

Home Retreat – Trials

St Teresa of Ávila was nothing if not feisty; she once said to God: ‘If this is how you treat your friends, it is no wonder that you have so few.’ Today, we are celebrating the Memory of the Beheading of St John the Baptist, which might make us think that she was right! After all, which saint was as close to God as St John? Living out in the desert as a sort of monk, chosen to be the fore-runner of Jesus himself; and yet, he went ahead of Jesus not only as a preacher, but also in the manner of his death. Conditioned as we are by a particular view of the world, it might seem strange to us to think that those particularly blessed by God should have to endure such things as trials. Nevertheless, it has been the experience down the ages not only of God’s closest friends but – in the person of Jesus – of God himself that trials come in our life on earth.

I said that St John the Baptist lived a sort of monastic life, and it is true that the medieval monks used to think of him and prophets like Elijah and Elisha as forerunners of the monastic life. St Benedict, the father of most branches of Western Monasticism, shares with the rest of the monastic tradition the idea that trials in life are an inevitability – indeed, they are one of the only things the newcomer to the monastery is promised! But this is something which, perhaps, we accept through gritted teeth. We might think of the Lord, appearing to his disciples after the resurrection and uttering those words that we remember at every Mass: ‘Peace I leave you; my peace I give you.’ If we look around in our world, we may well ask God where exactly this peace is to be found; there seems only to be the very opposite of peace as we see it, namely: trials.

However sceptical we might be about the prospect of peace in our life and however disinclined we might be when it comes to enduring trials, nearly all of the monastic writers agree with St Benedict that trials are not only inevitable in the monastic and Christian life, but even that they bring fruit. The other day I came across a Christmas Sermon of a fifteenth century German Carthusian monk called Lanspergius. It being a Christmas sermon, he is commenting (not unreasonably) on the song the angels sing when Christ is born: ‘Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to people of goodwill.’ He says this (it is quite a long quote):

In every place, in every time, in every state [of life], all people desire peace. What peace? The peace of not lacking anything that they want, or having [to endure] anything that they do not want. Dearest brothers, do not seek out this sort of peace in this world, where *the whole of a man's life is combat, labour and affliction of the spirit*.¹ Indeed, it is in the future that we will encounter this sort of life. That sort of peace is not to be sought in this world. Neither does it come from a good will to desire and strive for [a state where] everything happens to you according to your own will; rather, you must learn to bear whatever happens, and to will it for God's sake. And if something distressing should happen, which could not in itself be desirable, for God's sake let it be desirable, and indeed desired! Peace, then, is not [to be found] in not feeling things, but rather in putting up with hardships calmly (*æquanimiter*).

And so, whoever you are, how can you complain that you cannot have any peace? If you seek to avoid hardship, you will not find peace anywhere. For if you cannot bear hardship, your intolerance will follow you, and – wherever you happen to be – will put you outside of peace. Return, then, to yourself and put to death your inner foes – I mean your intolerance, your self-will, your private love. Once you have attained this peace, those external annoyances that present themselves will not be irksome, because that within you which allowed them to be irksome has died.

And so, dearest brothers, if for a long time we have been shown goodwill, if people acquiesce to our desires, if they bear with us and are patient with us, if they are lenient with us, so that nothing displeasing happens to us, nobody annoys us, then this peace is neither real nor lasting. True peace is only found in denying oneself. Insofar as you deny yourself, you will experience greater peace. But insofar as self-will rules within you, you will be further away from true peace. And so, in any affliction, in any annoyance, reflect that nothing comes about without God; and by means of his love, be patient, disregard the scorn and injustice. Be like one who does not hear and cannot understand. Let others rejoice if they humble you, if they oppress you; you be peaceful with those who hate peace, because peace is not for the ungodly, but for people of good will.

As long as it is, this is quite an interesting and perceptive quote, it seems to me, with a lot of meat to it. When it comes to identifying the source of trials in our lives, we are sometimes very quick to point to things from outside: the weather; the pandemic; an illness; a difficult situation. I wouldn't want to suggest for a minute that none of these things is a serious or difficult predicament, but are they (in themselves) the source of our trials? Lanspergius says no. He says that if we want to see where our trials come from, we should maybe spend some time in front of a mirror.

¹ Job7:1

He says that part of the problem is that we don't find peace because we are looking for the wrong thing; we are looking for the peace of not lacking anything that we want, or having to endure anything that we do not want. This, he says, is not peace: it is a fantasy. If we are fixed on having what we want, and not having what we do not want, then the problem is really a problem of our will: it is not a good will! Lanspergius tells us that

it does not come from a good will to desire and strive for [a state where] everything happens to us according to our own will; rather, we must learn to bear whatever happens, and to will it for God's sake. And if something distressing should happen, which could not in itself be desirable, for God's sake let it be desirable, and indeed desired! Peace, then, is not [to be found] in not feeling things, but rather in putting up with hardships calmly (*æquanimiter*).

Then he has the tagline that we might all take away from this talk: If you seek to avoid hardship, you will not find peace anywhere.

He goes on:

'For if you cannot bear hardship, your intolerance will follow you, and - wherever you happen to be - will put you outside of peace. Return, then, to yourself and put to death your inner foes - I mean your intolerance, your self-will, your private love. Once you have attained this peace, those external annoyances that present themselves will not be irksome, because that within you which allowed them to be irksome has died.'

