



Transformed in **CHRIST** JOHN MAIN OSB Talks from WORD MADE FLESH 2

We are the most ordinary people, yet each of us has this extraordinary destiny to be transformed in Christ.

Transcript of selections from Word Made Flesh

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Each of us is called uniquely to open our hearts to the supreme reality of God's love for us, to the reality of our own personal destiny. And the destiny each of us has is to full union with God, 'to share the very being of God'.

Transformed in Christ

I want to try to sketch in for you what is the essential call of Christ for each of us. To be a Christian, I think, means to have faith in Jesus, and to have faith in him means to be open to his power; and to be open to his power also requires faith because it is a transforming power. His power, if you look at St Paul and St John and St Peter, is nothing less than his glory – the light that shines throughout the universe and most extraordinarily, the light that shines in our hearts. Meditation is the way to the most profound openness to this power, to this light, to this glory, of which we are capable in this life. But everybody who is interested in meditation or feels attracted to meditation should understand that once this power begins to have its way, once this light really begins to shine in our hearts, we are transformed and transfigured because we begin to live our lives out of this vitalising power, power that is the glory of Jesus: his love.

Theologically speaking, you can say that Jesus is the one who is pure receptivity, wholly open to the love of the Father, and we are invited to be receptive to his love and to return with him to the Father. Now, none of us can understand that; all this is pure words and they have a limited value. But each one of us is called to be open to this not as words, not as concepts, not as ideas, but as a reality. To be open to it we require simple discipline, simple faith: a simplicity to return to our word day after day, morning after morning, evening after evening; and in returning to it, in those times of meditation, to be as faithful to it as we can. In that faithfulness we learn faith: We learn to go into the dark, to go into the silence where there is no sound, and to go deeper and deeper into the silence. deeper and deeper into the mystery of God. In our meditation we learn, as it were, to launch out into the deep. As Paul tells us, from those depths comes to us power and glory. And when Paul wants to describe that power to us, he describes it as the power of the Resurrection, the power of new life given back to Jesus, a new life

that enthroned him in glory forever. And that new life and glory and power are ours. That's the astonishing mystery, that here we are, a group of the most ordinary people, and yet each of us has this extraordinary destiny to be transformed in Christ, if only we will become mindful, if only we will realise from our own experience what has been achieved for us in Jesus.

Jesus in the New Testament comes through to us as the archetypal man of faith. And it is his faithfulness that raises him to glory. I think there is nothing more important for us to try to understand than that our meditation is a way of faith. We must become faithful. And it is that way of faith that leads us to share in the glory of Christ, the glory that is enthroned in the heart of each of us, the glory that gradually transforms each one of us, if only we give it full sway and allow its power to become supreme in our heart. It is this power of Jesus himself that enables us to be one with him in suffering, in death, and in resurrection to new life, limitless life. That's the experience of Christian prayer.

The experience of Christian prayer is the experience of utterly transforming liberty in the power of Jesus fully released within our hearts. And it's our destiny to share fully with Christ, to share his glory, his radiance, the glory of his love, the glory of his power.

Why meditation is so important is that it is nothing less than the burning brilliance of Jesus that burns away our ego. It's his glory that burns away our own sinfulness, our own imprisonment in illusion, in egoism. The Christian way is not to concentrate on our egoism, but to allow the glory of Christ to burn it away, to reveal it as the sham that it is and to dissipate it entirely. This is what Christian prayer is about – it's about living our life in harmony with the depths of the mystery of God, and so, being rooted in joy, being rooted in love, because we are rooted in reality, the only reality that there is: the reality that is God who is love. And his power, his glory are to be found within our heart. That's what meditation is about; that's what the pilgrimage is about: It's the pilgrimage to our own heart so that we may be made one with God.

