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The Spirit in the Desert

Only in the relations we have with one another can the love and mercy of God appear and become effective.

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If you are able to take away what in you stands between God and the neighbour, then your own healing as well as the other person's healing is set forward.

1
Life, Death, and Neighbours

I want to express the warmest of thanks to the World Community for Christian Meditation for their invitation to be here, because an invitation to address a group like this is always an open door into discovery of oneself. In preparing what I have to share with you in these few days, that has been very much my experience – a return to texts that are not entirely unfamiliar to me but which, because I have had to think them through and pray them through with you in mind, have spoken afresh. So thank you for what you have already told me even before I tell you anything.

Why the dessert fathers? The inspiration of the World Community itself, the spiritual roots of John Main, are so deeply interwoven with the desert tradition of early Christianity, above all with the writings of the great Cassian, that it seemed appropriate to look at those sources. That's why the context rather than simply thinking of meditation as such to see where that might lead.

It is very clear in the writings of the great monastics of the fourth and fifth centuries that contemplation, meditation, isn't and can never be something in itself. It is the fruit and the source of a renewed style of living together; it is inseparable from the reality of the body of Christ. What I want to do in these sessions is to look at certain aspects of how the life as a whole was understood by those early monastic writers, to see if we can be taken a bit further into understanding where the meditation came from and where it goes to. Because as we think about that, it seems to me, we touch on some of those wellsprings of renewal for our community as Christians. And so to this evening – Life, Death, and Neighbours.

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I have chosen those three words Life, Death, and Neighbours for this first session because they are words that are repeatedly

interwoven in some of the recorded sayings of the first couple of generations of desert monks.

You know the essentials of the history, that in the fourth Christian century an increasing number of Christians, worried by what they saw as the corruption or secularising of the church of their day, began to move into communities in the desert, some large some small. Many of them moved beyond that into solitude, in order to rediscover what it was that the church was there for – the question whose answer wasn't always completely obvious in the fourth century, as indeed it isn't always completely obvious now. What they dis-covered in the 'laboratory of the Spirit' that was the Egyptian and Syrian desert has to do not only with how you pray but how you under-stand your humanity. Hence Life, Death, and Neighbours, because our human life pivots around that cluster of realities for the desert monks.

You are going to hear a lot of quotation in the next few days; in other words I am going to let other people do the work for me. I am quoting from *The Sayings of Desert Fathers* translated by Benedicta Ward, a book which some of you will know, which I think is still in print and remains the best collection in English of the sayings of the desert fathers.

This is from St Anthony the Great, usually regarded as the founder of monasticism as we know it: 'Our life and our death is with our neighbour.'

> *Our life and our death is with our neighbour. If we gain our brother, we have gained God. If we cause our brother to stumble we have sinned against Christ.*

Further on and a generation or so later, we have Moses the Black, an Ethiopian and an extraordinary, literally larger-than-life person. Abba Moses wrote to Abba Poemen: 'The monk must die to his neighbour and never judge him at all in any way whatever.' A brother said, 'What does it mean to think in your heart that you are a sinner?' The old man said, 'If you are occupied with your own faults you have no time to see those of your neighbour.'

'Our life and our death is with our neighbour. If you gain the neighbour or the brother or sister, you gain God.' 'You must die to

your neighbour and never judge at all in any way whatever.' Gaining the neighbour or the brother or sister, in the language used here, seems very clearly to mean winning them for God. In a sense, you might say, converting them.

Here is a saying from Abba John the Dwarf:

> *You don't build a house by beginning with the roof and working down. You begin with the foundation.*
> They said, *'What does that mean?'*
> He said, '*The foundation is our neighbour whom we must win. That is the place to begin. Every commandment of Christ depends on this one.'*

To win, to gain the neighbour is to put them in touch with God. It is that reality of putting someone else *in touch* with God. That, I want to suggest, is fundamental for a great deal of understanding the spirituality of the desert. And the failure to put someone in touch with God, to create an obstacle in another's path, is a kind of rebellion against Christ.

