for who we truly are, that we were created as love and remain intimately connected to the ground of all being, to Reality with a capital R, to Love with a capital L, to Being with a capital B, Presence with a capital P. Thomas Merton, who was the first in our time to rediscover Christian meditation, once wrote that when we meditate we discover that *'underlying the subjective experience of the individual self there is an immediate experience of Being ... [which] is totally different from the experience of self-consciousness.'* He described this discovery, this growing awareness, as the discovery of our true-self.

We discover the true self not through the mind but through the heart. Sometimes words help us to appreciate a deep truth, especially when expressed through poetry. But words can only point to something – no word is ever the thing it seeks to describe. This is especially true when it comes to describing the landscape of the spirit, of the human heart, when we try to give expression to that which is experienced in the heart and not the mind. The mysterious silence into which we are led in meditation is the ground of our being, it is who we really are. We all participate in it, uniquely, but equally. In this silence we discover that we are truly one.

While in everyday life we think of ourselves as separate beings, we discover in meditation that instead we are unique manifestations of the same being. We are all beloved children of God. And when we discover that, when we truly apprehend the truth of that, our way of seeing – and therefore our way of being in the world – changes. We become kinder to ourselves and others. And, remember, kindness, like silence, is a language, a presence, which everyone understands – a language that even the deaf can hear and the blind can see.

06 Where Your Love is Revealed

In this article I want to continue to explore the depth of meaning in the John Main prayer which we say before meditation. 'Heavenly Father, Open Our Hearts to the silent Presence of the Spirit of your Son. Lead us into that mysterious Silence where Your Love is revealed to all who call.'

And today I want to reflect on the phrase 'Where Your Love is Revealed'. The first thing to note is what it is that meditation reveals to us. It is God's love for each one of us. And, as we have mentioned before, this is heart-knowledge, not head knowledge. It is an entirely different way of knowing, beyond the mind, beyond rational thinking. This kind of knowing is trans-rational spiritual knowing based on personal spiritual experience. And, because the Church doesn't often talk about personal spiritual experience, we very often don't recognise it when it happens.

Spiritual experience is very ordinary, not extra-ordinary. It is not necessarily an out-of-this-world experience of bliss but a growing realisation of who we really are at the deepest level of our being. It occurs in fleeting glimpses, moments of insight when we briefly experience our true-self and we apprehend something of the depth of reality.

Much of religious education is in fact religious instruction – teaching about the beliefs, doctrines, rituals, customs, rites, and roles of a particular religion. And, there is, of course a need for that. But there is also a need to help people to explore their innate spirituality through practices that promote personal spiritual experience. The theologian Michael Paul Gallagher expressed this need as follows: Spirituality comes before theology: If faith is not an experience of encounter, we have little to reflect on except the words of others. And they will ring hollow unless touched by personal fire.

As John Main describes it, through meditation the ultimate secret is revealed and 'the secret is this – Christ in you.' In meditation 'we are not striving to make something happen. It has already happened. We are simply realising what already is, by travelling deeper into the unified consciousness of Jesus, into the wonder of our own creation.'

It may help to think about spirit as the flame on a candle. Have you ever tried to walk while holding a candle? If you have you will realise that the movement often snuffs out the candle, because when we move too quickly, to the candle, the sudden movement through the air is just like someone blowing out the candle for example on a birthday cake. So to keep the candle lit, we need to protect it with our hand, or better yet, we can choose to be very still. That is not a bad way of appreciating the need for stillness in meditation.

Imagine that when we create the space within where our spirit can be still and receptive to the Holy Spirit; if you think of both spirits as candles, what happens in meditation is like the flame of the candle that is the Holy Spirit lights up our own candle. That metaphor helps us to understand how we become energised by grace through meditation. When one candle

lights another, the first does not lose its energy but now, suddenly, one has double the brightness and double the energy burning within.

Love is like that. The more love is poured out, the more it replenishes itself. It's like dropping a stone in a still pond. The ripples grow outward, extending in all directions. When we experience this love in meditation, it reawakens and reignites our spirit so that it burns more brightly, shines more clearly.

The image of an unending candle burning within us also shows how we are intimately linked with the Divine. Once a candle is lit, its flame becomes just like that of the candle which lit it. Ultimately, there is nothing to distinguish one flame from the other.

