



**Meditatio**

TALKS SERIES 2014 D · OCT- DEC

JOHN MAIN OSB

# Awakening

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Transcript of audio CD *Awakening 2* published 2014

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*Prayer is a self-transcending process. In this deeper sense of self-transcendence, prayer is an unimaginably enriching process; we begin to understand what St Paul meant when he said: 'I live now no longer, but Christ lives in me.'*

## CONTENTS

1. Self transcendence	5
2. The church in today's world	7
3. Prayer and community	11
4. Let the other be	15

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in proclaiming the gospel of  
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# Self-transcendence

Here is a reading from the Gospel of Mark:

*Then he called the people to him, as well as his disciples, and said to them, 'Anyone who wishes to be a follower of mine must leave self behind; he must take up his cross, and come with me. Whoever cares for his own safety is lost; but if a man will let himself be lost for my sake and for the gospel, that man is safe. For what does a man gain by winning the whole world at the cost of his true self?' (Mark 8:34-6)*

The most important thing for all of us in our lives is that we really do learn to be with Jesus and that Jesus is with us; and everything else in our life must take secondary place to this primary search, this primary pilgrimage. The key to what we are called to do, and the key to the greatness of each one of us, the full realisation of our own potentiality is leaving self behind.

The church, like Jesus, exists for others, and its power and effectiveness is in direct proportion to its selflessness, to its self-transcendence. And we are the church, so our power, our effectiveness in proclaiming the gospel of Jesus and the *reality* of Jesus to the world exists in direct proportion to our selflessness, to our capacity to take the searchlight of consciousness off ourselves and put it on the Lord Jesus, which to the world is utter foolishness. To the world it is what Paul called 'foolishness of the cross'. It is only in this spiritual state of being, this spiritual state which is a state of being other-centred, that the church itself can believe what it is meant to proclaim. If we want to speak, and we must speak with authoritative voices about the gospel of Jesus, about Jesus; to communicate him and his gospel, then we have to be in this state of being other-centred, neighbour-centred, Jesus-centred, God-centred.

Because it is then, and only then, that we will be in a state of genuinely experiencing, in the centre of our own being, the loving dynamic of the Good News. And this is the Good News: Jesus has set us free; we possess the liberty of the children of God, free to love him with every power of our being and to communicate his love to the whole world.

I think this is tremendously important, because what we have to proclaim to the world is not a past experience, even something so wonderful as the past experience of Jesus himself dying on the cross, redeeming us. We are not proclaiming a past experience; we are proclaiming a present reality. And that present reality is the reality of the glorified Lord Jesus present in my heart. That is the Good News: The Lord Jesus lives, and he lives in my heart in his resurrected and glorious mode of being.

The church can only proclaim what it is in the state of experiencing. Or to put it slightly differently, the church can only proclaim what it is. We are the church, and our responsibility and our opportunity and our vocation is to proclaim that power of the Lord Jesus as a living reality. But we can only speak of what we know; we can only be what we are. And the state of being that we are summoned to by Jesus is the state of being other-centred, which is of course the state of prayer.

What we have to be very clear of is this, that we, as individuals and as communities, must accept our own level of responsibility. And if our congregation is going to be an effective proclaimer of the word of God in the world today it will be so only insofar as everyone of us puts the Lord Jesus first in our own lives. In other words, if we are going to proclaim the gospel, then the gospel must call us to an encounter and communion with the wonderful reality of God's power at work in creation: the power of the redeeming, sacrificial love of Jesus, and the fundamental reality that all being is interpenetrated with the love and reality of the Holy Spirit ■

## The church in today's world

The danger for the church is that, instead of being turned to the Lord Jesus and to his power, we are constantly considering ourselves, the place of the church in the world today, and so on; being concerned with our own image, our own structures, our own organisation. This is the reason why the church is seen by so many in today's world as largely irrelevant and ineffective, at a time when the general consciousness of all societies in the world has never been more keenly attuned to the basic need of the stabilising power of the enduring spiritual realities. The church has turned to a large extent many barriers towards itself, its own image, its own persona, its own problems, its own structural changes.