The desert fathers were very interested indeed in what gets in the way here, in how we put obstacles between other people and God. They were well aware that one of the major temptations of being religious is to intrude between other people and God. We like to think that we know more about God than they do. We like to think that it is comfortable for us to control the neighbour and their access to God. You can read a good deal of the history of the church as a sustained attempt to police one another's relationships with God on the part of Christian people. The desert fathers didn't escape that by going to the desert. On the contrary in many ways they were concerned to draw it out with greater and greater clarity, to encourage and to foster greater and greater honesty about how we get in other people's way before God. And there are a number of instances which they habitually refer to of this kind of getting in the way.

One, interestingly, is a kind of *inattention* to somebody else. An inattention. We think we know what they need, and that almost always arises from a failure to attend to what they really *are*, and not attending to what a particular person can hear or what a

particular person can bear at any one point. That's something which recurs again and again. There are several versions of the story in which a young monk comes to an old one in something like despair and says: I have temptations. I have problems of this or that kind. I went to father so and so who said this is terrible; you must do seventeen years of penance, and I am not sure that I can stand seventeen years' penance. Have you got any advice for me, father? And the old man almost invariably says: Go and tell father so and so that father so and so who has recommended seventeen years' penance has not been paying attention.

Part of that of course relates to the concern shown by so many of the desert fathers about inappropriate kinds of harshness, looking down on others arising from the kind of self-confidence which is not appropriate. Macarius the Great and Poemen are remembered specifically for this. Of Macarius, we read unforgettably that it was said that he had become like a god in Scetis, the monastic area, because when he saw the sins of the brothers he would cast the cloak of his mercy over them. That's what God is like. That's what Macarius is like. Macarius was visiting another brother called Theopemptus.

> *When he was alone with him, the old man* [Macarius] *asked, 'How are you doing?' Theopemptus replied, 'Thanks to your prayers, fine. The old man asked 'Do not your fantasies war against you?' He replied, 'Well up to now it's alright.' He was afraid to admit anything. The old man Macarius said to him, 'Many years I have lived as an ascetic and everybody praises me, but though I am an old man I still have a lot of trouble with sexual fantasy.' Theopemptus said, 'Well, actually Father, it is the same with me.' The old man went on admitting, one after another, that other thoughts warred against him until he had brought Theopemptus to admit all of them himself.*

Being harsh on harshness recurs in many ways.

> *A brother questioned Abba Poemen saying, 'I have committed a great sin. I feel I must do three years' penance.' The old man said, 'That is quite a lot. The brother said, 'What about one year?' The old man said, 'That's still quite a lot.' 'Forty days?'*

Poemen said, 'That's a lot. For myself, I think if somebody repents with all his heart and does not intend to commit sin anymore, perhaps God would be satisfied with just three days.'

Harshness often comes from and goes with claims of superiority, and we have already seen how Macarius in particular turns that on its head. The gift of the spiritual director (the father, the abba here) in gaining the neighbour is a gift which has to do with identification. You can't say anything, you can't get anywhere, unless first and foremost the father, the director, the senior has put himself or herself on the level of the person asking the question. Hence, Macarius' wonderful therapeutic exposition of his own weakness so that the self-satisfied old monk gradually sees that it's alright to admit his.

Another story that recurs in a variety of forms is about occasions where the community at large has been eager to pass sentence and one of the great old men has countermanded it.

There was a brother at Scetis who committed a fault. They called a meeting and invited Abba Moses. He refused to go. The priest sent someone to say to him, 'Every-body is waiting for you.' So Moses got up and went. He took a leaking jug, and filled it with water and carried it with him. The others came out to meet him and said, 'What is this Father?' The old man said to them, 'My sins run out behind me; and I can't see them, yet here I am coming to judge the errors of somebody else.' When they heard that they cancelled the meeting.

