

## Omphalopsychoi etc.

2 Peter 1:16-19

One of the most amazingly popular programmes on the radio - at least I presume it is so, because it has been going for so many years - is Round Britain Quiz. You remember, it is a quiz in which incredibly clever people are asked crossword-clue style questions like "How would you connect a dessert to please a baker, a literary sister, and the foreign partner of an insane monarch?" The answer would of course come back very quickly - "Charlotte" - the dessert like an apple charlotte, Charlotte Bronte, sister of Anne and Emily, and Queen Charlotte, wife of George III.

Well, on a day when we think about the Transfiguration, I got myself into a Round Britain Quiz situation. Let me pose you a similar question which got into my head: "What is the connection between someone who contemplates their navel, a famous ten word prayer, and the Feast of the Transfiguration?" The answer is??? - I won't expect a forest of hands to be anxious to share - "Hesychast". Of course, you say!!!!

Often on that quiz, they spend more time explaining how they got their answer than actually giving it. So I will do some unpacking of my little conundrum, and then see what it all has to say to us.

Someone who contemplates their navel: it is an expression I have been familiar with without ever knowing its origin. I suppose I thought it was something to do with yoga, and Buddhist meditation. But no - apparently it has a Christian origin in the c.14th. It was coined by a man who rejoiced in the name of Barlaam, in his criticism of a group of Christians who had developed a technique of meditation which involved, amongst other things - and I quote - "resting your beard on your chest and directing your bodily eye together with your entire intellect towards the middle of your belly, that is, towards your navel". And this was to be done sitting on a low stool about 9 inches high, with your shoulders bowed and your back bent. It was, and was intended to be, quite uncomfortable. People who did that were called omphalopsychoi.

So let me move on to the second part of the quiz question - what about the famous ten word prayer? Well, it comes in different versions, and we may argue about the number of words, but what was in mind was the so-called "Jesus Prayer". And these people sitting contemplating their navel should then recite the Jesus prayer, in time with your breathing. The words are "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me."

And the last element in the question was the connection with the Transfiguration. Well, these men, contemplating their navel, and saying the Jesus prayer, were attempting so to still their minds and concentrate on God, that they would gain a vision of the divine light -which St Gregory Palamas, who developed these ideas, identified with the light that surrounded Jesus on the Mount of the

Transfiguration. He taught that it was not ordinary light, created light, but a form of the energy of God. No-one could ever see all that light, because it was infinite, like God. It is essentially mysterious. They were fond of quoting Dionysius the Areopagite, who talked of the "deep and dazzling darkness" in God.

And the name of these monks who practised these things in the c.14th became known as the Hesychasts - and the technique was known as 'Hesychasm'. It derives from a Greek word meaning "quiet" or "stillness". It was controversial in its day, but was affirmed as proper by three Councils in Constantinople in 1341, 1347 and 1351, and has remained in some form or other a part of orthodox spirituality ever since. Indeed it has been very heavily revived in our time.

So what has this to do with us? Again let me take the three elements I have mentioned, and see where they take us. Bodily posture is the first. There is much more thought given to this today in all Christian circles. Kneeling to pray is just the bodily posture we have been brought up with. It has no more authority than that. Jews have always prayed standing up, and that has also been the Orthodox tradition, and indeed in many continental churches. There was a vogue a few years ago for using "Prayer Stalks" - little low seats on which you can sit/kneel at the same time. The way we are - sitting, standing or whatever, *does* affect our prayers. The Hesychasts deliberately made themselves uncomfortable. More often people have tried to find a posture which is both comfortable and alert. And similarly, there is today a new awakening of the allowing our whole being to be involved in prayer - not just our minds, or our lips. So the "prayer of the body" as it is sometimes called, is something we can work at. Their technique was designed to make themselves aware of their body, so that then they could go beyond it, into God. That is a good principle - we offer our souls and bodies, we say week by week at Communion.

Then there was the Jesus prayer, and its use. Modern Orthodox practice is to say "Lord Jesus Christ Son of God", whilst breathing in, and "have mercy on me" whilst breathing out. But there are all sorts of variations. The point of the exercise was to acquire inner simplicity and stillness, free from images and discursive thinking. The rhythm of breathing and prayer become as one. So that prayer is to be made continuous, and will bring with it, according to Gregory "a feeling of warmth in the heart". This is all a very salutary reminder to us Western Christians, that we are far too prone to make our prayers very intellectual. We look for beautiful words and thoughts. We make lists of the things that we should pray for. Intercession, praying for others, is perfectly right and proper, but it is only one part of what prayer can mean. And what this kind of prayer is offering is something we are much less in touch with because of the accident of where we have been brought up. It is a way of so concentrating on Jesus, that what we say we believe (with our minds) that he is with us, is found to be a spiritual reality. It has such simplicity that it is available to us when our minds are clouded and confused. I recall when I was a curate talking to a woman in hospital who said she had found tremendous help from using the Jesus prayer whilst being wheeled down for an operation. With her brain befuddled with the pre-med, this was in fact the only kind of prayer she could make, but it was also the perfect one - she was able to focus on Jesus rather than

herself, and that gave her tremendous peace. So there is another aspect of praying that you might want to experiment with, if it is new to you.

Then lastly there is the connection with the Transfiguration. This is the business of the Light of God which was the purpose of the prayer. I think this is something we have to take very seriously. You remember the story of Moses' face shining after he had met with God, and how he veiled his face. The people saw a reflected light - and light signifying the presence of God was basic to their thinking. The events on Mount Tabor, or wherever the Transfiguration took place, were in keeping with that tradition. Why should we dissociate the body and the soul in the way we often do? If we have spent time with God, we ought to be 'Lit up' in some way or other. Why should not our bodies reflect the encounter we have had? There have been remarkable examples of this with the appearances of stigmata on a few saintly people - they bear physically the wounds of Christ. We have probably all met someone who really does appear to "shine" with an inner holiness. But we say to everyone when they are baptised "shine as a light in the world" and give them a candle to remind them of that. We are not asking them to shine with their own light, but to reflect the light of Christ who is the Light of the World. St Paul, writing to the Corinthians, and in the context of talking about Moses' shining face says "All of us, then, reflect the glory of the Lord with uncovered faces; and that same glory, coming from the Lord, who is the Spirit, transforms us into his likeness in an ever greater degree of glory." In our New Testament lesson this morning, Peter looks forward to the time when the day dawns, and the light of the morning star shines in our hearts. But that light which is our goal, is also a light that in some measure is a light we can see and use today. The transfiguration of Jesus showed his glory to the disciples. And that glory is one we have been called to share. The Hesychasts were just some of those who have shown that we can glimpse that glory here and now.