This is St Paul writing to the Ephesians:

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has bestowed on us in Christ every spiritual blessing in the heavenly realms. In Christ, he chose us before the world was founded, to be dedicated, to be without blemish

in his sight, to be full of love; and he destined us — such was his will and pleasure — to be accepted as his children through Jesus Christ, that the glory of his gracious gift, so graciously bestowed on us in his beloved, might redound to his praise... Therein lies the richness of God's free grace lavished upon us, imparting full wisdom and insight. (Eph 1:3-8)

What the Tradition Tells Us

The tradition tells us that Jesus lives in our hearts. We have all read that in the scriptures; we all know it at one level. Let us listen to St Paul here:

Continually, while still alive, we are being surrendered into the hands of death, for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be revealed in this mortal body of ours. (2 cor 4:11)

That's the conviction of the early Church, that the life of Jesus is being progressively and more profoundly revealed within each one of us. That being the essential theology, what is our response to that?

In the tradition that we speak out of – the tradition of the prayer of John Cassian and the Desert, and the Benedictine tradition particularly as enshrined in *The Cloud of Unknowing* written in the fourteenth century in England, and the writings of Abbot Chapman in the twentieth century in England – all that tradition over the centuries says to us that the supreme task for every life that would be fully alive, fully human, is to be as open as we can be to that life of Jesus within us. That, we have to keep absolutely clear because Christianity isn't in essence a theory or a theology; it is, in essence, openness to the person of Jesus Christ, and in that openness being taken by him to the Father. Christianity is the religion of transcendence, transcending our own limited life and entering into the limitless life of God.

Now, what does the tradition tell us about the way? The tradition tells us we must learn to be disciplined. We must learn to leave self behind. Which is another way of saying we must learn to leave the limitations of self behind, and we must be open to the being of God. And make no mistake about it; Christianity proclaims an astonishing doctrine. St Paul writes:

Indeed, it is for your sake that all things are ordered, so that, as the abounding grace of God is shared by more and more, the greater may be the cause of thanksgiving that ascends to the glory of God. (2 Cor 4:15)

This is the doctrine that we have to be open to; this is the person we have to be open to. And the tradition tells us that we must learn discipline and we must learn simplicity. Hence the need for our daily mediation, every morning and every evening. During the time of our meditation to learn to be profoundly silent, and that we do by reciting our word.

We sit down, we sit comfortably with the spine upright; close our eyes lightly; and then begin to say interiorly in our hearts, our word. The word I recommend you to say is the word *maranatha*. Mara-na-tha – four equally stressed syllables. And this is the difficulty for us, to learn to be content with just that simple repetition of this Aramaic word, the language that Jesus himself spoke, the oldest prayer in the Church: 'Come Lord. Come Lord Jesus, Ma-ra-na-tha.' I recommend you to say it in Aramaic, using the Aramaic form rather than the English so that you have the least opportunity to have any image in your mind.

Meditating is not thinking about God, not thinking about theology, or thinking about religion. Meditating is something much greater than that; it is *being* with God. When you begin, you have to take that on faith, and you take it on the faith of godly men and women throughout the ages who have confronted that basic theology that Jesus lives and that he lives in our hearts. They've confronted it, and they've sought to make the truth of it the main thrust of their lives. And that is their tradition.

The author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* says: 'Confine the whole activity of your being to the recital of one little word.' The recitation of the word will teach you many things. It will teach you humility and it will teach you poverty if you surrender all the richness of words, all your ideas, to be open to *the* supreme reality: the infinity of God that cannot be captured in any concept, in any idea, in any intellectual formula, but that can be encountered in your own heart if in the depth of your being you are open to the being of God. The humility that is required and the discipline that is required are given to you, if only you will make yourself available.

Learning to pray is not a matter of listening to talks on prayer or reading books on prayer. It can only happen if you pray. And all we can do in our prayer is to dispose ourselves. The gift is given; the Spirit is in your heart. All prayer is pure gift of God given to us, and given to us with infinite generosity. God can only give infinitely generously. And meditating, making that time available in the morning and in the evening, two little half-hours a day, is a token of our generosity; a token of our openness to the infinite generosity of God. I recommend you to try to see those times as God's times not as yours, not at your disposition, not times when you are looking for fulfilment, insight, holiness, but times that you dedicate fully, generously and totally to God. I think you will find that helpful in building up your fidelity.

Two things are necessary: to be faithful every day to your meditation every morning and every evening, and to be faithful during your meditation to the recitation of the word from the beginning to the end.

