

REVISED EDITION



SIMON BARRINGTON-WARD

THE  

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JESUS PRAYER

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## INTRODUCTION

After this book had first appeared—drawn out of me, to my own surprise, by that remarkable woman Shelagh Brown of the Bible Reading Fellowship when she visited me in Coventry—I found myself being invited by a growing number of varied church groups to go and talk to them about the Jesus Prayer and help them to pray it. Since then, everywhere, the number of those using this way of prayer, sometimes taking a different phrase from the Gospels or the Psalms to repeat with increasing depth of both joy and longing, has grown enormously. As I have gone round speaking at ‘Jesus Prayer’ retreats and gatherings, I have often been asked for a copy of this book, since it is shorter and more condensed than the one that Brother Ramon and I wrote together (*Praying the Jesus Prayer Together*, BRF, 2001), and gives, quite simply, more of the whole story of the prayer and how to pray it, in outline.

The World Community for Christian Meditation (WCCM), founded by Fr John Main and using the word *Maranatha* (‘Come, Lord’), has itself been spreading enormously worldwide. I went to the biennial conference of their branch in Britain recently to talk about the Jesus Prayer. We met at Worth Abbey in Sussex and joined in some of the monks’ simple times of worship in their beautiful, modern chapel. But one feature of the conference, which impressed me particularly, was the simple discipline that all WCCM members practise in their

daily life. People were there from a wide variety of backgrounds and with a wide variety of forms of employment, from youngish mothers to doctors, businessmen, manual workers and teachers, and ranging from the unemployed to the retired. All of them spend half an hour every morning and half an hour every evening, out of their often very busy and hard-pressed lives, praying in silence. It was quite humbling to share that half-hour period twice a day during our gathering there together, in complete stillness.

I still think that it would perhaps be best for people launching into such prayer for the first time to ‘start small’. You could begin with ten, then perhaps fifteen, minutes, morning and evening. But the knowledge that there are so many people from Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Anglican, Methodist, United Reformed and many other Christian groups and fellowships who are committed to this daily discipline of contemplative ‘practice of the presence’ for half an hour, morning and evening, would then encourage and inspire you to do likewise. While I was with them, I had many requests for this little book, and I have been happy to tell some, who had been unable to obtain it second-hand, the good news that it is being republished.

Indeed, I hope the book will help many, many more Christians throughout a wide variety of churches and fellowships to be drawn into stillness, and in that stillness, perhaps through that most ancient Eastern Orthodox pattern of the Jesus Prayer—the prayer of the name, the invocation of the Lord’s presence, his forgiveness and empowering—to be drawn into a

deeper communion with God, in Christ, through the Spirit. I hope it will lead a large number of new readers to the secret of unceasing prayer, to a whole way of praying that continues day and night, while we are working, eating, meeting with each other and even while we sleep (this last in the way that Brother Lawrence described in his little book, *The Practice of the Presence of God*, as ‘letting the wind of the Spirit fill our sails even in sleep’).

In this way, it could meet the quest of members of a remarkable worldwide group, the ‘24–7 prayer movement’ (see *Red Moon Rising* by Pete Grieg and Dave Roberts, Kingsway, 2004), through which young people in a growing number of locations all over the world—in Western and Eastern Europe, South America, Asia and the USA—are drawing many others to faith in Christ and into joining in prayer, day and night, in little huts and prayer rooms. As with those praying the Jesus Prayer, they have been drawn into the quest for practising the presence and love of God in Christ night and day, and entering worship, adoration and yearning intercession in union with his ceaseless prayer for us.

All of us can learn from each other and pray with and for each other, in worship and intercession, in ‘joyful mourning’ as John Climacus called it, as we seek to grow ever more deeply into union with Christ and as we reach out towards the day of his final coming. I hope that this book will continue its work of enabling many more people to discover the inexhaustible riches of grace opened up to us in him.

## A FIRST ENCOUNTER WITH THE JESUS PRAYER

I came across the Jesus Prayer at a time when I was travelling in different parts of the world for the Church Missionary Society. It was those travels that made me hunger for a better way of praying, a way that would be more adequate to all that I was then encountering in Africa and Asia. Even on my return to this country I was becoming more aware than ever before of deep currents flowing in our own society.

Sometimes I could sense, underlying so many casual meetings and conversations across the globe, so many glimpses of the way people were living and striving and suffering—glimpses snatched even as I cycled into London, even around our offices in Waterloo—some kind of universal struggle. There seemed to be so many contradictions at every level in my life and in the whole of human society. There seemed to be, underlying everything, some kind of vast, inchoate yearning, which I could also feel, more and more of the time, in my own heart and which seemed to be increasingly present in everything I was trying to do.

Gradually it focused on a longing for a real deepening of prayer—and of the whole of my ‘life in Christ’. I was thirsting for something that was more universal, deeper,

wider than my previous attempts at prayer. I was thirsting for a way of praying that genuinely embraced all the people and situations that still cried out to me when I paused for a moment, and yet at the same time came to grips more realistically with the frustrations and longings of my own divided nature.

