

Home Retreat on Solitude

11 July 2020

This short talk provides a brief reflection on the value of solitude in the monastic tradition for the life of the Christian.

Introduction

It is implicit in the word ‘monk’ that the monastic life requires at least an element of solitude, *monachos* the Greek word for monk being drawn from *monos* meaning ‘alone’. The monk or nun is one who is called to spend time alone with God in prayer, even perhaps as a hermit, St Benedict noting in his *Rule* that there are those who ‘have built up their strength and go from the battle line in the ranks of their brothers to the single combat of the desert’.

But solitude is not simply a withdrawal from the world or from normal human society. Whilst it is true that the monastic life does involve a degree of detachment from even the good things of ordinary human existence, and an element of asceticism as part of this, the purpose of these practices is to provide time and space free of distractions, thus providing the basis for a recollected environment for prayer in which the monk can be drawn closer to God. Solitude, then, requires silence, the quality of both of these being important, as they form a preparation for listening to God. As a Carthusian writer has put it:

We are to be free within; our souls are not to be cluttered up with noise and sterile activities, but attentive and ready to detect the signs, sometimes so delicate, of the presence of the Lord speaking to our heart.

Listening to God

We might say, then, that the fundamental purpose of this solitude and its accompanying silence is to listen to God in prayer; and it is vital – both in the

sense of being necessary and in the sense of being life-giving. Created in the image and likeness of God, and redeemed in Christ, it is of our very being that we are formed for a relationship with God, and in the prayer of silent solitude God is ever active in fulfilling His work of creation and redemption, completing His work in us, a work of deep and abiding love. Our part is simply to be in His presence, learning to receive Him, learning to accept His love, listening to Him - amid whatever distractions we might encounter— even if what is ‘heard’ is not so much words, but an almost inexplicable experience of Him, seemingly unsatisfactory at times, that somehow we know we need and will make us whole.

To experience genuine solitude, we need some sort of structure to our life. Monks and nuns are helped in this by the pattern of the day in their monasteries that provides times for communal and private prayer, including *lectio divina*, as well as specified times of silence – activities that nourish silent prayer in solitude - but even then they need to work at this and to learn the self-discipline that makes these times fruitful.

The Example of Jesus

One way of developing the capacity for solitude is to meditate upon the example of Jesus in the Gospels, and to imitate him as we are able. In St Luke’s Gospel, in particular, we see Jesus withdrawing regularly to pray in silence, alone with his Father, from whom he gains his identity – ‘the Beloved Son’ – and the strength for his mission – ‘let your will be done, not mine’. We read in St Mark how after teaching and curing people in Capernaum, Jesus ‘in the morning, long before dawn... got up and left the house and went off to a lonely place and prayed there’, a practice, reflecting his need for communion with his Father, that we see evident at key times in his ministry, such as before the Choosing of the Twelve, and at times of crisis, such as when after the Feeding of the Five Thousand, as recorded by St John, Jesus had to resist the crowd’s desire to ‘take him by force and make

him king' and withdrew alone to the hills surrounding Lake Galilee to find solace and strength in solitary communion with God the Father.

Jesus, thus, provides us with a pattern of prayer alone with God, perhaps the most striking example of which is his temptation in the solitude of the Judaeen desert immediately after his baptism. St Mark gives us this account:

And at once the Spirit drove him into the desert and he remained there for forty days, and was put to the test by Satan. He was with the wild animals, and the angels looked after him.

This time in the desert, part of the preparation for his ministry, was clearly not a time of rest and comfort for Jesus. In fact, it was quite the opposite, his encounter with trial and temptation pointing to the fact that silent solitude is not simply closed in on itself, but has a dynamic quality. We cannot reduce God to our own dimensions; we are not in control, and one aspect of the prayer of solitude is that through an encounter with difficulty and struggle we are taught to hand ourselves over to God just as we are. As a Carthusian writer has put it:

To wish to come face to face with the light of God is deliberately to consent to expose all our faults and pettiness to the hard light of day.

