

Prayer to Jesus

No, it is nothing new to feel left behind and vulnerable, a fuddy-duddy marking out our last steps of time. But our forebears knew the answer, and we can know it too. **JESUS** is our solace and rescuer, our dependability, so that, linked with the great living chain of those who have gone before, we, in our turn, can join in saying:

*'Gainst these perils I hold this counsel good,
To pray for Jesus' mercy on our knee.*

The Jesus we have known and loved, the Jesus to whom we look in the old familiar ways, will never let us down, as we pray to him from the heart.



The old is good, the familiar. So much is changing around us that we lose our ground and need an anchor, as much in our life as followers of Jesus as in any other sphere. Many of the things we grew up with seem to have been swept away and it is hard to acclimatise. All the same Jesus Christ does remain the same yesterday, today and for ever, despite the ups and downs of our feelings. Some of the old hymns we used to sing can actually speak quite eloquently to us now in ways we would once never have dreamed of:

*Change and decay in all around I see;
O Thou who changest not, abide with me!*

or, by contrast, for our encouragement:

*We have an anchor that keeps the soul
Steadfast and sure while the billows roll;
Fastened to the Rock that cannot move,
Grounded firm and deep in the Saviour's love!*

Of course this is the thing about our faith: it is utterly dependable because eternally valid. And yet it is also tinged with a kind of perennial newness as we discover more and more facets of the merciful love, beauty and



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holiness of our infinite God. There are never enough ways to praise him, and we must not scorn any of them. However, they are not all for everyone. Sometimes there is need for some of us at least to look back, to find again, or discover for the first time, hidden treasures from years gone by. Here again it is the old hymns that can answer our need, part and parcel as they are of our English Christian heritage. We can never sever ourselves completely from our roots.

There is one old favourite that easily comes to mind, a hymn usually attributed to St. Bernard of Clairvaux (1091-1153). The opening verse in most hymn books begins ‘*Jesu, the very thought of thee, with sweetness fills my breast*’ and there can be anything up to fifteen stanzas provided. Surprisingly though, scholarly people tell us that the verses were actually written slightly later than St. Bernard’s time and anyway most probably in England. Moreover there are forty two verses all told! Thus there is a *lot* of hidden treasure to discover here and to enjoy, though the original of course is in latin and most of us must rely on translators to help us out. Father Guy Bowden (20th century Anglican priest and one time Canon of Truro Cathedral) made his own translation of at least parts of the ‘*Jesu Dulcis Memoria*’, as it is termed in the original. The section which he entitles ‘Prayer’ is well worth exploring together. It is a strong encouragement to turn to Jesus consistently, even when he perhaps seems absent, and to trust him to bring peace to our hearts despite our sense of sinfulness:

*Jesus, in prayer I seek thy face,
I seek thee and thy cleansing grace.
Thou in my soul dost make my prayer:
I need not seek thee; thou art there.*

*And if thy grace seem far away,
Grant me to know thou art – and pray,
“Not what I will, but what thou wilt.”
Make in my will thy Presence felt.*

*When I am tempted, may I see
Jesus yet reigning from the Tree:*

mugging and the rest, never mind war and terrorist attacks, pollution, the threat of famine and the fear of global warming:

*Do mercy, Jesu, ere that we hence pace
Out of this perilous, dreadful pilgrimage,
Beset with brigandage in every place,
With fell intent to hinder our passage:*

On the individual level too there is the constant fear of advancing age and increasing limitations, of sickness and disablement – yes of death itself. We have to be honest and recognise our need to pray to Jesus for ourselves – to cry to him, to explode sometimes in indignation at the seeming injustices of life, the enigma of suffering in all its atrocious forms. Jesus hears and understands:

*I, above all, for I am fallen on age,
And sore enfeebled of old infirmity,
Cry unto Jesu for my sore outrage,
With all my heart thus kneeling on my knee.*

In our anguish for ourselves and all the pain of humanity and the universe, we beg that the suffering and death of Jesus should not have been wasted effort since our salvation was bought at the cost of his blood, (1 Peter 1:18):

