

Lent 1

Grovely Parish

1st March 2020

It has been a long-standing Christian tradition to begin the first Sunday of Lent by looking at the temptations of Jesus in the wilderness.

Today I would like to reflect on these temptations, and Jesus' responses to them in a slightly different way. I want to reflect on them, through the writings of the desert fathers and mothers.

Let me begin by saying something about these desert fathers and mothers.

For about three hundred years, from about 300 ad to 600 ad Christianity experienced a unique phenomenon. It was the time of the desert fathers and mothers. It was a time when Christian men and women abandoned their usual lifestyle, and chose to live in loosely connected communities in the isolated regions of Egypt, Syria and present day Turkey. Most of time they lived in simple structures or caves, by themselves, growing their own food, living lives of great simplicity, often owning few possessions: perhaps only a gospel book, which would be a collection of gospel sayings and writings.

The person who inspired this movement into the desert was a man called Anthony of Egypt. At the age of 20, in the year 271, Anthony heard the advice, recorded in the gospels, to another rich, young man. The advice was:

“There is one thing you lack. Sell all that you own, and distribute the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven: then come follow me.”

Anthony felt those words were for him, and he sold all he had, gave it to the poor, and went and lived the life of a man of prayer and contemplation, seeking the treasure of heaven,

and following the ways of Christ Jesus. For twenty years, he lived fairly anonymously, on the outskirts of an Egyptian village, but soon people sought him out for counselling and Godly wisdom. He moved further into the wilderness to an abandoned fort to live his life of prayer, and growing his own vegetables, doing simple acts of kindness. After another 20 years, he moved even further away from villages, but his reputation as a man of Godly wisdom became so well known that he was sought out by a large number of people, wanting to grow in faith, hope and love.

Towards the end of his life, people began to collect his sayings and wisdom. His friend the Bishop of Alexandria wrote a biography of Anthony, which was widely read. At the extraordinary age of 105, Anthony died. For a man who had lived so long in quiet and reflection, he was noted as a very centred person, a person of common sense, and Godly sense. One person who visited him, rather amusingly noted; "He was a very normal person, and not what people expected at all."

Inspired by the example of Anthony, other men and women journeyed into the desert to grow in the knowledge of God, and to gain self-mastery. Their sayings and wisdom were over time written down. We now have a large collection of writings known as: "The Wisdom of the Desert Fathers and Mothers."

On this Sunday, when we remember Jesus' wisdom in the wilderness, I would like to share with you a little of the wisdom of those desert fathers and mothers, and particularly the wisdom of Anthony.

The first piece of wisdom they give us is: - to focus on Christ. Anthony in his biography speaks about being tempted by the devil to abandon his life of prayer and contemplation, but he filled his thoughts with Christ he said, and thus: “Quenched the fire of temptation.”

The desert fathers and mothers encouraged people experiencing worry, stress and temptation to change their inner thinking. They were encouraged: to rejoice in the Lord, to meditate on the good things, and to contemplate the things of the Lord, and the ways of the Lord. To use a modern day expression the desert fathers and mothers encouraged people to “Change the Channel.” The wisdom of the desert was to stop focusing on the problems, instead to focus on the good, and the holy. By doing that, the problems lost their control over a person’s thinking.

The second piece of wisdom, which the ancient fathers and mothers, gives us is: - to allow yourself to grow in resilience and confidence.

Anthony tells of a time, when he experienced a long and difficult struggle with the devil. We are told in his biography that, “After his struggles Anthony looked up and saw as if the roof opening, and a beam of light coming down to him. Anthony said to God, “Where were you?” God replied, “Anthony I was right here, but I wanted to see you in action.”

The wisdom of the Desert Ones is that struggles come to us all. While God is with us in our struggles, God does encourage us to face our struggles, and deal with those struggles using our God given skills and abilities. By doing so, the Desert Ones wanted people to grown in self-confidence, and to grow in appreciation of their own abilities, and to use the gifts that God had given them.

There is a final piece of wisdom that we can glean from the desert writings.

As I said a little while ago people were amazed how normal Anthony, and the other desert dwellers were. When they visited Anthony, I think they half expected some kind of crazy individual. Instead they found a very well grounded, intellect, thoughtful holy-man. Anthony appears to have learnt through his long life of prayer, and journeying with God that joy and contentment was the natural state for the human condition, once you were freed from fear and error.

I think the reason why Anthony appeared so normal, and so sensible is that he had struggled with his fears and sins and failures. To use his terms, he had struggled with his demons, and so had rid himself of those things, which had stunted his life, and reduced his humanity. He had come to a state where joy and contentment were his natural state. Although it should be stressed no one, except Christ himself, overcomes all the struggles and forces that be-little our lives.

Aided by Christ, and the power of Christ to defeat evil, Anthony at the end of his long, long life had found the treasure he went out as a young man to seek. He had found the treasure that would not rust, nor could be stolen. He had found a deep relationship with God, and in doing so, he had found himself, and that person was a whole and holy person.

We can be encouraged by Anthony's state of contentment, and learn from him.

It says to us, if we too stay close to Christ Jesus - through prayer, and fellowship, and acts of kindness and compassion, we too will find that state of contentment, which comes from a life lived in relationship with Christ

Let me return now to our gospel reading for today.

Jesus went into the desert, and he had his struggles and temptations. He like the desert fathers and mothers, who would follow after him, instinctively knew the way to overcome temptation. It was to ignore the temptation, and focus instead on God, and the wisdom of God. Through his struggles and temptations Jesus did become stronger and more resilient. At the end of his 40-day desert experience, he came back to his community and began the ministry he had been commissioned to do – to bring forth the reign of God.

On this Sunday we remember Jesus' 40 days in the wilderness. But let us also remember that great assembly of the Desert Fathers and Mothers, who chose to find an eternal treasure, which is a deeper relationship with God through their faith in Christ Jesus.

And may we learn from the wisdom of those desert Christians. May we learn to focus on Christ, and on the good, when difficulties and struggles come to us.

May we learn to grow in greater reliance and courage, by using the gifts and abilities, which God has given us to use. And may we face and overcome those fears, and errors of thinking, which hold us back, so that a state of contentment may flourish in our lives, and in our communities.

Let us Prayer

Lord, help us to use this time of Lent to grow in faith, hope and love.

We give you thanks O Lord for the desert Fathers and Mothers, and their seeking after a treasure that cannot fade or rust, an everlasting relationship with you.

We pray this in Jesus' name Amen.