

The Episcopal Diocese of West Texas

Practicing Lent

A Series of Weekly and Daily Reflections for Lent 2015

Monday ♫ March 23, 2015

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The Practice of Prayer: The Jesus Prayer – Habitual Recollection

Reflection. In 1998, Bishop Bob Hibbs, who was then Suffragan Bishop of the Diocese of West Texas, wrote a small book. Its title, *An Altar in Your Heart: Meditations on the Jesus Prayer*,¹ came from something that St. John Chrysostom said: "No matter where we happen to be, by prayer we can set up an altar to God in our heart."

That altar in our hearts is what happens when we practice the Jesus prayer, says Hibbs. It goes like this: Lord Jesus Christ, son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.

The prayer, says Hibbs, has been known by the saints for centuries "as a venerable method of not just prayer but of being with God." The elements of the Jesus prayer can be found in the church of the first apostles, but as a developed devotional system, it was during the third and fourth centuries that the prayer began to emerge as a body of doctrine, a body of teaching.

In 64 pages, *An Altar in our Hearts* deconstructs the Jesus prayer and helps us understand why we are praying what we are praying. First, says Hibbs, it wraps itself around the basic Christian theology of Good Friday and Easter.

Lord Jesus Christ, son of God – Easter;

Have mercy on me, a sinner - Good Friday.

With the Jesus Prayer, it's always Easter and it's always Good Friday. You can't have one without the other.

When we say, "Lord Jesus Christ," we are saying three things: Jesus is the one true Lord, he is our salvation (his Hebrew name, Joshua, means Yahweh is my salvation), and he is the messiah that many Jews had been waiting for and the whole world needs. As Christ,

¹ *An Altar in Your Heart* is no longer available. However, the book grew out of a spiritual retreat held at the Mustang Island Conference Center in 1996. Recordings from that retreat may still be available.

he is anointed one. When we declare him to be the Son of God, we are saying he is God from God, the One who was with God from before the creation, the One who is God.

When we ask for mercy, says Hibbs, "we are not pleading with God to give us something he is reluctant to give." When we admit we are sinners, we are saying, in Hibbs' words, that we need help. "If I just trust me, there is no god I will not blaspheme, no truth I will not dishonor, and no good I will not betray. I'm not the little engine that thought it could." By myself, I am a sinner.

One way to acquire the rhythm of the Jesus Prayer is to say it as you breathe: "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God" as you inhale, and "Have mercy on me, a sinner" as you exhale. When you first begin to use the Jesus Prayer, says Hibbs, you're going to be distracted. "You'll start to pray then find yourself thinking about something else." Don't be impatient with yourself; simply return to the prayer.

For many, frequent recitation of the Jesus prayer becomes an act of habitual recollection - living always in the presence of God. It becomes so ingrained that in time it moves inward. "The oral part, the moving of the lips and the tongue becomes less important," says Hibbs. The prayer is going even when we're not consciously saying it.

Hibbs reflects that there are many in the world today who are "terribly lonely and terribly frightened and sort of profoundly interiorized." One of the ways to handle that, says Hibbs, is to realize in a "concrete and spiritually practical way that you are not alone." That is what habitual recollection of the Jesus Prayer will do.

Today's Practice. Today's prayer practice is to say the Jesus Prayer throughout the day, as often as you think of it. Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.