One day a friend took me down to a Russian Orthodox monastery in Essex. It was just a small monastery, with both monks and sisters. (This happened some years ago, and before that I had never had very much to do with the Orthodox Church.)

As soon as we arrived, we both went straight into the chapel, because the community and their guests were starting their evening Office. I imagined it was going to be like the Offices in most monasteries in the West, with some kind of traditional form like that of our own morning and evening prayer, which, after all, came out of the monastic tradition.

But instead they had something quite different. There was just one voice leading what has long been called the Jesus Prayer—a woman's voice—and the others were praying it silently with her. We stood there in the darkened chapel, with all the icons and screens around, and little lights burning. I was conscious of the shapes of the brothers and sisters around me and of their faces—faces as striking as that of Father Sophrony, a remarkable bearded countenance with a great quality of shrewdness and humour and also radiance about it, absorbed in the gentle flow of the prayer.

It was as if the faces of the brothers and sisters around me were somehow merging into the faces on

the icons all round the walls, and I was conscious of how very easily you could find yourself one with them as the generations slipped back and back.

There was an icon of St Silouan, the person from whom Father Sophrony had learnt about the Jesus Prayer. I had seen Silouan's face in a photograph on the back of Father Sophrony's book about him; and now, there he was, in an icon—which Father Sophrony told me later was a much better likeness of him than the photograph. The photograph was too sombre, with his heavy eyebrows, dark gaze and massive beard dominating. The icon showed the real lightness and the gleam of response which were also always there.

Through the rows of smaller icons we went back to the next generation, and back through the years to St Seraphim of Sarov, with his white hair and beard and his white robe, bowed with frailty but shining and alive with joy and risen life; then to all the great Russian saints before him and, before them, reaching back to the Byzantine and Eastern Fathers and Mothers, to the Desert Saints, and, at the heart of all, the apostles and John the Baptist, after whom the monastery was named—back to the Evangelists, to St John and to the Virgin Mary and to the whole Gospel story. Beyond us and over us was the Last Supper and above us the vision of God in heaven. It all seemed of a piece, as if we were all going forward together in this one great community in time and space and eternity.

That was the setting in which I first met the Jesus Prayer, and that whole setting was very important, because the prayer was already being said when we went

into the chapel. The prayer was spoken mostly in English, because much of their liturgy is in English, but there were short stretches of time in which it was spoken in Greek and also in Russian. A sister who was leading at first handed over to a monk after a while, simply praying:

*'Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me.'*

There was a pause. Then the prayer was repeated. We were lifted up into the steady wingbeat of the prayer. As we settled into it and began to be drawn into it, we felt that it became the focal theme of the whole community and of our own being.

One's mind could wander—and we could even go to sleep (especially if we had kindly been given a chair to sit in, as I had). Yet all the time the prayer was going on, and we were part of it. Indeed, the constant re-emphasis of the words 'Lord Jesus Christ' kept on recalling me to the presence, and the constant movement of the prayer, 'Have mercy on me', immediately began to grasp me very deeply. After I came out of the chapel, the prayer was still praying itself inside me for many hours.

Later, I talked with Father Sophrony, and from that first occasion on we talked many times. He became a helper to me and a spiritual guide. He has since slipped through the veil—which in his presence always seemed so thin—that separates us still from that radiant host on the chapel wall. But, like the rest, he is still close to us. His shrewd twinkling gaze still looks at me from a photograph on my study wall, peering quizzically across

at me as he always did, as if he were humorously and affectionately aware of all my evasions and yet always ready to guide me beyond them. In this prayer particularly, I think we need that sort of help.

*The Jesus Prayer* has been known and loved by generations of Christians. Originating in the Orthodox Church, it is a way of entering into the river of prayer that flows from the heart of God, as Jesus continually prays for his people and for the world he loves. Within us, too, the Spirit of God prays ‘with sighs too deep for words’, and the Jesus Prayer can help us to join in the loving intercession of God-in-Christ for the redemption of all things.

In this new edition of a BRF classic, Simon Barrington-Ward teaches us how to use the prayer, and provides biblical and historical background for understanding its significance.

Simon Barrington-Ward was General Secretary of CMS (1975–1985), became Bishop of Coventry in 1985 and eventually retired to Cambridge. He travels widely, speaking on prayer and spirituality and the Jesus Prayer in particular. Through writing this book, he came to know Brother Ramon SSF and they collaborated on *Praying the Jesus Prayer Together* (BRF, 2001).

*‘In the spiritual hunger of our times the rediscovery of the Jesus Prayer may yet be one of the most important gifts we have to deepen our praying. Written out of long experience, Simon Barrington-Ward’s book is one of the clearest, practical and most timely introductions available.’*

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