When we say 'Your love is revealed' we mean not just that we encounter God in meditation – even if at a level of consciousness deeper than ordinary self-consciousness – but we come to apprehend that not only is God mysteriously in us but we are also mysteriously in God. We come to understand that our longing for love has been awakened by Love, who loved us first. This discovery, this revelation, often comes to us as a slow apprehension rather than a dramatic unveiling.

This is the good news of the Gospels. When we come to appreciate the truth that the Spirit dwells within us, we are no longer motivated by any outside reward or punishment but by participating in the Mystery itself. Because we participate in the Love that is revealed, carrots and sticks are no longer required or helpful. As St Paul says in Philippians 2:13 "It is God, who for God's own loving purpose, puts both the will and the action into you". We no longer engage in mere rule-following behaviour; rather, it is our awareness of our actual identity in God that drives and transforms us. When we truly apprehend who we are at the deepest level of our being, we do things because they are true and loving, not because we have to do them or fear the consequences of not doing them. Now we are not so much driven from without, by the false-self, by our desire for power, prestige and possessions but we are drawn from within, by the True-Self.

And we also come to appreciate that what has been disclosed, uncovered, revealed is true, not just for me, but for all of creation. Although each of us is a unique manifestation of the Love of God, ultimately we are all one. As John Main wrote: 'Unity among Christians as well as, in the long term, unity among different races and creeds, rests upon our finding the inner principle of unity as a personal experience within our own hearts.' While the experience may be personal what it reveals is universal because the nature of the experience, as the Spirit prays within us, is that it takes us beyond our egoic selves into full awareness of our common personhood.

Of course, as St John of the Cross attested, there are times in our spiritual experience where it seems that love is withheld rather than revealed; when meditation and prayer are experienced as dull, turgid and dry and we sense an absence of love instead. At such times,

when we may experience a dark night of the senses or a dark night of the soul, we need to trust in our faith, accept that Love is still at work in us at an even deeper level, albeit behind a cloud of unknowing, and persist with our daily practice as lovingly as we can.

I invite you now to spend some time in the stillness and silence of meditation where you can begin to experience that truth for yourself.

07 To All who Call

Prior to Advent we had been exploring the depth of meaning in the John Main prayer which we say before meditation. The second sentence of the prayer asks God to: 'Lead us into that mysterious Silence where Your Love is revealed to all who call.' In this article I want to reflect on the phrase 'to all who call'.

Some meditators add the word 'Maranatha' at the end of the prayer, but many prefer not to do so in case the prayer is interpreted to mean that God's love is revealed only to those who call 'Maranatha'.

It is surprising sometimes to realise how many meanings a single word can have. We say things like 'I called around to my friend's house last night' when we mean we visited them in their home. Or, 'I must give Mary a call tomorrow', when we mean we will talk with her by phone. Or 'When my granddaughter got lost in the shopping centre, I heard her call out and ran to get her'. These are just three variations on the way we use the word 'call' and all three of them apply to this prayer.

When we sit in meditation, we can see it as if we are dropping by to visit a close friend. The more accustomed we become to meditation, the more it can feel like that. The more you know someone, the deeper the relationship, the easier it is to sit with someone in silence; not speaking but mysteriously in communion with one another nonetheless. The second example, to give someone a call, meaning to speak by phone, replicates the fact that while on a phone call we can speak with the other person, we can't see them. Silence on a phone call can be very awkward and when we first start meditation we can experience that awkwardness too – we can feel an urgent desire to fill the silence with our own thoughts.

The third use of call, where I heard my granddaughter anxiously call out when she got lost in the shopping centre also applies to meditation. Speaking to God, St Augustine once wrote 'You have made us for yourself, Lord, and our hearts are restless, until they rest in you.' He was writing about the human desire to discover meaning in life, that impulse we all feel to live life with authenticity and, for him, that meant discovering the depth of his relationship with God. At different stages of our lives, we all experience a mysterious call to begin a journey of discovery into the depths of our being, to discover our true-self. And I think that is the kind of 'call' that John Main had in mind when he wrote this prayer; when he wrote that 'Your love is revealed to all who call'.