The claims of superiority inherent in the eagerness to judge are again part of those obstacles we place between God and the neighbour. Repeatedly, as I say, we have greater men like Moses and others refusing, often in very dramatic ways, to take part in a kind of group scapegoating. Again a story is told of several people – they are invited to a council, as is Moses in that story, and judgement is passed. The great old man, whoever it is, gets up and walks out. 'Where are you going Father?' 'I have just been condemned.'

All these hang together as part of one indissoluble vision of spiritual and relational therapy. Inattention to the reality of the other leads to harshness. Harshness has to do with superiority; superiority

blinds to yourself and the other. And all these failures provoke despair or mistrust, which is the worst thing you can possibly do in relation to anyone else. That is why dying to the neighbour is part of living with the neighbour. The monk must die to his neighbour and not judge in anything, like Macarius covering the sins of the brethren as if he did not see them, and Abba Joseph's question 'Who am I?'

It's not a kind of indifferentism, that sin doesn't matter. It is just that the one place you can be certain of recognising failure, alienation from God, is in yourself. Hence the advice given by Moses to Poemen: If you have sin enough in your own life in your own house there is no need to go looking for it elsewhere. Or as another father puts it rather more graphically: When you have a corpse laid out in your own front room, you don't have time to go to a neighbour's funeral. That is a way not of minimising the seriousness of failure, but recognising that failure is only healed by humility and solidarity and not by condemnation.

How is sin to be dealt with? The temptation is always to say, 'I know how to deal with that in you; I am not so sure about myself, but I know how to deal with it in you.' The desert fathers are consistently saying – remember Abba John the Dwarf, 'don't start with the roof' – you deal with it first and foremost by standing *with* the sinner. Whatever is the matter, you are to be there alongside them first, last, and always. And again, a few examples:

A brother questioned Abba Poemen, 'If I see my brother committing a sin, should I conceal it? The old man said, 'The moment we hide our brother's fault God hides our own; and the moment when we reveal our brother's fault, God reveals our own.'

Some old men came to see Abba Poemen and said to him, 'We see some of the brothers falling asleep during the Divine Office. Should we wake them up?' He said, 'As far as I am concerned, when I see a brother who is falling asleep during the Divine Office, I put his head on my knees and let him rest.'

No, not indifference. But where do we start? With the identification, solidarity. That is what heals.

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2
Winning our Neighbour for God

If we are trying to reimagine what it is to lead the Christian life together, I think I would underline particularly two words which need redefining: one is *life;* one is *gain.*

Life here, the life that is with the neighbour, is primarily and precisely the life that is being free to let God give through you. Being free to let God give through you, because all these various pathologies of the spirit which arise in the common life – the urge to cement to your superiority, the urge to pass judgement and to shut out, all of these are ways of not allowing God to give through you. And *gain* – gaining the brother, gaining the neighbour – is conceived purely and simply as the freedom that comes from that transparency to God as it is experienced by the other person.

That puts some very severe questions to a lot of what we take for granted about common life. What if the real criteria for vital common life had to do with our failure or success in connecting another person with the possibility of reconciliation or of wholeness; whether we are able to connect someone else with reconciliation or wholeness? And we connect not by successfully ordering their lives towards reconciliation and wholeness, not by triumphantly solving their problems as we would love to do. We connect by our own willingness to face our weaknesses and our faults, our own connectedness with God's mercy. To live like that requires obviously a pervasive critical awareness of how much, in church and world, we are encouraged to be competitive, to imagine success in terms of the other's loss. We pretend it isn't so but as a matter of fact, in church or world, that's the model we work with.

I sometimes wonder what life in the church would be like if we had never developed the concept of winning and losing. In many of the great controversies that face the church at the moment, it seems increasingly clear that nobody is going to win. In other words,

there is not going to be a situation of sublime clarity in which one group's views will prevail because the other group simply says, 'Oh, I see it all now.' But if we are not in the business of winning and losing like that, what does the church look like? What if we were sufficiently *unafraid* – there's a key word – sufficiently unafraid to be able to put winning and losing on the back burner, to move away from the notion that my triumph is another's loss. What if we were able to think of the health of the Christian community in terms of our ability or otherwise, our freedom or otherwise, to connect one another with the wellsprings of reconciliation? We may not know positively how to do that in a triumphant and comprehensive way, but the desert fathers do at least give us some fairly searching criteria which help us to know how not to do it.

