

## ***The Epistle of Prayer and The Epistle of Privy Counsele :Minor works of the Author of The Cloud of Unknowing***

The three works by this author - *The Epistle of Prayer*, *The Epistle of Privy Counsel* and *The cloud of Unknowing* build up into a comprehensive outline of the practice of contemplative prayer which is enormously helpful to any apprentice setting out on the journey towards union with God, and which certainly deserves to be very much more widely known than it is. The two shorter works discussed in this article are private letters written to specific individuals, and dealing with particular problems of the spiritual life. They are later compositions than *The Cloud of Unknowing* - in fact the *Epistle of Privy Counsel* refers to it by name - and although covering some of the same material, represent a significant development of the author's teaching. In contrast to his previous work, there are a great many references to other writers; Dionysius (Ch 7), St Augustine (Ch 12), and Aristotle (Ch 12) in the *Epistle of Privy Counsel*, and to St Thomas Aquinas (Ch 60), and St Bernard (Ch 6) in the *Epistle of Prayer*. Either the reader is himself better educated, or he is sufficiently grounded in the practice of prayer not to be distracted from the point of the teaching by a show of learning, or to mistake it for spiritual depth.

### ***The Epistle of Prayer***

This must have been the earlier piece both because it is referred to in *the Epistle of Privy Counsel*, and because the novice being addressed seems to have been at an earlier stage in his prayer life. Its theme is the mental discipline and the detachment required for contemplative prayer.

The novice asks how he should focus his attention at the start of his prayer, and the answer may appear more startling to us today than it did in the middle ages, when sudden and unexpected deaths were more common: it is to imagine that one may die before the time of prayer is over. The idea of this is to accustom the novice to the idea of the immediacy of the presence of God, and awaken a sense of dread, because of his own sinfulness and unworthiness. We might find this a little morbid, perhaps even a little masochistic, and the author seems to feel something the same, for he goes on to add that this dread is not to lead to despair, but to stir up hope in the mercy of God. This combination of dread and hope will lead us to avoid evil and seek God, and, if soundly based on proper penance for past sins, will give rise to a genuine reverent love.

The practice of this reverent love is more valuable to the soul than any merely external penance. The author likens it to a tree, whose root is dread, whose stem is hope and whose fruit is love. At first this love is based on humble gratitude for the mercy of God, but if we persevere in prayer, we will find ourselves coming closer to God, and loving Him more for what he is in himself than any of the gifts He gives us. This is a long process. Patience and humility are required, and there will be times when we feel no sense of making progress, but only constant strain and struggle. But this is as it should be:

*"there is no reason why you should eat the sweet kernel without having first to crack its hard shell or bite off its bitter bark." (Ch15)*

Contemplation is a pure gift of God, and given for no effort on our part. Yet the author points out that God has created ways whereby we may make some effort to draw closer to Him, and human nature demands that we make use of them, as far as they can help us.

### ***The Epistle of Privy Counsel***

At first glance *The Epistle of Privy Counsel* appears to be addressing more intellectual questions, or at least, approaching them in a more intellectual way. It is certainly important to the author to

show that his teaching is soundly based on authentic theology, but as we read, we begin to be aware that this is far from being an academic treatise, and that the problems the novice is facing are not intellectual at all, but spiritual. He has reached the stage in his spiritual life where he feels the urge towards contemplative prayer, but because of the difficulty of adjusting to this new way of prayer, he is beating about the bush, stalling for time. The author is well aware that this is so, saying at one point:

*"Your question is prompted by intellectual curiosity which will not let you consent to this work unless it can be justified by logical argument. I am not going to stop you--- you are setting limits to your humility by refusing to accept the advice of your spiritual director unless your intellect agrees with it." (Ch 7 p179).*

Nevertheless, as a sound director, he knows that his apprentice cannot settle to the demands of the contemplative life without the reassurance of a few straight answers. He begins by analysing the process of contemplative prayer which is to offer oneself simply and directly to God, without getting involved in undue speculation on the divine nature, or any attempt at self-analysis.

*"What I am , and how I am, by nature and by grace, I offer to you, Lord, it is you yourself. I offer it all to you, in the first instance for your praise, but also to help my fellow-Christians and myself." (Ch3, p 167)*

This prayer is independent of thoughts, images and emotions, but it is not therefore merely passive mental blankness. The language of our author speaks of effort, urgency, persistence, hard work. It is without conscious reference to the attributes of God, yet it is founded on trust in the mercy of Jesus (Ch 5), and the grace of the Holy Spirit. (Ch 2) It may be solitary, but the contemplative is 'expected to feed and cherish your brothers and sisters' with the fruits of his prayer. In other words, this basic gift of self, renewed every moment, is the complete fulfilment of the commandment to love God whole-heartedly, and to love one's neighbour as oneself.