But the word 'all' is also very significant. Even though we have learned about meditation from our Christian tradition, we acknowledge that all the major religious traditions – and many in secular society – practice meditation. And while all who meditate will experience something of the mystery of Being in the silence, each tradition has its own unique way of describing it and assigning meaning to it. But ultimately the words we use to describe what we experience are just words, they are not the experience itself. While words may help us to understand it better, ultimately words can only point towards the truth. Our experience of God – even as it happens at a level of consciousness deeper than ordinary self-consciousness – transcends the capacity of language. So the language in which we call out to God, the language of the tradition into which we were born, is not the only valid language. God's love is revealed to all who call.

As John Main observed: *We have to be able ourselves to recognise the life of God in all situations and peoples, to identify it for a sceptical generation looking for signs elsewhere, and then to place it in the context of that ultimate revelation of God's life which Jesus brought to us all in His own person. To see God in the world, in other faiths, in our lonely cities and dismal suburbs, we have first to have found the image of God in ourselves.* And, having found it alive within we know for certain the same is true for all. The language of meditation is silence, which makes meditation a universal practice. That is why Christian meditation groups are open to all.

Meditation is not just for your benefit but for the benefit of all. It is not about you but about the grace your daily practice generates in the world around you. Likewise, meditation is not just about the time you sit in meditation, but it generates a grace-filled energy that informs how you live in the world in every aspect of your life. While our experience of God is always personal, it is never individual but universal. Meditation is not a practice for personal salvation, but for awakening fully to the present moment and responding with compassion action in the world, in our daily lives.

An alternative Closing Prayer:

Lord, may our hearts remain open to your presence and guide us to love like you

08 A Closing Prayer for Meditation

We have been exploring the depth of meaning in the John Main prayer which we say before meditation. The prayer is very simple and reads *'Heavenly Father, Open our Hearts to the silent presence of the Spirit of Your Son. Lead us into that mysterious Silence where Your Love is revealed to all who call.'* I love its simplicity and clear focus. The prayer itself is not a mental or discursive prayer but a deep cry of the heart that we might be awakened to the Reality of the present moment; that we might discover how intimately we are linked to the Presence of God in whom we live and move and have our being.

The Christian meditation community also has a closing prayer for meditation which is used by some meditation groups. By comparison, is much less concise and more verbose. For that reason, I have written a very short closing prayer which is closer in theme and style to John Main's opening prayer. It reads: *Lord, may our hearts remain open to your presence and guide us to love like you.'*

While the opening prayer asks God to lead us into the mysterious, silent presence of His Son, we have seen that the request is not for a brief insight limited to the period of meditation but that we should be awakened to the fact that God is ever-present in our lives. It is we, who, through our

business and our continual focus on the small, separate, egoic self rather than the true-self, lose sight of the bigger picture. Teilhard de Chardin expressed it as follows: *'We are not human beings on a spiritual journey. Rather, we are spiritual beings on a human journey.'* Thomas Merton was even more poetic: *The thing that we have to face is that life is as simple as this. We are living in a world that is absolutely transparent and God is shining through it all the time. This is not just a fable or a nice story, it is true.* The practice of meditation helps to awaken us to the truth of this and helps us to appreciate how human life can be utterly changed if enough people lived their lives knowing this to be true.

The short closing prayer I am recommending asks that our hearts would remain open to God's presence in our lives and that this awareness would guide us to love like Jesus. It prays that our faithfulness to our daily meditation would help us to put on the mind of Christ and to live life as He would wish us to do. While we can never come to know God fully in this world, our faith encourages us to live with an ever-deepening and abiding awareness of the presence of God in our lives every day. It is the task of a lifetime to figure out how to realise our full humanity as we strive to respond to the circumstances and events of our lives after the example of Jesus.

That is why the second half of the closing prayer asks that our open hearts would guide us to love like Him. What does it mean to act like Christ, to love as He would, in the world today? How are we to love our neighbour following the example and teaching of Jesus? This is not a matter of creed but of 'credo'. Creed has come to mean giving intellectual assent to a set of doctrines and dogma formulated by the Fathers (and Mothers) of the Church. But 'credo' points instead to a heartfelt response to the call to become like Jesus. The theologian Karen Armstrong reminds us that 'credo' derives from the Latin phrase 'Cor do' which means 'I give my heart'; so its original meaning is closer to 'trust; commitment; engagement; involvement' rather than creed.