Dying to the neighbour is not being afraid. And that can only come, as I have said, from the sense of our own deep connectedness with the mercy of God. It is easy to caricature this as a faintly complacent picture: Nobody is going to win so why struggle? Nobody knows who is right so why bother? God is always merciful so why not relax? God will forgive; that's what we pay him for, as one of those late 18th century French cynics observed.

What makes this not complacent in the desert fathers especially, I think, is that pervasive sense of shared frailty. Macarius, Moses, Poemen and all the other great names are at one and the same time strenuous and relaxed. Most of us know what is to be strenuous, know what it is to be relaxed, but we are not very good at holding them together. We think strenuousness is tension, being strung to a tight pitch; we think relaxation is a sort of slackness, a letting go. What I read in the sayings of the great old men and women of the desert is something that doesn't easily fall into those rather clichéd terms. There is an extraordinary poignant sense of sin. Sometimes a young monk will say to an old one, 'We so admire your penance and your asceticism. Don't you think you've earned your way to heaven by now?' And the old man says, 'No, if I had three lifetimes I could not make up for the mess I have made of my life.'

Take that out of its context, and a sort of Lutheran objection arises: Don't these people believe in the free grace of God? The

answer I think is yes they do, and that's why the awareness that they have of this frailty, this sinfulness, which even three lifetimes couldn't atone for. It goes hand in hand with the extraordinary tenderness that they ascribe to God and show to one another. If your sins are that serious then you may very well spend a lifetime weeping and doing penance, not because you are making something up to God but because that is how it is to experience yourself as a failure, a sinner, and a sufferer, but so far from that providing a whole catalogue, a whole system of condemnatory regulation. That is precisely what allows you to hear and to understand the tears and the self-hatred of somebody else.

Let me go back to a phrase I used a bit earlier: Sin is healed by solidarity. The monks of the desert were looking for solitude but not isolation. A good deal of research has been done in the last couple of decades on the importance of community to these people and the way in which time and again in the narratives, in the sayings that stem from them, the point is reinforced. Only in the relations they have with one another can the love and mercy of God appear and become effective. And those mutual relations have to do with that identification, that solidarity, that willingness to stand with the accused, and the condemned. Somehow, it's in that action that the real healing occurs.

Prayers and fasting, sleepless nights and asceticism – various of the Fathers take varying views of it. Most of them are sceptical about how significant that is. But if you are able in some sense to take away what in you stands between God and the neighbour, then your own healing as well as the other person's healing is set forward. So asceticism is not simply about loading your body with chains, spending thirty years on top of a pillar, sleeping two hours a night, or whatever. It is about learning to contain that aspect of acquisitive human instinct that drives us constantly to compete and to ignore what is around us. Asceticism is a purification of seeing. It is not self-punishment but a way of the eyes.

The whole of this life is about being instrumental to someone else's path to reconciliation. It may well be that we arrive at heaven, if we ever do, slightly puzzled by how we got there as no doubt we all

shall be, and it is explained to us that we're there simply because at some moment or other we actually served another's path to reconciliation. Maybe we barely noticed it. But that's what we're there for – for each of us to find how exactly we are to be the means for someone else to connect with reconciliation. It would be very different depending on who we are, what our responsibilities are, what our own inner blockages are as well, and the way in which each one of us overcomes his or her instinct towards exclusion or judgement. That will depend on, a great deal, with our histories and our temperament.