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Uniqueness of Our Creation

One of the greatest problems that afflict our society is that so many people in it feel that they are not fully alive, feel that they are not fully authentic as human beings. And so many of us, as it were, spend our lives responding to other people's goals for us – to society's goals for us, to the advertising industry's goals for us. But the Christian revelation says to each of us that our destiny is far more personal than that. Each of us is summoned to fullness of life, fullness of our own life in the mystery of God.

How are we to break out of the enclosed circle of inauthenticity, of lifelessness? There is only one way that I know of, and that is the basic message of the New Testament: to be fully open to the gift of eternal life; to understand the uniqueness of our own creation; to understand that each of us does have an infinite value, an infinite importance. If you reflect only for a moment, you can see how drastically the world would be changed, our own society changed, our own lives changed, if each of us could really understand the uniqueness, the dignity and the wonder of the gift of our own being. And it was to communicate this reality to us that Jesus came. This was the message of his life and of his death – that each one of us was of such importance and value that God sent his only Son to die for us. And the Crucifixion is the divine plea to us to understand the wonder of our own creation, the dignity of the gift of our own life. Listen to the First Letter of John:

He who believes in the Son of God has this testimony in his own heart... The witness is this: that God has given us eternal life, and that this life is found in his Son. (1 Jn 5:10-11)

The invitation that each of us has is to be open to this life in our own heart, and until we are open to it, we cannot live our life fully, wholly, richly, fulfillingly. But each of us has to discover that ourselves. Other peoples' experience can be inspiring, instructive, but other people's experience can never substitute for our own experience. Each of us is called uniquely to open our hearts to the

supreme reality of God's love for us, to the supreme reality of our own personal destiny. And the astonishing thing about the Christian proclamation is that the destiny each of us has is to full union with God; as Peter puts it in his Second Letter, 'to share the very being of God'. The mystery is that each of us shares it uniquely. It is your sharing of it that is your destiny, my sharing of it that is my destiny. To know the love of God 'though it is beyond knowledge', is what each one of us is summoned to.

As more and more thinkers in our society are coming to realise, the basic problems in our society are in essence spiritual problems. The basic problem is for each us to know who we are, for each of us to understand what our potential is, and for each of us to realise that potential in the love of God. And this is precisely what meditation is about: not being content to live as one removed from spiritual reality, not being content to read about it or to study it or to listen to other people talking about it, but to understand that the invitation of Jesus is addressed to you, each of you, each of us individually, to be open to the supreme reality. The supreme reality is God, and the supreme Christian insight is that God is love. The supreme Christian experience is to know this love in your own heart.

Now, all that is merely words, 'sounding brass and tinkling cymbals', unless we take steps, practical steps, simple steps, to be open to the reality that these words point to – the reality that the Spirit dwells in our hearts.

We meditate every morning and every evening because our day must be fully inserted within this reality. When we meditate in a moment or two, we enter the experience of being wholly still, still in body and still in spirit, undistracted, together, whole so that we can be open to the experience of our own wholeness and holiness in God.

Let me remind you again. When we sit down, take a couple of moments to be comfortably still, close your eyes lightly, and then begin to say your word. The word I recommend to you is ma-ra-na-tha. Say it as four equally stressed syllables: ma-ra-na-tha. And say your word from the beginning to the end. That's of supreme importance, to peacefully, serenely, and faithfully, humbly say your word. The purpose of saying the word is to go beyond all division, all disharmony; to be still, open and faithful, so that you can be open to the prayer of the Spirit in your heart. It's a grace for all of us to be

here together tonight. It is a grace that we should seek to be open to the supreme reality that God is, and that God is love.

Wonderful Experience of Silence

To learn to meditate you have to learn to be silent, and not to be afraid of silence. One of the great problems for modern people is that we are so unused to silence. For example, rather than just assemble in complete silence as we might, we play some music before the talk in case people would be too overwhelmed by the burden of just sitting in silence. It's a thing people find very awkward.