In my travels around the world it has often struck me that the church in today's world is like a power company trying to light a city with candles, while in the midst of the city is this power source that would enlighten the whole city and the entire surrounding countryside. And that power as you know is the power of the Lord Jesus in our hearts. This is what we have to understand. We've got to find how we can be united to this power source so that we can be light and refreshment and joy for our own society. Men and women in the world in all sorts of non-Christian societies are coming more and more to realise the importance of some enduring spiritual reality, and our opportunity is to show them that reality right in our own heart. And so what we've got to do, as it were, is to find the right frequency to send out a signal to our lost contemporaries to draw them into the family of the Lord Jesus. And that frequency is nothing other than the light of the Risen Lord in the heart of every being, drawing all of us into this conscious awareness.

We've got to deepen our understanding of the church because the church is composed of those who know this life at the very

centre of their being, which is the centre of all being. We must understand that the church is the living Lord Jesus, the glorified Lord Jesus. The world expects from us confidence and authority – that we proclaim this reality out of our own experience. It is this knowledge, this authentic knowledge that our contemporaries in the world are searching for. And this is the knowledge that St Paul was constantly exhorting the early church to acquire and to deepen. It is a knowledge that is personal.

Let me develop that a little more fully. St Paul speaks of knowledge. And what our contemporaries are seeking for, so it seems to me, is this knowledge that gives meaning to everything that we are; to our whole life. Here is where we must be very modest as we consider our own relationship to this search. As St Paul pointed out to the early Christians, we must pursue this search seriously; something we have to be deeply serious about – not solemn, but serious. And that seriousness will make us ready, each one of us, for the discipline involved. This is the need that every one of us has, that the church has, that the world has. It is a need for discipline, day by day faithfulness to the pilgrimage. If we are going to set out on the path of prayer, then we must be faithful in encountering our Lord. Our discovery of his power and his love at work in our heart must be first in our life.

I travel around quite a bit talking with priests, religious. And everywhere I go I find a sincere desire for prayer, a sincere desire to find the way back. But everywhere too, I find the discipline that is involved in this creates a kind of sadness: 'I would like to do it, but...'

As you know, the Lord Jesus asks us to follow him freely. Jesus asks us to follow him wholly, with our whole heart. Any man can be a part of that life as he leaves self behind. The knowledge that St Paul speaks of cannot be gained as we acquire a knowledge of history or economics or thermodynamics. There is no such thing as a course on prayer or a course on spirituality. In all the courses you have accretions to our memory banks, possessions that we gain, possessions that do not fully enter into the mystery of our own personhood. The real knowledge that St Paul speaks of is of a

totally different kind, totally different order, because the knowledge that he speaks of is the knowledge where the centre of consciousness, the intelligent agent, is not ourselves acquiring, savouring, experiencing, observing. The knowledge that St Paul speaks of is not something we possess but something that possesses us. And here is the marvel of the Christian mystery with which we are entrusted, that we are taken up into the mystery of the Godhead itself. In terms of Christian theology we know fully only because we have been fully understood. Here again is the freeing power of the gospel of Jesus. In his love we are truly known; we are fully taken into the mystery of Christ, of the Godhead.

The strange and redeeming feature of our rather mad world we live in is that somehow so many of the young today, perhaps the not-so-young too, are being led to the threshold of this beautiful spiritual perception: that we can only fully know when we are fully known. We can only be fully known when we leave self behind and allow the other to know us. It is only in allowing ourselves to be known, that we fully know – the central words of the message of Jesus that he who would find his life must lose it.