Nonetheless, our life and our death remain with our neighbour. Our life is with our neighbour because we are alive in God when and only when God's reconciling presence is through us somehow connected with the reality of the neighbour. Our death is with our neighbour because letting go of all these things which we so love – the moral high ground, the conviction of victory – is a kind of death. If we gain the neighbour, we gain Christ because it is as we connect the other with the source of reconciliation that we come to stand in the place once and for all cleared for us and defined for us by Jesus Christ. Our life and our death are with our neighbour. If we gain the neighbour, we gain God.

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3
Silence and Honey Cakes

Here's a story about two of the desert monks who had obviously very distinctive personalities indeed. One of them is Abba Arsenius. Arsenius had been tutor to the imperial family and a senior civil servant in Constantinople, and had then gone off to become a monk. He was a man of enormous cultivation and education, who was renowned in the desert for his humility. He was renowned for silence and seclusion as well, and you will see in a moment what that involved. The other character involved in the story is our friend Moses, Moses the Ethiopian, Moses the Black.

A brother came to see Abba Arsenius at Scetis. When he came to the church he asked the clergy if he could go and visit Abba Arsenius. They said to him, 'Have something to eat and then go and see him.' 'No, he said I shall not eat anything until I have met him.' So, because Arsenius' cell was far away, they sent a brother with him.

He knocked on the door, went in, greeted the old man, and sat down without saying anything. The brother from the church said 'I'll leave you now for a few minutes. Pray for me.' The visitor did not feel at ease with the old man and he said, 'I'll come with you.' And off they went together. Then the visitor said, 'Take me to Abba Moses who used to be a highwayman. When they arrived, Abba Moses welcomed them joyfully and took leave of them with great expressions of delight.

Now the brother who had brought the visitor said to his companion, 'I've taken you to the foreigner, that is Arsenius, and to the Egyptian, Moses. Which of the two do you prefer? As for me I prefer Moses.' One of the fathers heard this and he prayed to God 'Lord, explain this matter to me. For your

sake one flees from human beings, and the other for your sake receives human beings with open arms.' Then two large boats were shown to him floating on the river. In one of them he saw Abba Arsenius and the Holy Spirit of God in perfect quiet. And in the other boat was Abba Moses with the angels of God and they were all eating honey cakes.

That wonderful little story is perhaps one of the most vivid expressions of that theme in the desert fathers: the distinctiveness of people's calling.

The sin which I mentioned last night, of inattention, not being sensitive to the difference in people's callings, remains one of the great worries, one of the great corrupting and frustrating factors in spiritual life. Here we have two people reacting totally differently to human contact and human interest. One withdraws into silence, one embraces, and they are both alright; silence and honey cakes are equally acceptable.

But that particular vision is expressed perhaps even more economically in a very brief anecdote which is attached sometimes to St Anthony the Great.

It was revealed to Abba Anthony the Great in his desert that there was somebody in the city who was his spiritual equal. He was a doctor by profession. Whatever he had beyond his needs he gave to the poor and everyday he sang the Sanctus with the angels.

That later on becomes elaborated into an anecdote in which some great old man says, 'Is there anybody who is as holy as I am?' And God takes him off to the city and shows him somebody extremely ordinary just doing their job. That illustrates in concrete form that there is a kind of standing-back before the mystery of the other. There are no standardised generalised forms of holiness. Each one needs to discover what their path is.

A brother asked one of the fathers, 'Are you defiled by having evil thoughts?' There was a discussion on the subject, and some said 'Yes' and others said 'No'. The brother went to a

very experienced old man to question him about the discussion. The old man said to him, 'What is required of each one is regulated according to their capacity.'

What is required of each one is regulated by their capacity; you can see why, in the light of that, the whole business of passing judgement is so impossible, passing judgement in the sense that the desert fathers so deplore. How do you know how hard pressure or temptation bore on somebody? The temptation which might seem to you trivial, might be to another, crushing. How are you able to say everybody ought to be the same kind of ascetic? What is hard for you might be easy for someone else; what is easy for you might be hard for someone else.