In meditation you are, as it were, crossing over the threshold from the background noise into silence. And the silence is really absolutely necessary for the human spirit if it really is to thrive, and not only just to thrive but to be creative; to have a creative response to life, to our environment, to our friends, because the silence gives our spirit room to breathe, room to be. In silence you don't have to be justifying yourself, apologising for yourself, trying to impress anyone; you just have to be. It's a most marvellous experience when you come to it. And the wonder of it is that in that experience you are completely free: You are not trying to play any role; you are not trying to fulfil anyone's expectations. You are just there, alive, open to reality. And then, in the Christian vision, you are almost overwhelmed by the discovery that the reality in which we have our being, is love, and that your spirit is, as it were, expanding into love. If you can take one real step into that silence, you've begun the journey of your life, you've begun the journey into life.

When we meditate in a few moments, we are going to do two things. We are going to try to sit still, not because we are afraid to move, but we are going to sit still because what we are seeking is a unity of body and spirit. We are seeking silence, stillness, awareness, and we are doing so in a harmony – body and spirit.

So the first thing to try to achieve is to sit still in a way that is absolutely relaxed. So get a comfortable sitting posture and just be

in your body. And then, close your eyes, again very gently. When you are meditating, every muscle in your body should be relaxed. Sit as comfortably as you can and be as relaxed as you can. And then, begin to recite interiorly, in silence, your mantra or your word. The word I recommend you to use is *maranatha*. Just sound that word in silence interiorly in your heart ma-ra-na-tha – four equally stressed syllables. Maranatha is the oldest prayer there is in the Christian tradition. It means (the meaning is not important for us at the moment) it means 'Come Lord'.

Now let me try to explain to you the reaction you must try to have to the silence. What happens is this: You begin to recite your word and you begin to feel more peaceful, more silent, and then you become aware that you are on the threshold of silence. This is a critical moment for many people, because you are leaving the familiar world of your sounds, your ideas, your thoughts, and your words; you are crossing over into silence and you don't know what's in store for you. That's why it is so important, so useful to meditate in a group; it's why it is so important, so useful to meditate in a tradition, a tradition that says to you 'fear not, don't be afraid'. The purpose of our meditation is to be in the presence of love, the love that, as Jesus tells us, 'casts out all fear'. But it is a critical moment, because if you go back to your thoughts to your ideas, even perhaps to your prayers, you have turned away from the entry into silence. into prayer, into love. Learning to say your mantra is the first step into this wonderful experience of silence.

I can use all the words in the vocabulary to talk you about the eternal silence of God, the creative silence of God. I can even talk to you about the importance of the silence because in that silence you will hear spoken to you clearly, for the first time, your own name. You will come to know who you are. I could use all those words, but none of them would convey the experience itself – the experience of liberty, the experience of being in the presence, the creative presence of God.

To learn to meditate you have to learn to say your mantra and to keep saying it. Don't go back to your thoughts or your words or your ideas or your imagination. Leave them to one side and say your word.

Just listen to this from the Gospel of Luke; St Luke is conveying his impression of the sort of man that Jesus was, in his view. These are two sentences I'd like to read to you:

And from time to time he would withdraw to lonely places for prayer. (Lk 5:16)

And a little later:

During this time, he went out one day into the hills to pray, and he spent the night in prayer to God.' (Lk 6:12)

When we meditate we seek that quiet, that silence to be one with Jesus in God.

Value of Spiritual Practice

We live in a society that doesn't recognise the immense value of spiritual practice, that doesn't recognise the spiritual reality. Meditation is a way that enables us each day to root our lives in the divine reality of God. And it's a positive way. It isn't a way in which we as it were reject the world or build up any false opposition to the world. We want to live our lives to the full in the world, and we know that we can only do that if we have the confidence that comes from rootnedness in God. It's as though we were rushing through our lives and in our hearts there is the flame of a candle; and because we are moving at such high speed, this essential interior flame is always at the point of going out.

When we sit down to meditate, when we become still, when we are not thinking in terms of our own success, of our own self-importance of our own will, but when we are just still in the presence of the one who IS, then the flame begins to burn bright and we begin to understand ourselves and others in terms of light and warmth and love. Now we have to get to that point where we can learn to be still. And that is why we say our word our mantra: ma-ra-na-tha. Saying the mantra leads us to the stillness where the flame can burn bright. We, all of us, know that we can't live a full life unless our lives are firmly grounded on some underlying purpose. unless we come to know that each of us has an ultimate significance, and that ultimate significance we can only discover if we find our central rootedness, our rootedness in God.

