

Reflection on St Antony of Egypt (17 January 2024)

Someone came to Jesus and said, "Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?" And he said to him, "Why do you ask me about what is good? There is one who is good. If you wish to enter into life, keep the commandments." He said to him, "Which ones?" And Jesus said, "You shall not murder. You shall not commit adultery. You shall not steal. You shall not bear false witness. Honor your father and mother. Also, you shall love your neighbour as yourself." The young man said to him, "I have kept all these; what do I still lack?" Jesus said to him, "If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me." When the young man heard this word, he went away grieving, for he had many possessions. *Matthew 19. 16-22*

Antony of Egypt responded directly to this gospel reading. He was born around the year 251 to wealthy Christian parents. His parents owned a prosperous farm. When they died, Antony inherited it. But he felt that he was 'the rich young man', so he sold the farm, made provision for the welfare of his sister, and gave the rest of the money to the poor. He then sought to live a life devoted to prayer, poverty, meditation on the Bible, and manual work, and he moved just outside his home village, where many sought his advice.

Interestingly, this new life-style led Antony into intense spiritual struggles. He was acutely aware of the devil and the tensions within himself between good and evil. He felt the force of the temptations with which he was struggling. He struggled with his own passions, especially lust. But these struggles were part of an instinct he felt to leave normal civilisation and go out into the barrenness, austerity and challenge of the desert. He believed that just as Jesus was tempted by the devil in the wilderness, so the desert was the place of ultimate spiritual conflict where the battles for holiness must be won.

He became renowned for his wisdom as a spiritual teacher; he was given the title *abba* or father; he attracted many disciples who sought out his counsel. Many came to share this new way of living. And this was the origin of what came to be called monasticism. Antony wasn't a monk in the modern sense; he was more like a hermit or anchorite – 'anchorite' is from the Greek 'to withdraw'.

And so, in the Egyptian desert, a new movement began of individual hermits seeking the solitary life. Over time, they began to form into federated groups which in due course became communal monasteries. The prayer of these monks was formed around the recitation of the Psalms, which they learned by heart. Here the foundations of monasticism were laid – poverty, prayer, meditation on scripture, holiness of life.

And they had a conviction – like our Lord, in the desert they were engaged in spiritual conflict with the powers of evil. If the world was to be won for Christ, they were at the front line of the spiritual struggle for the world’s salvation. It was this same instinct that led our beloved St Cuthbert to withdraw to the Inner Farne, so that he could engage in the same spiritual contest.

Many of us get hung up on status, possessions, and the kind of social conventions that we feel we must conform to because they have become society’s norm. It’s why so many people struggle to be their true selves. Instead, we live a fabricated self, a construct, as we are swept along by social forces. Antony and those who followed him can encourage us to find true freedom and identity in Christ, and they can help us to be rooted in prayer. We don’t have to let the world squeeze us into its mould.

These early monks we now know as the Desert Fathers and Desert Mothers. Many of their sayings have been preserved. If you read them, well, many of these sayings are down to earth, some are bizarre, some amusing, but many show profound insights into the life of faith.

Let me give you two examples.

“In Scetis, a brother went to see Abba Moses and begged him for a word. And the old man said, ‘Go and sit in your cell, and your cell will teach you everything’.” The monastic cell was a simple unadorned room. The bare, austere cell teaches us that life is more than things; it encourages us to seek God alone as the ground of our being. The cell strips away all self-idolatry. Ultimately, God is our desire; he is all we truly need.

And a second saying, Abba Lot came to Abba Joseph. “‘What else,’” Abba Lot said, “‘can I do?’” Then the old man stood up, stretched his hands towards heaven and his fingers became like ten lamps of fire, and he said to him, “‘If you want to, you can become all flame’.”

If we want to, we can be set on fire with the love of Christ. That is what happened on the Day of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit came. May it be our desire and God’s gift, as we like Antony, strip away possessiveness and self-illusion and seek only to know the length and breadth and depth and height of Christ’s love, the love which he offers us in this sacrament of his precious body and blood.