There are tremendous signs of hope in today's world and in today's church. The church is oceanic. It rises and swells in one place and recedes in another. Those who have left self behind to follow Christ have left the shore and are carried on the ocean, moved by the tide. The great prayer movement that has arisen in the church is one of the great signs of hope. The charismatic houses and the contemplative groups and houses, all point in different ways to the same phenomenon: a deep spiritual hunger. It seems to me that we as religious have a special opportunity and a special responsibility to make our houses houses of prayer, because we are men and women of prayer. And because we *are* men and women of prayer, the atmosphere, the orientation and the priorities of our houses are rooted and founded in the reality of the love and presence of the living Lord Jesus.

One of the things that I found among the young is their veneration for the great religious personalities of our day, men and women like Mother Teresa, Cardinal Suenens, Jean Vanier – people with

real enthusiasm (*en theos*), with the indwelling God powerfully transforming them at the centre of their being. And these great personalities testify to the central power of Christian conviction. The power is this: that once the inner commitment has taken place, once conversion has taken place, then we are, all of us, en route not for the eradication of our personality but for the fulfilment of our personhood. And what we have to show our contemporaries is that if only we have the courage to lose our life, we do indeed find it. This is the message that we've got to proclaim, we've got to communicate. Again, central to the preaching of Jesus is that he came to bring us life, life in all its fullness.

The point of my putting this before you is that the great task for each one of us is to see ourselves and to experience ourselves as the church we speak of; for each one of us to know ourselves as the presence of the living Christ in our world and to respond to it fully, courageously, generously. But, we have to learn to see the church not as some multinational company or international organisation. We have to learn to see it as the living Body of Christ. If we are going to do that, we can only do it if we discover or re-discover, experience or re-experience ourselves as personal witnesses, personal temples of the Holy Spirit. We have to see ourselves as the redeemed and loved of Jesus. ■

## *P* rayer and community

This is a reading from the First Letter of St John:

*It was there from the beginning; we have heard it; we have seen it with our own eyes; we looked upon it, and felt it with our own hands; and it is of this we tell. Our theme is the word of life. This life was made visible; we have seen it and bear our own testimony; we here declare to you the eternal life which dwelt with the Father and was made visible to us. What we have seen and heard we declare to you, so that you and we together may share in a common life, that life which we share with the Father and his Son Jesus Christ. And we write this in order that the joy of us all may be complete. Here is the message we heard from him and pass on to you: that God is light, and in him there is no darkness at all. (1 Jn 1:1-5)*

Perhaps the greatest feature of St Benedict's Rule is that prayer and community are interdependent. Prayer, as I have tried to suggest to you, is in essence learning to pay attention to the Other; and learning to regard the Other not in any self-interested or self-calculating way but simply for the Other's own sake, because in fact the Other is infinitely lovable. In Benedict's vision God and our neighbour are not two entities clamouring for our attention to the detriment of one or the other. God does not demand our love at the expense of our brother. Indeed, love for one another is the deepening of our intrinsic communion with God rather than a dissipation of it. 'He who dwells in love dwells in God'. (1 Jn 4:16) Similarly, the love that we have for one another, properly understood, propels us deeper into the mystery of love itself. To love the God that we cannot see, we must love the brother we can see. And we can see our brother as *brother* precisely because we are convinced that God is our *Father*.

To learn to pray does require a good deal of unlearning. It can

require a good deal of suffering. If we are going to deepen our faith, then we have to learn to leave behind us the prayers of our former life and enter into the mystery of prayer. There is pain too in the discovery that prayer is not a self-centred event but prayer is a self-transcending process, the process of passing over to the Other. We discover of course that prayer in this deeper sense of self-transcendence is an unimaginably enriching process, because as we progress in our prayer we begin to understand that we are learning to view the world, to view all reality, and ourselves, no longer from our own limited viewpoint but from the viewpoint of the Other. We begin to understand what St Paul meant when he said: 'I live now no longer, but Christ lives in me.' (Gal 2:20) In this experience, the pain of change and the pain of growth is not to be compared with the glory we will discover within ourselves when we have the courage to become fully alive, fully alive in Christ. Remember these words of St Irenaeus: 'The glory of God is man fully alive.'

