

St John the Baptist

This Home Retreat reflects on the inspiration that early monastic life drew from St John the Baptist, suggesting ways in which this inspiration has value for Christians today.

St John the Baptist, the feast of whose birth we keep today, was the messenger whom Isaiah prophesied would prepare the way for the Lord, the Messiah who would bring liberation – the forgiveness of sin and the opportunity to live freely in God’s presence – to His people. Born of the seemingly barren Elizabeth and the elderly Zechariah, even in the womb he recognised the presence of Jesus in Mary’s womb, leaping for joy at this recognition; and in adult life he withdrew into the desert, a solitary preacher whose manner of life, as well as his message, was a preparation for the advent of the Messiah, even for the coming of Jesus into our lives now.

John lived on the margin of society, his distinctive manner of dress and his diet clearly setting him apart, his message of repentance in preparation for the coming of God into the world drawing people to him as they recognised their need for the coming salvation he preached. Very much a prophet, not a reed swaying in the breeze, it was in him that the early monks and nuns found their inspiration for a life of prophetic witness to the love and mercy of God preached by him and made manifest in Jesus, the most common of relics found in ancient monasteries being those of John the Baptist.

Monastic life has its origins in the Egyptian desert of the third and fourth centuries into which a number of Christians had withdrawn into solitude, living like John an ascetical life on the margin of society, so to be able to dedicate themselves to the search for God in prayer. Fundamental to their lives was silence and the prayerful recollection that formed the context for their careful rumination and meditation

upon the words of Scripture, which ultimately formed their spirituality and the way in which they sought to live.

A superficial reading of *The Lives of the Fathers* could leave one with the impression that these early Christians have little to say to us today, being somewhat over-concerned with isolation, physical austerity and spiritual heroics. Whilst it is possible to detect in their sayings and in the accounts of their lives a strand of this enthusiasm, at times perhaps experimentation, which spills over into all of these, to look no further would be to miss the real value of their example and teaching.

More than anything else, the Egyptian monks emphasised the importance of self-knowledge, the discernment of ‘thoughts’, as they were called (in Greek *logismoi*), as being of prime importance. Ultimately, through John Cassian, who brought the spirit of desert monasticism to Europe, and following the interpretation of St Gregory the Great these became known as the ‘seven deadly sins’, which Cassian treats of particularly in his *Monastic Institutes*. As one monk said, ‘Unawareness is the root of all evil.’ [According to Cassian and the tradition he inherited, these eight thoughts are: greed, fornication, avarice, anger, melancholy, depression, conceit and arrogance.]

The key point is that without self-knowledge – knowing and accepting what we as fallen human beings are really like – any attempts truly to pray, to grow in holiness or to serve others, will in the end founder. This is the reason for the much-repeated advice of the *abba* to the disciple of ‘stay in your cell’ or ‘the cell will teach you everything.’

A young monk once went to abba Paphnutius, because he was feeling unsettled in the desert; he was tempted by the thought that he was achieving nothing. Abba Paphnutius said to him, ‘Go, stay in your cell and make one prayer in the morning and one prayer in the evening and one prayer at night. And when you are hungry, eat, and when you are thirsty, drink, and when you are sleepy, go to sleep. And remain in the desert.’ The young man was

not convinced.... [‘How is this a way for an enthusiastic monk to achieve holiness?’ he might have asked.] So he went on to abba John, who emended the advice he had received from Paphnutius, by saying, ‘Do not make any prayer at all, just stay in your cell.’ Finally, the young man went to abba Arsenius, who simply told him to do what the fathers had said.

The discipline of simply staying in your cell is intended to bring you face to face with your real self and your real needs and capacities, so that you can then offer these with your whole self to God; and this self-knowledge gained by growth in humility was to lead to the showing of mercy to others, recognising their need as being no different from your own. Thus, when a monk was excommunicated from the sanctuary because he had sinned, abba Bessarion got up and went out with him, saying, ‘I too am a sinner.’ The monk’s task is to bewail his own sinfulness, not to judge that of others. The austerity and spiritual disciplines of the desert, then, were not an end in themselves or a means to become some sort of high-performing spiritual athlete, but rather were at the service of self-knowledge, and so of humility and of love.

A distinguished visitor once came to visit abba Poemen and sought to engage him in high-level spiritual discourse, but to his dismay and the surprise of Poemen’s disciple, Poemen answered him not a word. When questioned about this, Poemen replied, ‘He is from above and speaks of heavenly things, but I am of the earth and speak of earthly things. If he had spoken to me about the passions of the soul [about his ‘thoughts’, his *logismoi*], then I should have answered him. But if he speaks about spiritual things, I know nothing of them.’ When the visitor tried a second time saying, ‘What am I to do, abba, I am dominated by the passions of my soul?’ Poemen responded, ‘Now you are speaking rightly.’

The purpose of the desert (which we all encounter in different ways in our life – aridity in prayer, overwork and exhaustion, illness, times of crisis, suffering and sorrow, failure and sin) is to bring us face to face with ourselves, so that we may

come to purity of heart: to that recognition of what we are really like, to that acceptance of our absolute need of God, which in turn leads to our growth in humility that then enables us to grow in love of God, as we recognise just how much we have been given by Him, and to a genuine compassion for our neighbour in the knowledge that we stand in just as much need of God's mercy as they do; it is these experiences that heal and purify our divided heart. Our first task is to come to some degree of self-knowledge, which if genuine will be followed by a growth in humility and love. The higher spiritual realms can, at least for the time being, look after themselves; we must first honestly face up to our internal disorder and chaos, to our own thoughts and temptations – as the desert tradition would have it, do battle with the demons – accept the way we are, and offer ourselves whole and entire to God in sorrow, repentance and love. In this way, we will grow in purity of heart that we might see God. This is the way of the monk, but in this it is no more than the way of the Christian; and it is also what the prophet Ezekiel found in the desert:

The hand of Yahweh was on me; he carried me away by the spirit of Yahweh and set me down in the middle of the valley, a valley full of bones... and they were completely dry. He said to me, 'Son of Man, can these bones live?' I said, 'You know, Lord Yahweh.' He said, 'Prophecy over these bones. Say, "Dry bones, hear the word of Yahweh. The Lord Yahweh says this to these bones: I am now going to make breath enter you, and you shall live. I shall put sinews on you, I shall make flesh grow on you, I shall cover you with skin and give you breath and you will live; and you will know that I am Yahweh."'”

The transformation that will bring us truly to life, the work of salvation, is a work and a gift of God that finds its locus in Jesus to whom John's life bore witness. As Zechariah prophesied of his son:

As for you, little child, you shall be called a prophet of God the Most High. You shall go ahead of the Lord to prepare his ways before him.

To make known to his people their salvation through the forgiveness of their sins, the loving kindness of the heart of our God who visits us like the dawn from on high.

He will give light to those in darkness, those who dwell in the shadow of death, and guide us into the way of peace.

Or as St Paul put it so directly to the Romans in language that both we and the dwellers in the desert would recognise:

So I find this rule: that for me, where I want to do nothing but good, evil is close at my side. In my inmost self I dearly love God's law, but I see that acting on my body there is a different law which battles against the law in my mind. So I am brought to be a prisoner of that law of sin which lives inside my body.

What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body doomed to death? God – thanks be to him – through Jesus Christ our Lord.

In his recognition that he must decrease whilst Jesus must increase, John the Baptist gives us an example of humility that we should imitate, as we recognise our need of God - the message of salvation preached by John and our true life revealed in Jesus.