Most of the difficulties and temptations that occur in the first part of the contemplative life arise from the frustration of the intellect and the imagination. There is nothing for them to do here, and so they constantly throw up distractions. In *The Cloud of Unknowing* these were presented as little more than random thoughts - the kaleidoscope of words, images, idle questions and passing fantasy that make up so much of our actual thought processes, but now they press on the anxious and inexperienced soul much more strongly. He is about to pin his whole existence on a way of praying which he is yet to experience fully, and which he finds baffling, tormenting and irresistible. His problems resolve themselves into three major concerns:

*Is contemplative prayer any good? Is it actually pleasing to God, or is it just self-absorbed and self-delighting?* The author makes short work of this one. This prayer is only possible for people who are willing to forsake themselves and the world in the most radical manner in order to follow Jesus. We have to strip ourselves of all other concerns whatever in order to be united with God. Even the conscious awareness that we have a 'self' to offer God becomes a burden and a weariness. Furthermore, as contemplative prayer can only happen by the grace of Jesus, who is the real power behind it, " (Ch 6, p176) , it is ridiculous to imagine that it is somehow holier to refuse the gift.

*"Don't go thinking that this humble and complete surrender of all attempts to look after yourself which you believe to be the result of God's grace means that you are putting God to the test, simply because you fancy this is something you would not dare to do on your own," (CH 6 p176).*

This is simply inverted pride, masquerading as humility, and based on lack of faith. While a holy, active life is enough to save anyone, if you are called to contemplation it is folly and ingratitude to refuse the gift, which, our author reminds us, is a great help and comfort to all the church.

*How do I know that I am called to be a contemplative, and not just fooling myself?* The author emphasises quite strongly the ordinary preconditions for a life of contemplative prayer. An aspirant must be reconciled with the Church, have done penance for any serious sins, and reform his life under the guidance of a spiritual director. Furthermore, he is even more emphatic about the need for a long foundation period of meditation on the life of Christ, on the teachings of the Church concerning Heaven and Hell, on one's own personal sinfulness and the mercy of God, before one may even aspire to anything further.

*"He who 'enters not by the door, but climbeth up some other way' to perfection --- ignores not only the simple open entrance mentioned above, but also the sound advice of spiritual masters is, whoever he may be, not only a burglar of the night, but also a sneakthief of the day. A burglar, certainly, for he goes about in the darkness of sin banking more on his own mental agility and purpose than on any sound advice --- and sneakthief too, for he pretends to a pure and spiritual life, by picking on the outward signs and phrases of contemplation and not its fruit." (Ch 9 p 187)*

This is not, however, the problem this particular novice has. We can assume from the context that he has lived a stable and prayerful life for some time, and is genuinely feeling the attraction of the contemplative experience. What he wants to know is the difference between the a genuine call and the firing of the imagination we sometimes get when we read about an admirable life-style. Our author is well aware of the latter phenomenon, and of people who, under its influence, merely 'fancy themselves ' as contemplatives, but he does not dismiss it out of hand. It is, he says, an evidence of ordinary grace, meant to inspire us with a desire for genuine holiness and nourish us through the everyday development of our spiritual life. It is different from a real calling, in that the appeal lasts no longer than its effect on our imagination. We go back to our ordinary lives, encouraged and strengthened, it is true, but without much sense of loss. A genuine vocation is not satisfied with this; the desire for closeness to God gets between us and our sleep, our work and our relaxation; our prayer becomes simpler and less concrete; our longing for stillness, quiet and solitude (quite different from depressive exhaustion or ennui) makes even our most enjoyable activities or companionship seem irrelevant. We hunger for the presence of God, and nothing else will do. It is a hunger, but a serene one, not a craving; it is like what Thomas Merton calls 'a deep and peaceful fire.'

What if you start off by feeling like this and then it all goes away? This is the point where real contemplative prayer begins. The initial period of light and fervour - not always a time of plain sailing, but at least a time of relative clarity and conviction - is over, and the contemplative finds him/herself apparently stranded. There is still no lasting satisfaction in previous activities or forms of prayer, and yet the sense of enthusiasm and dedication which spurred him on, and without which he would surely not have stepped over the threshold, has simply evaporated. What has happened? has he betrayed his vocation? Was it all a mistake? is he just completely incompetent in the spiritual life? Much time and emotion is wasted by fledgling contemplatives in this sort of self-torment, and the author's answer is as gentle, as positive and equivocal as they need it to be. God will come back; it is important to understand that this is only the contemplative's impression, and that we are not saying in any way that God is ever actually absent. He never withdraws the grace of a contemplative vocation except when it is destroyed by mortal sin. The feeling of enthusiasm is not itself the experience of contemplation, but only a consolation to strengthen and guide. Periods of dryness and pain are inevitable, but if accepted humbly and patiently will detach us from self-will and purify our love for God until

*"your love for God is chaste and perfect. It is now that you both see your God and you love, and experience Him at first hand, in the very core of your being, united in spirit with Him in love --though blindly, as it has to be here below. " (Ch 12 p 196)*

Experience helps us to deal with this without undue anxiety in dryness or exuberance in

consolation, so that in spite of pain, difficulty and the constant sense of struggle, we keep our sense of direction and persevere in what we have to do.

*All quotations in this article are from Clifton Wolters' translation in the Penguin Classics series (1978).*