It's so easy to let our life just become a mere routine; and it's so easy for us to play some role, whether it's the role of democrat, student, mother, husband, monk or whatever. But Jesus came to tell us that life is not about playing roles, life is not about becoming a functionary in some system. Life is about meaning, significance, purpose. And the message of Jesus to each of us is that everyone of us has personal meaning, significance, value, importance; and that value that each of us possesses arises from who we are in

ourselves. It does not arise from what anyone else or what society says we are.

When St Thomas Moore was imprisoned, locked up in the Tower of London for refusing to tell King Henry VIII what the king wanted to hear, he was classed as a common criminal. But the inspiring thing about the life of St Thomas Moore, who was eventually killed, is that he knew who he was, and he knew that his own integrity was of such value not just in his own eyes but in the eyes of God. He knew that he couldn't compromise that integrity by telling a lie to please the king. What Thomas Moore possessed was a profound confidence; a confidence that arose from within him, from knowing who he was — created by God, redeemed by Jesus, and the temple of the Holy Spirit.

The message of Jesus to each one of us is that we must discover that fundamental and basic truth about ourselves. We must discover that rootedness in God. We must be open to the love that redeems us and we must live out of our own infinite holiness, that each of us is the temple of the Holy Spirt. The Spirit of him who created the universe dwells in our hearts, and in silence is loving to all. And we must discover that. We must discover it for ourselves and live out of it personally. In the sort of society we live in, we have to take radical steps just as Sir Thomas Moore had to take radical steps in his day. Everyone in his society tried to dissuade him from his integrity – his own family, his wife, his children, all his colleagues.

To meditate, to learn to mediate, is quite a demand. It means that we must give time to the most important fact in life; and the most important fact in life is that God Is and that his Spirit dwells in our hearts. Meditating is as it were adopting an entirely positive attitude to that supreme fact. And so to learn to meditate, we need to meditate every morning and every evening of our lives. We need to start our day out of the power of God's presence within us, and we need to bring our day to a conclusion returning to the mystery of his presence, of his love.

Integrity, as you know, means wholeness. Meditation is the way that brings every part of our being, of our life, of our experience into harmony. Meditation is the way beyond dividedness, beyond the dividedness that we so often experience within ourselves, and it's the way across the divide that separates us from God. It's the way to deep peace and to joy. It's the way beyond all sadness. Sadness can

only come from separation, from dividedness. It can only come from ego and the ego goes when we discover our unity in God.

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The Silence of Love

St Augustine wrote a memorable sentence when he wrote: 'My heart is restless until it finds rest in you.' I think what all of us find in our lives is that the challenge to us is to come down to reality. To find a really solid base out of which we can live. So much of our life is passing away. The business of living is like sand falling through the hourglass. But all of us know, as we see the sand falling through, this cannot be all there is. There has to be something that is more solid and more enduring. We have to find the rock-like base for our life to live out of that base. That is the experience rooted and grounded in the solid rock that is Christ. We live out of that, and our life and our horizons, once we are grounded, begin to expand. And that is the Christian experience, that our invitation is to live not just our own isolated lives but to live out of the infinity of God or, perhaps better, to live into the infinity of God. And the experience of meditation is the experience of finding ourselves within the mystery, or perhaps of losing ourselves within the mystery.

I want to read you now, one of the most extraordinary paragraphs ever committed to writing. This is from the Gospel of John:

If you love me you will obey my commands; and I will ask the Father, and he will give you another to be your Advocate, who will be with you for ever — the Spirit of truth. The world cannot receive him, because the world neither sees nor knows him; but you know him, because he dwells with you and is in you. I will not leave you bereft; I am coming back to you. In a little while the world will see me no longer, but you will see me; because I live, you too will live; and then you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me and I in you. (Jn 14:15-20)

That is what Christianity is all about: Knowing that the Father loves us; knowing that Jesus dwells in our hearts; and more astonishing perhaps, knowing that we dwell in him. The mind cannot

comprehend that; only the heart can know it. And the heart can know it because this is the knowledge that can only be known with love.