Meditation helps to bring about the personal transformation which leads to such a mind-set. It frees us from our conditioning and from the tendency, which we all have, to react rather than respond. The fruit of meditation, of all contemplative prayer, is contemplative action in daily life. As Mother Teresa of Calcutta said *'If you pray without serving your prayer is in vain; if you serve without praying your service is in vain. Go forward, pray and serve in the power of the Holy Spirit.'*

We are called to respond with compassion to the myriad situations we encounter in life; not to react out of our conditioning but to respond as each situation calls for. We are called to be like the Good Samaritan. What distinguished him from the others in that parable was that he saw clearly. The Priest and the Levite were blinded by their conditioning, perhaps by their religious conditioning, but the Samaritan saw clearly the suffering before him and was aroused to respond with compassion and kindness.

And that is why the closing prayer for meditation that I offer you today reads: *Lord, may our hearts remain open to your presence and guide us to love like you.'* It challenges us to live our lives informed by our deepest connection and communion with God.

09 The John Main Prayer & The Lord's Prayer

In this series we have been exploring the depth of meaning in the John Main prayer which we say before meditation. We have examined each of the key phrases in the prayer and now I want to reflect on its overall meaning and how it mirrors the prayer variously known as the '*Lord's Prayer*' or the '*Our Father*'.

Meditation changes our way of seeing and therefore our way of being in the world; it makes us appreciate the importance of rooting our doing in our being, so that the quality of our doing is informed by the quality of our being. As we discover who we really are in the depths of our being, and deepen our relationship with God as the ground of all being – as we begin to see everything through that lens, the quality of our seeing changes and deepens. And we can more easily figure out how each unique situation calls for us to respond.

The *Lord's Prayer* begins with the words *Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name*' just as the John Main prayer begins *Heavenly Father*. The Lord's prayer continues '*Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.*'

It is good that the prayer contains that phrase '*Thy kingdom come*' because the core of Jesus' teaching was about the Kingdom of Heaven or the Kingdom of God and how we can access it here and now. Unfortunately, for many centuries, the Christian tradition has misunderstood those words as pointing to the need for personal salvation, the need to secure a place in the heaven in the next life by doing what we are told.

But when Jesus uses the expression the 'the kingdom of God' he is not talking about the next life but this one, about here and now, the eternal now if you like. He is telling us that there is a way that we can live connected to God and one another in this world, wherever we live, today, right now. The prayer says '*Thy kingdom come, thy will be done.*' Not, my will be done, but your will be done; God's will not ours. In other words, we are called to be willing, not wilful. As Richard Rohr notes: 'To pray and actually mean "Thy Kingdom come," we must also be able to say "my kingdoms go."' When we meditate, the repetition of our mantra and the letting go of thought are a symbol of all that we are called to let go in our daily lives as our small but personal contribution to making God's kingdom a reality in the world today.

But how do we learn to distinguish between the desire of the ego and the will of God? This is where meditation comes in, as do all forms of prayer. But meditation especially because it lets go of thought, the primary gateway of the desires and demands of the ego. In meditation, we move from the head to the heart, we move from a mode of doing to a mode of being. And it is in that mode of being that we discover who we truly are in the depths of our being – we discover the seed of an intimate relationship that was planted when we were born. And we learn that the daily practice of meditation enables that seed to take root in our hearts and our relationship with God to grow. Every time you meditate, you choose Love. And every time you choose Love - in prayer or in actual connection with another person - every time you choose Love, you connect with the Divine at a level of experience deeper than you can comprehend.

As we grow in meditation, we learn to live in the present moment, aware of the Love that always surrounds us. And we learn to tolerate and accept our limitations and imperfections because we

come to know we are loved for *who* we are, not for *how* we are in any given moment. We learn that God does *forgive us our trespasses, our failings* and we learn to *forgive those who trespass against us*. We don't have to be perfect to be loved, we have always been and will always be loved. And we are called to appreciate this truth and to try to live life from that perspective; to live out our lives alert to the present moment, responding with a radical Yes to what it asks of us.

Meditation acts as a portal, a gateway, to the universal; it makes us keenly aware of our unity. It moves us beyond a sense of an individual relationship with Christ to an understanding that we are **all** called to be one with Christ and hence with one another. The Lord's Prayer does not contain the words 'I' or 'me' or 'mine' but the words 'our' and 'us' appear many times.

Every time we sit in meditation, as we allow ourselves to be present to Reality - in all of its ordinariness and extraordinariness – we leave ourselves open and vulnerable to a graced encounter with Love that has the capacity to transform us so that we can play our part in building the Kingdom of God where we live, today. I invite you now to spend some time in the stillness and silence of meditation where you can begin to experience that truth for yourself.