There is an anecdote again of Abba Arsenius. Someone is complaining about the fact that Arsenius doesn't seem to exhibit quite the same degree of physical asceticism as everybody else. The old man who is dealing with the complainant says, 'When you were in the world what were you?' 'I was a father,' says the monk. 'And when you retired at night where did you go to bed?' 'Just rolled up in a corner of the hut,' said the ex-father. 'Then what did you have to eat in the morning?' 'Oh, just a little bit of maize porridge.' And the old man says, 'When Abba Arsenius was in the world, he slept between sheets of silk every night and breakfasted off gold plates. You have experienced very little change in becoming a monk.'

So, individual vocation, standing back before the mystery of the other. And that standing back before the mystery of the other means that each person is given room in this spiritual world, room to grow as God wills.

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4
Self-discovery

In the life of the desert is the discovery of who you actually are. The burden that lays on you can be quite considerable. Because to discover before God who you really are is less cosy that it might sound. We live in a world where self-discovery and self-expression sound wonderful: 'If only everybody else would go away, if only everybody else would stop telling me what to do, then I would be so marvellous, then my self would flower wonderfully in all its creativity, beauty and complexity.' Yes, say the desert fathers, but the trouble is that if everybody else were taken away, you wouldn't have a clue who you were. And finding out who you were in the eyes of God would actually be a long and painful job.

Again and again in the literature of the desert you come up against that fundamental principle, self-criticism, which says to you, 'I haven't yet found who I am.' I can't express myself because I don't know who I am yet; and what I want to express, what feels like honesty and rampant integrity and deep creativity is actually very likely to be just another manifestation of all those rather trivial, rather self-seeking motivations which I'd like to think I have left behind. Very briefly put, it's letting go of self-justification. That particular kind of creating one's own image and one's own self-hood that will justify oneself, that will enable oneself to say, 'Well I have made it now; I can relax.'

Only the mystery of God is going to tell me who I am. And facing that mystery in its fullness is going to require of me an enormous dispossession of the things that look as if they are going to tell me who I am. John the Dwarf, Abba John, said:

We have put the light burden on one side, that is to say self-accusation, and we have loaded ourselves with a heavy burden, self-justification.

Self-justification is in fact something inimical to the true self. Self-accusation, that is self-questioning, self-criticism, is the lighter burden strange as it may sound. Self-expression, self-discovery, self-realisation, since we have no idea in the beginning what that self is, becomes a journey in the dark, a journey of labour, pain and patience.

Abba Isidore the Priest writes about the danger of being 'guided by our hearts'. That sounds rather strange. It is the wisdom of the saints, said Abba Isidore, to recognise the will of God, and it is in obeying the truth that the human being surpasses everything else, being the image and likeness of God. Of all evil suggestions, the most terrible is that of following one's own heart (how we would love to be able to say following our own heart, following our truth, following our dream is what it's all about) because following one's own heart without the critical edge of the truth, in which alone we become the image and likeness of God, is a path to disaster. It must be God who tells me who I am, not the hidden agenda of my ego or yours. I would like to tell myself who I am, I would like to tell you who you are, and sometimes I would like you to tell me who I am. So in human relations, we become locked more and more tightly into a sort of vast collusion, a collective fantasy about the truth. We long for someone else to confirm what we are, to support our needs, the agenda of our ego.

In the world of the desert, stepping back from all that is the necessary path to truth. And sometimes in the desert world, the desert fathers often speak of that weeping for our failure, our failure to be open to the God who will tell us who we are, our failure to become who God wants us to be, who God sees us as being.

We live these days in a society that is both deeply individualist and deeply conformist. Our society is fascinated by the individual will. We find it quite strange as a society to think of lives that are not shaped by the exercise of will and choice, and we regard choice frequently as the highest possible good. We like the idea of the mature human being being in a position to impose his or her will by absolute free choice on the environment. At the same time we are deeply conformist because choice is in fact managed for us very efficiently by an immense system of consumer provision. Maximising choices

means maximising the products that somebody is in fact designing for you, and that means at the end of the day that our choices are always and already channelled into conformist patterns. Choice as such, just the capacity to say yes or no, that is in fact one of the least personal things about us. The person who has really matured as a person is perhaps the person who thinks least about choice.