When we recognise this happening, we may well feel ourselves to be among the 'wild animals' of the desert, but that is a good thing because it teaches us our need of God. This is part of the meaning of the saying of the desert fathers that 'the cell will teach you everything.' A necessary part of the Christian life is to recognise our frailty and weakness, to understand how we are tempted, to know that we are sinners in need of redemption, and to accept the love that God pours into our hearts to purify them, reducing the division within them, to know that we are forgiven, and thus for our loving desire for God to increase.

Any honest evaluation of our lives before God enables us to recognise that whilst we might desire God and want to love Him, our fallen nature is a hindrance to this

and that our wayward desires need to be overcome. Our prayer, then, should be for the desires of our heart to be purified and for a simple intention to love God to grow stronger within us.

The true meaning of solitude

There is, then, no value in solitude, in separation from the world and from others, for its own sake. Its value lies in the genuine encounter with God that this silence and solitude make possible, an encounter with the God who is love that brings us face-to-face with our need, that helps us to see just what we are really like, and through this when we recognise the love that God has for us, increases our love for God and for each other. As Christians, we do not live simply for ourselves – we are members of the Church, brothers and sisters in Christ – and our listening to, and growth in, the love of God should manifest itself in a growth in our love for others. St John makes this point very strikingly in his First Letter:

My dear friends, let us love each other, since love is from God and everyone who loves is a child of God and knows God. Whoever fails to love does not know God, because God is love. This is the revelation of God's love for us, that God sent his only Son into the world that we might have life through him. Love consists in this: it is not we who loved God, but God loved us and sent his Son to expiate our sins. My dear friends, if God loved us so much, we too should love each other.

True solitude permits an encounter with the living God, and of its nature is transformative, as it forms part of the Christian's sharing in the paschal mystery of Jesus' suffering, death and resurrection by which the believer is drawn into, and made a participator in, the mysterious inner life of overflowing and infinite love that is the Trinity of Father, Son and Spirit, which makes us whole and saves us.

A classic example of this transformation ('conversion of heart', we might say) in the history of monasticism is that of St Antony of Egypt, who after a lengthy period of solitude in the desert – which St Athanasius his biographer says included 20 years of almost total solitude – emerged with a physical appearance that reflected the inner purification of his heart. The silence and the asceticism of his solitude over such a prolonged period of time had exposed the dividedness of his heart, and the spiritual struggles – St Benedict's 'single combat of the desert' - which accompanied his growing recognition of his absolute need for God, taught him simply to offer himself to God just as he was, as a result of which transparency before God his heart was purified, was made whole – the necessary condition according to the monastic tradition (based on Jesus' teaching in the Beatitudes) to come to the vision of God, the final goal of the monastic and Christian life.

Suggestions

For those who would like to read or learn more about the importance of solitude in the Christian life, some ideas are offered below.

In his *Introduction to the Devout Life*, St Francis de Sales makes the helpful observation that:

Devotion is to be practised differently by the nobleman, the worker, the servant, the prince, the widow, the young girl, the wife. Even more than this, the practice of devotion has to be adapted to the strength, life-situation and duties of each individual.... Do you think... that it is suitable for a bishop to desire to live the life of a hermit like a Carthusian monk? If people with a family were to want to be like the Capuchins in not acquiring any property, if a worker spent a great deal of time in church like the member of a religious order, and if a religious was always subject to being disturbed in all sorts of

ways for the service of his neighbour like a bishop, would not such devotion be ridiculous, disorderly and intolerable?

It is an error, or rather a heresy, to try to exclude the devout life from the soldiers' regiment, the workers' shop, the court of rulers or the home of the married. It is true... that a devotion which is purely contemplative, monastic and religious cannot be practised in such occupations. However, besides these three sorts of devotion, there are many others suitable for leading to perfection those who live their lives in the world.

