

## IS THE MANTRA PRAYER?

By Gerry Pierse

### An oft-asked question: “Is the mantra really prayer?”

1. My first answer is a story.
2. There was a village by a lake that had a beautiful church and bell tower. However, during a geological movement of the earth, the whole village got buried in the water.
3. Later, a tradition grew up in the place that sometimes the ringing of the church bells could be heard from the shore.
4. A holy man spent a whole month on the shore listening intently for the bells, but he never heard them. He decided to abandon his quest.
5. As he could not hear the sound of the bells, he decided, on his last day, just to listen to the sound of the waves. And as he listened to the sound of the waves, it was then he heard the sound of the bells.

### When we seek the transcendent, we do *not* find it.

1. *When we listen to the immediate, what is around us, we hear the transcendent, what is beyond us.*
2. I think this is what happens when we say the mantra. We are present to the present moment in the here-and-now, and then we are also present to God, reality itself.
3. However, when we try to grasp this moment and this reality for itself, we lose it. This truth is borne out by many New Testament stories.
4. At the transfiguration, Peter wanted to build tabernacles to retain the moment of transfiguration, to grasp the moment of the presence of God, but Mark tells us it was foolish talk, “He did not know what to say, for they were terrified” (Mark 9:6 NRSV).
5. *The presence of the risen Lord, the Mystical Christ, is never known at the time of his presence.*
6. This is shown clearly in the story of the disciples on the road to Emmaus. Jesus joins the depressed disciples, but they do not recognize him. He explains the scriptures to them, and again they do not recognize him. It is only in the breaking of the bread that they recognize him, and then he is gone. It is only at this point, in retrospect, that they see that he has been with them all the time: “Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?” (Luke 24:32 NRSV)

### Praying the mantra . . .

1. In praying the mantra, we are not aware of Christ; we are only present to the mantra.
2. In retrospect, we can see that in being present to the mantra we are present at our own centre – and when we are present there, we are where the Spirit of Christ is.
3. And, since Christ is in the Father, so we are present to God, in a sense, without knowing it.
4. The only way we can be present to God is “without knowing it”; we are praying “without knowing it”.
5. So, it is true to say that when we know that we are praying, we cease to pray – just as a saint ceases to be a saint when he knows that he is a saint.
6. Praying the mantra, being present without knowing it, tells us also about how Christ is present when we serve others.

### How is Christ present when we serve others?

1. There is a spirituality that says that we should love Christ in others, and that we should see Christ in others.
2. The problem about this is that we may be using others to get to Christ. So, we do not love others for their own sakes but only because they bring us to Christ. We make them into “things” that bring us to Christ.
3. It seems to me to be much more true and wholesome to love others, period. When we love others, we look at the human face, we see the brokenness, we respond to the person, and we find Christ.
4. I think this is what St Augustine meant when he said: “When you minister to the sick, it is Christ ministering to Christ”.
5. Christ in you ministers to the sick, and Christ in the sick ministers to you. Efforts to be “religious”, when what we are called to be is “human”, can make our whole presence to others quite phoney.

### In conclusion . . .

1. The mantra, then, is prayer because it makes us present to the transcendent while not grasping it.
2. Praying the mantra prepares us to minister to Christ, a Christ who is present in all human situations, but whose presence can best be seen in retrospect.

Notes in outline produced by Alex Peck (aepeck77@yahoo.com.au); May 20, 2009.

Source: Fr. Gerry Pierse, “The Prayer That Jesus Taught”, *Meditatio Talks, Series B, 2006 (April– June)*.  
(<http://www.wccm.org/item.asp?recordid=meditatiolisten&pagestyle=default>)