**Fruitful Meditation**

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Christian meditation presupposes three very important truths. The first is the mysterious presence of the risen Lord Jesus with his disciples. It rests on the promise given by him in Matt. 28:20: “I am with you always to the close of the age.” This fact makes it different from these techniques of meditation which either relive past events or visualise a desirable scenario or merely empty the mind. When we meditate on Jesus, we aren't playing mind games; we don't fantasise and imagine unrealities. We envisage what we know to be true. We interact with Christ who is invisibly present with us, who would be visible and audible to us if only we had eyes to see and ears to hear. Thus, when we meditate on a story from the gospels, we listen to the risen Lord Jesus who speaks to us, just as he spoke to people when he was visibly and palpably present with them 2,000 years ago.

The second presupposition for Christian meditation is the life-giving power of his word (John 6:63). This truth is the foundation for the teaching and practise of meditation in our Lutheran tradition. Unlike human words which accomplish little or nothing, Christ's word is powerful and effective. It does what it says. So, when Jesus speaks of healing and forgiveness, he actually heals and forgives people through his word. He speaks with authority and power. His words are active and performative because they are inspired by the Holy Spirit. Through his word Jesus gives his Holy Spirit and grants eternal life to those who trust in him (John 6:68). His Spirit and his word belong together and work together. Through meditation on Christ's word they receive his Holy Spirit and experience the power of the Spirit in their lives.

In his gospel Luke teaches about the effect of meditation on God's word by reporting a puzzling exchange between Jesus and a woman in the crowd of bystanders. In 11:27, 28 we read how a woman congratulated Jesus by exclaiming: “Blessed is the womb that bore you, and the breasts that you sucked.” To this Jesus replies rather sharply: “Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and keep it.” In this response Jesus compares those who are born of earthly mothers with those who have been given rebirth through God's word. Babies, who receive physical life in and through their mothers' wombs, are nourished and kept alive by milk from their mothers' breasts. The word of God, spoken by Jesus, is our spiritual womb and our spiritual breasts. By hearing that word, we receive eternal life; by meditating on that word and keeping it in our hearts, we receive nourishment from it. Like infants we feed on God's word and grow up as children of God.

In keeping with this understanding of meditation, medieval pictures rather grotesquely painted breasts on the Scriptures with people breastfeeding from them. Those who ponder the life-giving word of God are truly blessed, because, by meditating on it and keeping it in their hearts, they receive its life-giving power and experience its life-sustaining nurture.

The third presupposition for the practice of Christian meditation, as taught the Reformation, is the doctrine of justification by grace through faith in Christ and his word. The connection between justification by grace and meditation is developed most clearly by Luther in his second commentary on Psalm 1. He notes that delight in God's word leads to meditation on it. The problem is that those who lack the assurance of salvation fear and despise his word, because it reveals their guilt and makes them try to justify themselves before God. The righteous, however, who are sure of God's approval and depend on Christ for their salvation, delight in God's word, because it justifies them and brings blessings of God for them to enjoy. So meditation is an exercise of their faith in Christ; through it those who believe in him and his word receive the gifts of God and have him do his work in them. Faith in Christ is therefore the presupposition for fruitful meditation on God's word. By faith meditation becomes an experience of God's grace rather than a futile attempt at self-justification and spiritual self-improvement.

This understanding of Christ's presence and of faith in his word resulted in a very simple and powerful form of meditation on the gospels in the Lutheran Church. It is described most simply and eloquently by Martin Luther in a pamphlet on *A Brief Instruction on What to Look for and Expect in the Gospels* from 1521. He says:

‘When you open the book containing the gospels and read or hear how Christ comes here or there, or how someone is brought to him, you should therein perceive the sermon or the gospel through which he is coming to you, or you are being brought to him. For the preaching of the gospel is nothing else than Christ coming to us, or we being brought to him. When you see how he works, however, and how he helps everyone to whom he comes or who is brought to him, then rest assured that faith is accomplishing this in you and that he is offering your soul exactly the same sort of help and favor through the gospel. If you pause here and let him do you good, that is, if you believe that he benefits and helps you, then you really have it. Then Christ is yours, presented to you as a gift.’

By meditating on the stories of Jesus we receive him as he comes to us and helps us.

Since Christian meditation depends on Christ and his word for its effect, we need to be wary of any free-floating, disincarnate method of meditation, dissociated from the Scriptures, public worship, and prayer. It is therefore best to begin a time of meditation with prayer which acknowledges the presence of the Triune God and seeks guidance from the Holy Spirit. The practice of meditation itself, whatever form it may take, should always be governed by the Scriptures. Like a lamp they enlighten our hearts as we meditate; like a compass they give us our bearings in meditation; like a touchstone they reveal whether what we receive is from the Holy Spirit or the evil spirit. Those who invoke the Triune God and rely on his word for guidance are protected against deception by the devil and attack by the powers of darkness. They can be sure that their meditation is pleasing to God and fruitful for them.

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