A Taste of Contemplative Prayer

“Taste and see that God is good.” Psalm 34:8

When we think of prayer, we usually imagine asking God for something or thanking God for something. In contemplative prayer our aim is more listening for God. We do that by creating as much silence as we can around us and inside us. What follows will take about a half hour of your time and give you a taste of contemplative prayer. Read through this several times before starting your session.

The first step is to decide which of three ways you want to try in this session. All of them have to do with managing your thoughts. When we sit down for contemplative prayer and close our eyes, thoughts pop in one after another. We won’t try to stop them; we will just respond to them in a gentle and easy way. The first method is to choose a word which symbolizes your intent: “peace”, “love”, “God” might be good options but with the caution that you won’t be thinking about what the word means but just thinking the word itself. Another way would be to choose a mantra, or meditation word such as “ahnam” from the sanskrit word for God as un-nameable. Another method is to notice your breath thinking “in’ on the in-breath and “out” on the out-breath. Choose one of the three for this session. With each method you respond to noticing thoughts by gently thinking the word you chose above.

Try to be in a quiet place where you won’t be interrupted. Turn off your phone (You can do it!!) and set a timer for five minutes to end with a gentle chime. You may want to begin with a prayer of thanks to God for this time. Then start the 5 minute timer. Notice how thoughts come without any effort. When you notice thoughts respond with whichever method you chose for this session. Let it be as gentle and effortless as possible. You will probably notice your thoughts many times over 5 minutes. Just respond each time gently and effortlessly. When the timer quietly rings, take a minute at least with your eyes closed to come out of the prayer time slowly. Then open your eyes. How did that feel? Hopefully it felt easy and relaxing. Now set your timer for 15 minutes and do the same practice for this longer period. Notice thoughts; respond with your practice, always gently, effortlessly. When your chime rings, take at least 3 minutes with eyes closed to come out of the session slowly. Open your eyes. You are done! For future sessions, omit the first five minute instruction above; set your timer for 20 minutes and do the practice that long followed by 3-5 minutes to come out slowly.

Feel free to try all of the different methods mentioned above to find the one that feels best to you. There are other methods as well you might choose to explore. The big challenge is to find time each day to practice. Most practitioners find that 20 minutes, twice a day is ideal. Try to choose a time when you have not just eaten or are under the influence of coffee, alcohol or other mid-altering substances. Before breakfast and before your evening meal are best. At night, a session might put you to sleep or keep you awake. Always let it be gentle and easy. So much of life is hard and demanding; contemplative prayer sessions are for gently opening the mind and heart to God. May God bless you on your path of contemplative prayer and may all beings be blessed with the “peace that passes understanding”.