*Let not be lost that thou has bought so dear,
Not with silver or gold, but with thy precious blood;*

Life is tenuous, full of uncertainty, and all the powers of darkness seem to be out to trip us up – even the world, nature itself looks to be against us. It is hard to keep pace, as things move from one extreme to the other – drought and flooding, heat and excessive cold, with all the seasons out of joint and man-made technology leaving us streets behind as others race ahead beyond our ken:

*Our flesh is frail and short our sojourn here,
The serpent old malicious is of mood.
The world unstable is, now ebb, now flood,
All things conclude in mutability.*

It is no longer so much *we* who stand at the cross seeking to share the sufferings of Jesus. Our own suffering for his sake, our awareness of our sinfulness, overwhelms us. We beg that Jesus will himself stand by *us* and give us his peace deep within so that we can bear to face up to his purgatorial cleansing, the light, which like the divine fire, both wounds and heals. Only then will we be made fit to share in the eternal Light of his Love which will know no changing moods of light and darkness, bitter aloneness or joy of fellowship.

Thank you Father Bowden, and the anonymous author of our latin hymn all those centuries ago. We have a kinship in Jesus that time cannot erase. But of course it has always been true that the changes brought about by time do threaten us. Our forebears knew where to turn in the face of such fears – always to Jesus. There are many hymns and prayers, in our English tradition, in honour of the name and person of Jesus, calling on and seeking his protection. Among these we might include extracts on ‘The Name of Jesus’ from what is known as ‘Lydgate’s Testament’ (Trinity College Cambridge M.S. about 1430). It seems to speak meaningfully to the anxieties of our present age six hundred years on. We recognise the wisdom of complying with our Lord’s injunction to pray to him, in the secret place of our own room, against the manifold evils that threaten both us and our world. It is not a selfish prayer and the name of Jesus becomes our strong protection. We are at one here with Christian tradition from the earliest days:

*Within my closet and in my little couch,
O blessed Jesu, and by my bedside,
So that no fiend or enemy shall me touch,
The name of Jesu shall with me abide.
My lode-star is he and my sovereign good,
Throughout this world, whether by land or sea;
O Jesu, Jesu, for all folk provide,
Who to thy name devoutly bow the knee.*

Life is short and full of unknown hazards. So much appears to be set against us. Even our fellow human beings can seem intent on overriding us and running us down, for their own selfish ends – robbery, fraud,

*Rather than pierce with sin thy side,
Let me with thee be crucified.*

*Stand by me, Lord, my sentinel:
Thy Peace within my spirit dwell.
The sin that shrouds me still in night
Purge with thy pure and dazzling light.*

*Jesus, be now our joy in thee,
That soon thy Glory we may see,
As thou hast promised, and adore
Thy changeless Love for evermore.*

Are things very different now from the 12th or 13th centuries when these verses were first composed? We too seek our Lord in prayer, calling on his name, for we know our need of his mercy and healing. We try hard, wind ourselves up, then suddenly it is given us to see that Jesus is so close that we are actually missing seeing him. He is always in our hearts making our prayer for us, there all the time.

That is a blissful moment, a time of release. We bask and let go. And yet, where *is* Jesus, he seems now to have slipped away again? That calls for a different kind of prayer. “Grant me to know thou art” is our urgent plea. There is no other way of knowing that God actually is except by the hidden and inner gift of faith that he grants to us. It is no longer a question of feelings but of will – the naked intention to believe, by God’s enabling. By acting in us, and making belief in himself humanly possible, God – Jesus – makes his presence known to us. We are growing up spiritually.

It is a hard struggle, full of temptations and pitfalls, but those are the moments to look up and see Jesus radiant and triumphant even in the midst of his sufferings on the Cross. This becomes our inspiration to share in his sufferings to the degree he appoints, without seeking to come down from our own particular cross. We don’t let ourselves look back and hanker after the first blissful moments of breakthrough now seemingly vanished. We continue to grow spiritually . . .