We know ourselves as loved; and knowing ourselves loved, we love. Language is so weak in explaining to us the fullness of the mystery. That is why the absolute silence of our meditation is of such supreme importance – that we don't try to think about God, that we don't try to imagine God, but that we stay in awesome silence, that we are open as it were to the eternal silence of God. And what we discover in meditation is that this is the natural ambience for all of us. This is what we were created for – to flourish, to expand, to be, in that eternal silence. The eternal silence is the silence of love. The silence of unqualified and unconditional acceptance. And we are there with our Father who invites us to be there, who loves us to be there; who has created us to be there. This is the eternal silence in which all of us are invited to flourish, to expand and to be.

Selfless Attention to God

One of the great needs of our time is for men and women who are confident in the gift of their own life. Men and women who can live their lives out of the power that has been set free in our world by the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Meditation is our daily commitment to the reality of that power, the power of Jesus that has been set free and is flowing in our world, in our hearts. The great gift that is given to us, once we plunge into this stream, is the gift of liberty. We are made free by the power of that life, death and resurrection.

Freedom, we often think of, as being the capacity to do what we want to do. But only the most rudimentary experience of meditation, of making contact with the power of Jesus in our hearts, only the most rudimentary contact will show us that freedom is in essence not the freedom to do what we want to do, but the liberty to be who we are: the redeemed, the loved of Christ.

To be who we are, we have to be in relationship. We all know the great fact that we cannot be ourselves in isolation. And the fundamental relationship of our life is our relationship with God; and our meditation is our commitment to that relationship. Prayer, we could describe as 'selfless attention to God'. That is why in meditation we don't *think* about ourselves; we *attend* to God. Jesus tells us 'only God is good', that is he is all-goodness. And the marvel and wonder of prayer is that in this state of selfless attention, we enter into his all-goodness, and so we become good ourselves, not because of any sort of platonic striving but simply because we enter into the orbit of his goodness. This I think is the essential basis for all morality, that we participate in the goodness of God.

The ancient Fathers called this 'purity of heart'. Our heart is cleansed of all desire, even the desire for God. We do not want to possess God, to possess wisdom or to possess happiness. Simply, in quiet stillness, we are who we are and we are content thus to be – to be good because we are in him who is all goodness.

In meditating we don't seek to manipulate God for our own

purposes. We are not, as it were, trying to involve him in our lives. We are discovering the wonder of our involvement in his life. Saying our mantra, coming to silence, coming to stillness, going beyond desire, coming to purity of heart; we are simply open to reality in its purest and most intimate revelation. We are open to God's presence, within us, around us, the presence who sustains us by his love.

The importance of meditation is that we come to know this with certainty. We are in the presence of the one who purifies us by his love, by his forgiveness. And we are in the presence of the one who renews us with limitless energy out of that same infinite source of love.

Never forget the purity of heart that is involved in saying the mantra. It is the faithfulness to the mantra from the beginning to the end of every meditation that brings us to this simplicity, to this innocence, to this purity, because we leave self behind. To give us the confidence we need to proclaim Christ, to witness to him personally out of our own knowledge, we need to be faithful – faithful to our daily practice, and within the practice, faithful to the mantra.

The ultimate aim in prayer is total union, continuous presence; the way to that total union and continuous presence is the way of selfless discipline. That is the way of the mantra: selflessness, and discipline. John Main



JOHN MAIN OSB (1926-1982) served in the diplomatic service in the Far East, and taught law at Trinity College, Dublin, before he became a Benedictine monk. He founded an open Benedictine community in Montreal, from which sprang The World Community for Christian Meditation. His books and CDs make available to people today the unique and transforming power

of his teaching. They retain the authority, clarity and humour of his original teaching and carry the spirit of the gospel directly into the heart.

The selections on this CD are taken from talks John Main gave to the early meditation groups in Montreal. He presents meditation as a way of Christian faith and emphasises the simplicity and the discipline of the practice. The talks open deep insights into the prayer that brings the whole of our being to God and lets his transforming power flow through our hearts and into the world. The complete talks are published on CD and in print under the title *Word Made Flesh*.