So, whilst not all of us are called to the type of solitude lived by St Antony in the desert - or to that practised in some monasteries - we are all called to take our faith seriously, to be devout, and times of silence and solitude can be helpful to all of us – monastics or not – when it comes to deepening our relationship with the Lord. For example, it was remarked of St John Henry Newman that he was 'never less alone than when alone.'

The following texts drawn from the monastic tradition might be helpful in thinking about how to pray in silent solitude, as well as the purpose of this prayer.

This is the advice of the anonymous author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* about how to pray alone with God in silence:

Lift up your heart to the Lord, with the gentle stirring of love, desiring him for his own sake and not for his gifts. Centre all your attention and desire on him and let this be the sole concern of your mind and heart.

For I tell you this, one loving blind desire for God alone is more valuable in itself, more pleasing to God and the saints, more beneficial to your own growth, and more helpful to your friends, both living and dead, than anything else you can do.

And so diligently persevere until you feel joy in it. For in the beginning it is usual to feel nothing but a kind of darkness about your mind; or as it were, a *cloud of unknowing*. You will seem to know nothing and to feel nothing except a naked intent toward God in the depths of your being... learn to be at home in this darkness.... For if, in this life, you hope to feel and see God as he is in himself it must be within this darkness and this cloud.

Keep at this work faithfully.... Then perhaps he might touch you with a ray of his divine light which will pierce the *cloud of unknowing* between you and him. He will let you glimpse something of the ineffable secrets of his divine wisdom and your affection will seem on fire with his love.

This account of an episode in the life of St Jerome in his hermitage in the Judaeian desert illustrates something of the experience of solitude and our self-offering to God, so that He can purify our hearts.

So Jerome worried and brooded, until suddenly he glimpsed a crucifix that had positioned itself between the dry branches of a dead tree. He threw himself on the ground, beating his breast with firm, sweeping movements...

It was not long before Jesus broke the silence and addressed Jerome from the cross. 'Jerome', he said, 'what do you have to give me? What am I getting from you?' That voice alone put fresh heart into Jerome again and he immediately began to wonder what he could offer his crucified friend.

'The loneliness, Lord', he answered. 'I offer you the loneliness with which I am struggling.'

'Excellent, Jerome', replied Jesus, 'and thank you very much. You have certainly done your best. But have you anything more to give me?'

Not for a moment did Jerome doubt that he had more to offer Jesus. ‘Of course, Lord’, he resumed. ‘My fasting, my hunger and thirst. I only eat after sundown.’

Again Jesus answered, ‘Excellent, Jerome, and thank you very much. I know it. You really have done your best. But have you anything else to give me?’

Again Jerome reflected on what he might be able to give Jesus. Successively he trotted out his vigils, his long psalmody, his study of the Bible night and day, the celibacy to which he dedicated himself as best he could, the lack of conveniences, the poverty, the most unexpected guests he tried to welcome without grumbling and with a not too unfriendly face, and finally the heat of the day and the chill of the night.

Each time Jesus congratulated him and thanked him. He had known for a long time that Jerome had meant very well. But with a half-smile on his lips, he persisted with his questions, asking for more: ‘Jerome, is there anything else you can give me? Or is this all?’

At long last Jerome summed up all the good things that he was able to scrape together from his memory. So when Jesus asked the question one more time he had no choice but, in great perplexity and almost total defeat to protest: ‘But, Lord, have I not given you everything? I have nothing further to offer.’

Then Jesus replied – and it became deathly quiet in the hermitage and in the whole Judean wilderness – and said, ‘But you do, Jerome. You have forgotten something: you must also give me your sins, that I may forgive them.’

When we have reached the end of our strength, when we have exhausted our resources, all that we can do – all that remains to be done, though in order of

priority it is really the first thing to be done, and it generally takes an encounter with suffering and failure to learn this lesson – is to give ourselves up to the Lord in true humility and love. To this end, many people find the Jesus Prayer a help:

Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the Living God, have mercy on me a sinner.