I think there comes a time in the life of every Christian when we have to choose decisively between the infantile prayer of the past, necessarily self-centred, and the prayer of Jesus, the prayer which is going on within us, filling us with the life that takes us beyond ourselves, a life that shatters all the fear-laden barriers that have so far prevented us from being fully ourselves. It is because we are not fully ourselves that we are not capable of becoming fully brothers and sisters to one another; that is the distancing of ourselves from our neighbour – our own fear. And that is the fear that is cast out by the experience of the love of Christ active within us.

We have often heard it said in the past that prayer is a personal matter in which each person tries the various methods – as if there were really various 'methods' – and then chooses the one that suits him or her best. Prayer is the growing awareness of God in Jesus, and our personal prayer and our community prayer are just different aspects of the same growing awareness that we as individuals and as a community become more alive with the life of Christ. Unless we are convinced of this, our own personal prayer can become a self-encapsulating process, and the community prayer and the community life can become a self-encapsulating process too, where the

community simply isolates itself from the outside world. And if our Christian communities are not proclaiming the gospel with the sort of authority and enthusiasm that they should be, it must be because they are not praying; their prayer is not fulfilling this function of making them free men and women, free to proclaim the gospel of Jesus. Our communities must be life-filled fraternities, Spirit-filled brotherhoods and sisterhoods inspiring others by breathing the Spirit into all who come into contact with us.

The thing we must never do is to settle for the inevitable deficiencies that sociologists tell us are the inevitable walk of all social groups. We are not just *any* gathering of people who got together to do any old job. We are the redeemed of Jesus Christ, bound together in love, our hearts beating with the life of the Lord Jesus. A lot of communities who have renewed themselves have gone, perhaps rightly, to sociologists and psychologists, but their insights for us are limited because the Christian community is not just one more social grouping. We are the elect, the anointed, the chosen of Jesus Christ. In other words, we must understand in all humility, and in all reality, what is the nature of our community life and our community commitment one to another. We are not setting out to achieve some sort of ideal psychological, sociological balance. Our vocation is to become transformed and transfigured in Christ Jesus. And we must never forget it.

*Let your minds be remade and your whole nature thus transformed. Adapt yourselves no longer to the pattern of this present world.* (Rom. 12:2)

This is where our prayer is central to grasping the full vigour and the full dimension of our Christian vocation. We must never forget our own sublime dignity as Christ's elect and anointed. And so, our religious communities must become what we are called to be, a fervent assembly of realised, fully conscious human beings, self-emptying disciples, self-transcending brothers and sisters, filled with the Spirit, the Spirit constantly praying in our hearts. This is the sign the world is looking for. They are not looking for boring conglomerations of like-minded, respectable automatons. The world is

looking for communities who are aware of the living and loving Lord Jesus in their midst. How to proclaim this gospel? There is only one way and that is the way of prayer.

This is a discovery we must make, each one of us – an actual discovery of the prayer of the Spirit within our hearts. And we must uncover what our un-remade minds keep covered up because this discovery of the prayer of the Spirit of Jesus within us teaches us that we can transcend all our own limitations. Of course we are limited human beings, but in Jesus those limitations are just swept aside. And if we can discover ourselves as the anointed, as the elect temples of the Holy Spirit, we will learn to reverence ourselves. This again is what we need – not to underestimate ourselves, not to play down our vocation, but look at that vocation with reverence. And in learning to reverence ourselves, we learn to reverence others, to love ourselves and to love others, to love all men and all women. And to proclaim this gospel throughout the world; proclaim to people that they are the anointed and holy temples of the Lord. ■

## *L*et the other be

I suggested to you that in our prayer we let God *be*; we adore Him as He is, all-holy, all-lovable, all-compassionate, all-forgiving; and we do not try to manipulate Him. In our prayer we bow down in adoration. Do not dispel God with our clever words or empty formulas. We learn to worship from the depth of our spirit in silence and in awe. And in our prayer, too, we learn to let our neighbour be. We learn not to try to manipulate our neighbour either, but rather to reverence and to love them just as we reverence and love the Lord our God. Because of this, prayer is a good school of community. In and through our common devotion to prayer, we find the true glory of Christian community as an assembly of elect, anointed brothers and sisters living with one another in profound and loving respect.