This is the traditional monastic teaching, and no mistake! One of the various Benedictine mottos is *pax inter spinas*: peace among thorns. Lanspergius is reminding us that, often, we sow the seeds of our own disquietude; whatever happens to us from *outside*, he says, only causes the experience of trial and annoyance because of what is to be found on the *inside*.

A trial for me at the moment is that I am here at Ampleforth! Normally in the last two weeks of August, I would be at a Cistercian monastery in Norway, acting as a supply chaplain for some nuns. I am a great fan of all things Scandinavian, and in Norwegian there is an expression: '*Ikke dårlig vær, bare dårlige klær.*' This translates as something like: 'There's no such thing as bad weather, only bad clothes.' (It is, of course, better in Norwegian, because it rhymes.) In our life as Christians, how much of the spiritual

'bad weather' that we encounter really just requires us (by God's love, as Lanspergius points out) to be wearing the spiritual 'good clothes' of patience and forbearance in order to transform it from an unbearable trial into something that, with God's help, we can bear?

It's a shame we are often so down on trials; St Benedict tells us not only that they will certainly come, but even that they will lead us to God, believe it or not. We really need to give up fighting trials, in a way: God allows them to happen for our benefit, it seems. I'm reminded of a scene in the Acts of the Apostles, where the eponymous Apostles are on trial before the Sanhedrin, and the Sanhedrin don't know what to do with them, and it is the wise rabbi Gamaliel who has the answer: 'Leave it, and see what happens. If it is not from God, it will die out; if it is from God, not only will you not be able to stop it, but you may even find yourselves fighting against God.' I think this last bit can be applied to our trials: if we try too hard to avoid them, maybe we will end up avoiding something which the Lord is intending to use to bestow a blessing upon us.

Let's ask the intercession of St John the Baptist, then, that we will have the grace to bear fruitfully any hardships and trials that the Lord allows to come our way. That way, we will receive the gift of peace, and it will be not only a peace that the world cannot give, but also a peace that the world cannot take away.

1699 words

Suggestions for Reflection

1. Thinking back, when have been the times in life when you have had to endure trials which, at the time, seemed intolerable but which, in hindsight, gave rise to blessings you might not otherwise have been able to receive?
2. If you are enduring any sort of trial at the moment, what is the Lord trying to teach you through it?
3. Choose a passage of scripture to ponder as *lectio divina*. If you are stuck for a passage, the following pages have some suggestions!

Ecclesiasticus 2:1-11

My son, if you come forward to serve the Lord,
prepare yourself for trials.
Set your heart right and be steadfast,
and do not be hasty in time of calamity.
Cleave to him and do not depart,
that you may be honoured at the end of your life.
Accept whatever is brought upon you,
and in changes that humble you be patient.
For gold is tested in the fire,
and acceptable men in the furnace of humiliation.
Trust in him, and he will help you;
make your ways straight, and hope in him.
You who fear the Lord, wait for his mercy;
and turn not aside, lest you fall.
You who fear the Lord, trust in him,
and your reward will not fail;
you who fear the Lord, hope for good things,
for everlasting joy and mercy.
Consider the ancient generations and see:
whoever trusted in the Lord and was put to shame?
Or whoever persevered in the fear of the Lord[b] and was forsaken?
Or whoever called upon him and was overlooked?
For the Lord is compassionate and merciful;
he forgives sins and saves in time of affliction.

1Kings19:1-13

Ahab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done, and how he had slain all the prophets with the sword. Then Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah, saying, "So may the gods do to me and more also, if I do not make your life as the life of one of them by this time tomorrow." Then he was afraid, and he arose and went for his life, and came to Beer-sheba, which belongs to Judah, and left his servant there. But he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a broom tree; and he asked that he might die, saying, "It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life; for I am no better than my fathers." And he lay down and slept under a broom tree; and behold, an angel touched him, and said to him, "Arise and eat." And he looked, and behold, there was at his head a cake baked on hot stones and a jar of water. And he ate and drank, and lay down again. And the angel of the Lord came again a second time, and touched him, and said, "Arise and eat, else the journey will be too great for you." And he arose, and ate and drank, and went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights to Horeb the mount of God.

And there he came to a cave, and lodged there; and behold, the word of the Lord came to him, and he said to him, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" He said, "I have been very jealous for the Lord, the God of hosts; for the people of Israel have forsaken your

covenant, thrown down your altars, and slain your prophets with the sword; and I, even I only, am left; and they seek my life, to take it away." And he said, "Go forth, and stand upon the mount before the Lord." And behold, the Lord passed by, and a great and strong wind rent the mountains, and broke in pieces the rocks before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a still small voice. And when Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave.

2Corinthians4:7-15

We have this treasure in earthen vessels, to show that the transcendent power belongs to God and not to us. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies. For while we live we are always being given up to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus may be manifested in our mortal flesh. So death is at work in us, but life in you. Since we have the same spirit of faith as he had who wrote, "I believed, and so I spoke," we too believe, and so we speak, knowing that he who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus and bring us with you into his presence. For it is all for your sake, so that as grace extends to more and more people it may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God.