

Donabate Talk Sunday, 08 December 2024 (Noel Keating)

My name is Noel Keating. I live in Carlow and have been meditating for the past 20 years. I lead Christian Meditation Ireland, a community of people all across Ireland who meditate in the Christian tradition.

I was born in 1951 and I am keenly aware that the whole culture of Irish society has changed enormously in my lifetime. And while there is much to be grateful for in those changes, one of the undesirable consequences has been a decline in regard for the spiritual nature of the human person.

James Finley, who writes about Christian Meditation, has a lovely way of describing how we so easily ignore the spiritual dimension of our being. He says that we spend so much of our time trapped on the outer circumference of the inner richness of our lives. We are so busy in the modern world, incessantly moving around that outer circumference doing, doing, doing that we may fail to set aside time for that journey inwards towards the inner richness of our lives.

When we become attentive to the inner dimension of our lives, we begin to see more clearly the challenges that are all around us and how we can offer some service to alleviate them because our understanding that we are all children of God, all loved intimately by God from before time began – that understanding grows and deepens informing how we live our lives.

Meditation teaches us who we are at the deepest level of our being; it helps us to apprehend something of the mystery in which we live and move and have our being. While we may think of a spiritual person as one who is especially committed to their religion, in fact a spiritual person is really one who tries to live life well, who strives to live an authentic life, appreciating who they are at the deepest level of their being and through prayer building a relationship with God.

Do you recall the definition of prayer in the penny Catechism? Prayer is the raising up of the mind and the heart to God. But in our lifetime, the Church has put enormous effort on raising the mind to God and, by comparison, very little on raising the heart to God.

I remember when I was about ten or eleven, reading a book I had borrowed from my local library coming across the saying of St Augustine which goes: *'We were made for you, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.'* And that insight has stayed with me all of my life. *Our hearts are restless until they rest in you. We need to find opportunities every day to allow our hearts to rest in God.*

As children we were taught to pray; and prayer is how we nourish our spiritual lives just as food and exercise nourish our physical and psychological lives. But in our lifetime, prayer has been understood primarily as mental prayer. Praying through words – we say our prayers, we thank God for things and ask God's blessing on our lives and the lives of others. We say the rosary. Even here, at Mass, the focus is very much on the spoken word. And, of course, such prayer - such raising of the mind to God - is important and necessary. But it needs to be balanced by the prayer of the heart. Christian Meditation is just that – a prayer of the heart.

In Matthew (Chapter 6) Jesus tells us ‘*When you pray, go into your inner room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. ... And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.*’ Christian Meditation is a prayer of the heart. It is a silent, imageless, wordless form of prayer inspired by the Psalms ‘*Be Still and know that I am God.*’

Since I retired in 2012, I have led a project teaching meditation to children in primary schools. They do it on a whole-school basis where the whole school stops and every child in every class sits in silent meditation, in silent prayer. The teacher rings a meditation bell three times at the start and again at the end of the meditation. One 12-year-old girl, Alex, told me that when she hears the bell ring at the start of meditation she imagines God is ringing her doorbell and she opens her heart to let Him in. Isn’t that a powerful image. She welcomes God into her heart and she sits in silence with him, living out that call of the Psalm to *be still and know that I am God.*

Meditation awakens the heart to the Spirit within. It moves the centre of gravity of our consciousness from the head to the heart. Just as meditation is not a form of *mental* prayer but a *prayer of the heart*, the fruit of meditation is not rational knowledge but knowledge of the heart. As John Main expressed it ‘*The “heart” is that focal point in our being where we can simply be in the Mystery – be in the mystery - without trying to explain or dissect it.*’

James Finley writes that in meditation we aim to allow our ‘*typical thinking self in our day-by-day consciousness to fall into the background so that a more contemplative consciousness might come into the foreground.*’ We repeat a sacred word or phrase continuously so that we can ‘*move forward into our love for God beyond all our thoughts.*’

If we remain trapped on the outer circumference of our lives we will fail to live from our true centre. We need spiritual practices to help us to get in touch with that inner spiritual dimension of our lives. Meditation is such a practice.

You might be thinking ‘I’m perfectly happy with the way I have prayed all my life – I’m too old to try something new now’. But I would ask you to consider this short poem by Rosemerry Trommer. It goes like this: *after fifty years of spinning, I learn that standing still is another way to dance.* Isn’t that very deep for a simple three line poem: *after fifty years of spinning, I learn that standing still is another way to dance.* After expending so much energy on *doing* – we learn *standing still is another way to dance*; a way of *being* as distinct from a way of *doing*. We discover meditation as a journey into the mystery of our being. Meditation moves our prayer from the mind to the heart and creates a pathway into the mystery of God. Isn’t it a lovely metaphor to imagine prayer as dancing – as something light and joyful, dancing with the Divine!

I am hopeful that over the coming years every parish, as well as every school, will create opportunities for people to meditate. In towns and parishes across Ireland, people come together once a week in small groups to meditate. As well as meditating at home, they gather once a week to meditate together and, over time, begin to share their experience of inner richness with one another. I would love to see that happening here in this parish. Your parish intends to create an opportunity to learn about meditation in the new year and I urge you to

come along and experience it for yourself. To begin a new pilgrimage to the centre of your own being where you will discover anew who you truly are.

I invite you now for the next 60 seconds to be still in body and mind. Because the mind wanders so easily, I invite you to repeat the words 'Be Still And Know' silently in your mind, saying the phrase over and over again. Not thinking about what it means, just taking your attention off of yourself and keeping your silent attention on that phrase 'Be Still and Know' starting now, for the next 60 seconds.

You will find leaflets and bookmarks at the back of the church – please take one home to find out more. I will be across in the Parish Centre after Mass and will be happy to answer any questions you may have. Thank you for listening.