The Christian community is in essence the experience of people living with those who are sensitively attuned one to the other on the wavelength of the same Spirit who has called each one of us to fullness of life. In others, I recognise the same Spirit that lives in my own heart, the Spirit that constitutes my real self. In this recognition of the other person – the recognition which remakes our minds – the other person comes into being as he or she really is; the real self of the other emerges, not some mere manipulated extension of my mind. In other words, when we recognise the Spirit in the other, the other moves and acts out of his or her own integral reality, no longer as some creature of my own construction. And even if our ideas or our principles clash, they are maintained in a real unity by this mutual recognition of the essential reality in each other. Indeed the mutually supporting and suffering dynamic of Christ's mystical body has just this objective: that we help one another to realise our own essential being.

True community consists in the process whereby we each draw

the other into the light of true being, each supporting one another in achieving our vocation of becoming the persons we are called to be. In this process, we share a deepening experience of the really joyous quality of life and living, as we discover more and more of the fullness of life in this loving faith that we share with our brothers and sisters. The prerequisite of this process is a mutual recognition of our own and of each other's infinite importance, infinite value. And this infinite importance and infinite value that we possess, we possess because we possess the indwelling Spirit of God. We recognise these as present realities and our capacity to experience and to respond to the reality of the other directly depends upon our capacity to let the other be.

There is something in all of us that wants to control the other, to diffuse the power that we apprehend in the other, and to protect ourselves from the transforming power of that apprehension. What we seek to do is to try to neutralise the otherness by imposing on it our own identity. So we are always getting people to conform to what we think we should be like and try to make others like ourselves.

The great sin of idolatry is to try to create our own God in our own image and likeness. It is this deep fear of the other, particularly the incomprehensible otherness of God, that underlies so much of our timidity as we approach religious truths. So we try to control God by our prayers and formulas rather than encountering God in his awesome difference from ourselves; and we construct this toy model of God in our own psychic and emotional image. In doing this, we debase and lose ourselves, surrendering ourselves and the glory of our humanity for the likeness of a golden calf. But the truth is so much more marvellous. God is not a reflection of our own narrow consciousness, but we ourselves with our own infinite potential to be realised, are the reflection, the image and likeness of the God we worship. The call of the New Testament, the call of Jesus, is to the worship of this transcendent God who is totally Other from ourselves, the God who is life. It's the fear of otherness that causes us to go in for the sort of cosy chats with God, just to make Him as it were a more convenient shoulder to cry on.

Christianity is a hope-filled response, a response of the human

heart where the human heart experiences itself as unredeemed, as unloved. And the fullness of the response, the fullness of Christian response is not a process of self-torturing or self-interrogation or self-analysis. The fullness of the Christian response is met in the person of Jesus Christ, Jesus Christ our redeemer, the one who saves us and the one who lives, the Risen Christ, delivering us from our own narrowness, from our own emptiness. It is in the person of Christ that we encounter in our own hearts that we find the ultimate hope: the divine person of the Risen Lord Jesus. In our meditation, as we learn to say the mantra with greater and greater fidelity, we go beyond ourselves and enter into this personhood, the personhood of the Lord Jesus. So, as individuals and as communities, our vocation is to transcend the limitations of our divided, fear-ridden selves, and to open ourselves to the transforming and transfiguring reality in which we have our true being, namely, the redemptive love of the Risen Lord Jesus. ■

*If only we have the courage  
to lose our life, we do indeed  
find it. Central to the preaching  
of Jesus is that he came to bring  
us life, life in all its fullness.  
The great task for each one  
of us is to know ourselves as  
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in our world, and to respond  
to it fully, courageously,  
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