

A VENTILATOR FOR ALL?

By the Reverend Canon Paul Allton

The Corona Virus pandemic has forced us all into some kind of isolation, with Christians in Britain experiencing the closure of churches (even to clergy) and protection from potentially germ-carrying books within them even including the Bible! Thus we find ourselves as Christians forced back on the God-given resources we have and facing the question - what resources do we actually have to help us through this time?

Let's imagine it is far worse for us than it is – something even worse than the isolation thrust upon Orthodox Christians under Soviet rule! No churches open, no clergy to take services or to offer pastoral encouragement, no Bibles, no other religious books, no contact with fellow Christians, no religious pictures, no security as friends “disappear”, informers amongst friends and even family! Just hostility ranging from downright acts of persecution including murder to social ribaldry and scorn with holy icons being put up to ridicule in state museums.

Throughout the Soviet years and through persecution in many places in our own world today, Christians have had one activity which could not easily be taken away from them and which could exist in the privacy of their own homes and in their own hearts. It is an activity that exists today and does not need to be “streamed” or to benefit from any of the modern technologies that are available these days. It is the life of prayer that exists in the hearts of us all and is available for all to use. It is a ventilator we all have and there is no shortage!

In Soviet days Orthodox Christians in Russia clung to one prayer in particular – the Jesus Prayer which had been honed for centuries in the great monasteries and which had been extensively used by lay Christians since the eighteenth century. It is a prayer that developed from the very early prayer “Lord, have mercy” and that was filled with such meaning that it says everything about God and everything about humanity. The prayer goes thus : “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner”. It is often called the prayer of the heart and in the monasteries it was repeated time after time after time with the aim of being the prayer that answered St. Paul's exhortation to the Thessalonians (1 Thessalonians 5. 17) to “pray without ceasing”. Later the prayer became a mantra – the first half prayed on an intake of deep breath and the second half on the expiration of breath. Thus the whole of Christ was taken into our deepest being on the in breath and then our sinfulness was taken away in the out breath. And as it is repeated time after time after time it forms a protection against sinful thoughts, a barrier against distraction, an inspiration to holy living, filling our whole being with the presence of the whole Christ who saves us and inspires us.

If this coronavirus pandemic teaches us anything it will be the supreme importance of being able to breathe! We have always known this but throughout our lives we have taken it for granted. But the pandemic reminds us powerfully that breathing is the very heart of our

being and this is what the rush for ventilators is all about – keeping going that fundamental human activity of breathing without which we die physically. The Jesus Prayer gives us a spiritual ventilator that keeps us breathing spiritually with the in and out of our breathing being matched by the in and out that is the very movement of this simple prayer. We may be experiencing social distancing or isolation, but we do have the resource of prayer to be with us throughout. The Jesus Prayer, as it is prayed time after time after time can bring our heart to beat in accordance with the basic movement of our bodies. Why not use just half an hour a day to pray the Jesus Prayer time after time after time and discover a resource that can carry us through these days and enrich our lives when they are over? Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy upon me, a sinner” – an inner ventilator for us all.