10 The John Main Prayer & The Trinity

The theology of the Trinity while simple in some respects is nonetheless very challenging to explain. St Patrick is renowned for having used the metaphor of a shamrock to speak about it And the 8th Century prayer, ***St Patrick's Breastplate***, concludes with the verse:

*I arise today
Through a mighty strength,
the invocation of the Trinity,
Through belief in the threeness,
Through confession in the oneness
Of the Creator of Creation.*

Heidegger wrote that '*Poetry is language in service of the unsayable.*' And there is a 9th Century Celtic Christian Verse called ***The Sacred Trinity*** which refers to the shamrock as just one of four metaphors to speak of the Trinity [from ***Irish Verse: An Anthology***]: :

*Three folds of the cloth, yet only one napkin is there,
Three joints in the finger, but still only one finger fair,
Three leaves of the shamrock, yet no more than one shamrock to wear,
Frost, snowflakes and ice, all in water their origin share,
Three Persons in God: to one God alone we make our prayer.*

Those who practice Christian Meditation after the practice of John Main usually recite a short but very deep and beautiful prayer before each meditation session: "*Heavenly Father, Open our hearts to the silent presence of the spirit of your Son. Lead us into that mysterious silence where your love is revealed to all who call.*" Trinity Sunday is a good opportunity to reflect on the Trinitarian theology which underpins this prayer.

We can say that it is the Trinitarian nature of John Main's understanding of the 'prayer of the heart' that makes our meditation 'Christian.' John Main makes clear that, through the work of meditation, we are joining our spirits with the Spirit of Jesus in communion with him and our Abba in our hearts.

In his book *Moment of Christ*, John Main describes the theological basis of Christian Meditation: *'It is our conviction that the central message of the New Testament is that there is really only one prayer, and that this prayer is the prayer of Christ. It is a prayer that continues in our hearts day and night. I can describe it only as the stream of love that flows constantly between Jesus and his Father. This stream of love is the Holy Spirit.'*

Meister Eckhart expressed the same idea in these words: *The Father laughs with the Son; the Son laughs with the Father. The Father likes the Son; the Son likes the Father. The Father delights in the Son; the Son delights in the Father. The Father loves the Son; the Son loves the Father. This laughter, liking, delighting, loving is the Holy Spirit!*

John Main continues that *'it is our conviction that it is the most important task for any fully human life that we should become as open as possible to this stream of love. We have to allow this prayer to become our prayer; we have to enter into the experience of being swept out of ourselves, beyond ourselves into this wonderful prayer of Jesus — this great cosmic river of love.'*

In order for us to do this we learn a way that is a way of silence, of stillness, and this by a discipline that is most demanding. It is as though we have to create a space within ourselves that will allow this higher consciousness—the consciousness of the prayer of Jesus — to envelop us in this powerful mystery.

We have got used to thinking of prayer in terms of "my prayer" or "my praise" of God, and it requires a complete rethinking of our attitude to prayer if we are going to come to see it as a way through Jesus, with Jesus, and in Jesus.

Elsewhere he explains that *'The presence of Jesus within us, His Holy Spirit, calls out to us to become fully conscious of this level of our being. In the twinkling of an eye, we awaken to ourselves, to the Spirit dwelling within us, and thence to consciousness of the communion within God in which we are called to share. And so we awaken, not to a platonic aloneness but to a complete communion of all beings in Being itself.'*

We begin with a dim awareness of the stirring of the Spirit in our heart, the presence of Another by which we know ourselves. In awakening to its full reality, in listening to our heart, we awaken to the living proof of our faith justifying that first dim awareness, that first hope. And, as St. Paul told the Romans: "This proof is the ground of hope. Such a hope is no mockery because God's love has flooded our inmost heart through the Holy Spirit he has given us.' [Word Into Silence, 38]

Because this theme is so central to our meditation practice, some time ago I wrote a closing prayer for meditation to match John Main's opening prayer. While the opening prayer asks God to 'Open our hearts to the silent presence of the Spirit of your Son' we do not mean to open our heart merely for the period of our meditation, but that it should always be open. Hence, my closing prayer reads *'Lord, May our hearts remain open to your Presence and guide us to love like you.'*