

## THE PRAYER OF THE MIND

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Writing in 4th century Egypt, that is 1,600 years ago, St Macarius compares the sweetness of calling upon Jesus Christ's name to... believe it or not... chewing gum! This is what he said:

*I remember that in my childhood, when I was in my father's house, I noticed that the old women and young girls had something in their mouth, some sort of gum, that they chewed in order that it might sweeten the saliva in their throat and the bad smell in their mouth, and so moisten and refresh their lives and all their inward parts.*

*If this material thing can obtain so much sweetness for those who chew it, how much more can the food of life, the fountain of salvation, the source of living waters, the sweetness of all sweet things, our Lord Jesus Christ, whose precious and blessed name makes demons disappear like smoke when they hear it in our mouth. **This blessed name, if we ruminates on it and chew it constantly**, obtains a revelation for the intellect, the driver of soul and body, chases all bad thoughts away from the immortal soul and shows her the things of the heavens, above all him who is on high, our Lord Jesus Christ, King of kings, Lord of lords, the heavenly reward of those who seek him with their whole heart.*

Today, brothers and sisters, is part three of a series of sermons on the *Philokalia*, which is an anthology of Christian spiritual writings from the 3rd to the 15th century. Last week we spoke about spirituality, that inner world deep inside us that, unless explored and discovered, can remain hidden, forgotten and lost. Today we will talk about the **key** that lets us in to that inner world. And that key is prayer. Prayer is the mode of communication between us and God, the Spirit of Good. There are different types of prayer. Personal prayer, where we pray to God on our own... and there is communal prayer, where we gather to pray as one big family and community, known as the church. But to understand the *Philokalia*, we need to understand something called the **Jesus Prayer**.

When I was a young child, maybe nine years old, my grandmother... God rest her soul... took me aside one day and gave me one of these... [show a komboschoini]. She explained to me:

*Με αυτό το κομποσχοίνι θα αρχίζεις από εδώ και θα λες την προσευχή “Κύριε Ιησού Χριστέ, Υιέ του Θεού, ελέησόν με τον αμαρτωλό”. Θα λές την ευχή σε κάθε κόμπο... ένας γύρος είναι εκατό φορές. Όσο αντέχεις, λέγε την προσευχή. Πριν κοιμηθείς το βράδυ, λέγε την προσευχή και θα κοιμάσαι καλά.*

*With this prayer-rope you will start from here and you will say the prayer “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me the sinner.” You will say the prayer at each knot... one round is one hundred times. Say the prayer as much as you can endure. Before you sleep, say the prayer and you will sleep well.*

So there I was, saying a prayer over and over again. The prayer-rope made it easy, because I wanted to get round to the little bead that marked the beginning. A hundred times, two hundred times, three hundred times. *Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me the sinner.* Over and over again. It helped me alot. That prayer gave me inner peace, as it would calm me down whenever I was upset. That prayer gave me courage, as it was the way I learned not to be afraid of the dark. That prayer gave me strength, as it was how I prepared myself for every challenge, every exam at school, every race that I had to run. And true to my grandmother’s words, it helped me go to sleep... and I very rarely had nightmares.

Little did I know that this handy little prayer, passed on to me by my grandmother, has been practiced for thousands upon thousand of years in the Eastern Christian Church. In reading the *Philokalia* as an adult, it became clear to me that there is great power in the name of Jesus Christ. The name Jesus actually means, *God Saves*. It also became clear to me that the thread of this prayer has been present in the Christian Church right from the beginning.

In the Bible we read how Jesus was walking towards the town of Jericho. On the roadside, in the gutter, was a blind man begging. With all the people walking past, He asked what was happening. They told him “Jesus of Nazareth is passing by.” And then he shouted, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!” But those people who were in front rebuked him... Shoosh! Be quiet! He knew of Jesus, he had heard what Jesus could do ... nothing was going to stop him from making contact with Jesus... and so he shouted louder than before: “Son of David, have mercy on me!”... *And Jesus stopped.* Above all the noise of the crowd Jesus heard the lonely prayer of the blind man... and he stopped. Jesus asks him: “What do you want me to do for you? “Lord, let me receive my sight”... And Jesus said to him, “Receive your sight... your faith has made you well.” And immediately he received his sight and followed Him, glorifying God; and all the

people, when they saw it, gave praise to God. Brothers and sisters, this is the prayer that stopped Jesus: *Lord Jesus... have mercy on me*. Certainly if this prayer stopped Jesus then, it can stop him today.

The *Philokalia* teaches the constant repetition of this specific prayer... and by constant, we mean all the time, all day, every day, every night and even during our sleep! How is this possible? It is possible because we can make prayer so much part of us, so much part of our inner being that it can move from being something we say in a conscious state to something that just happens sub-consciously... like breathing.

In a “new-age” world where all sorts of far-eastern practices have become prevalent... buddhist, hindu, yoga, zen, feng-shui...it is encouraging to know that we Christians have our own deep spirituality that has developed over thousands of years and that we can find our inner peace in this, our home..., in our own Tradition. All we have to do is search, read, ask, and learn. Knock, and the door shall be opened!

There are different variations of the Jesus Prayer. The longest is *Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner*. A shorter version is *Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me*. And of course the shortest is simply *Lord have mercy - Kyrie Eleison*. It is also very encouraging to see so many young people with Orthodox Christian prayer ropes around their wrists. It is there to be taken off when we need to pray, when we are upset, when we are distressed. Take it off and and go around, each knot, saying the Jesus Prayer.

I will finish with the words of St Hesychios from the 5th century: *“After having purified and unified our minds by the Jesus Prayer, our thoughts swim like happy dolphins in a calmed sea.”*

Next week we will talk about “Perfection versus Perfectionism”. If you have missed any part of this series of sermons, you can access them on our church’s Twitter account. Search “St George Church” [[@stgeorgerosebay](#)].