Strange to say this, but it casts for me quite a lot of light on the mystery of the free will of Jesus. Theologians have often argued about whether Jesus had human free will in the sense that we do, as if somehow Jesus would be less human if at every point of his life he didn't face exactly the same range of consumer choices we do. So in the Garden of Gethsemane, what was going on? Was Jesus really faced with the kind of human choice we might have, to stay or to run? Or did he *have* to do what he did? There is a very profound sense in which in the Garden of Gethsemane Jesus didn't have a choice because of who he was. Because having matured in steady fidelity to God the Father, the choice to betray would have been a violation of everything he was, a tearing of the very fabric of his being.

If you think about people whose moral and spiritual integrity has mattered to you, if you think about what their lives are like, you may very well recognise what's going on here. These are people who, it may be, don't need to choose very much because they have become habituated to seeing and responding in certain ways. We very often, struggling down in the foothills, need the disciplines of choosing, need to be very self-aware of what's going on. But perhaps when spiritual maturity arrives, there isn't very much choice. And that is not a diminution but an expansion of the personal, because here is someone, who by a long and hard route, has become someone whose seeing and responding is instinctively truthful. You don't have to think about it. You have been habituated to seeing and responding truthfully. The person is something more, something more than the ego; it's that integral response to truth which is something deeper than satisfying a system of wants.

An unspoken theme that I have in mind is how all of this, this sense of the authentically human, depends and can only depend on

the quality of our silence – the need to let go of words in certain ways, that willingness to occupy a space before God which is not a defended territory, defended against God or against anyone else. And because we occupy a space that isn't a defended territory, it is space both for God and for each other. We are moving beyond our fascination, our hypnosis by the ideas of choice and individuality as conceived in the modern world, moving towards the possibility of a human life characterised by consistent instinctive responsiveness to the truth, acquiring an instinctive taste for truth. A taste for truth, that's to say an appetite for what is real, so strong that it allows us constantly to keep ourselves in question, under scrutiny, not in an obsessional way but just going on asking, 'Who is being served here? The ego or the truth?'

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5
Leaving

Leaving or, in the language of many of the desert fathers, fleeing is one of the words that you will find most frequently in the literature: flee, run, get away. Here are a few examples.

Arsenius, you remember, was tutored in the imperial family while still living in the palace. Arsenius prayed to God in these words, 'Lord lead me in the way of salvation.' A voice came saying to him 'Arsenius, flee from men and you will be saved.' Abba Isaiah questioned Abba Macarius saying 'Give me a word.' The old man said to him, 'Flee from men.' Abba Isaiah said to him 'What does it mean to flee from men?' The old man said, 'It means to sit in your cell and weep for your sins.' Theodore of Pherme – it was said of Abba Theodore that the three things he held to be fundamental were poverty, asceticism, and flight. The great John Cassian said the two things above all to be avoided by monks were women and bishops. So there is another kind of fleeing involved there.

In a vital community there is always the space for the person to become who they are before God. For that to happen requires quite a dramatic, quite a positive withdrawal from certain systems that enjoin conformity, and from systems and habits that enslave us in the cycle of trying to dominate and trying to manipulate. What the desert fathers are saying when they speak about flight, about running away, is this persistent and sometimes quite dramatic saying 'no' to the systems of conformity and projection and slavery. Not fleeing in order to avoid responsibility; not fleeing from relation; not even fleeing from community; fleeing in one sense for the sake of community. So fleeing from other human beings is fleeing from the projections and the expectations that they load on you and you load on them.

That can be expressed in a huge variety of ways. Things you are supposed to run away from include for example running away from thoughts, which doesn't mean what goes on in your mind but means

chains of obsessional fantasy which take us over, those few gold fantasies that so occupy our minds if we let them. We could also flee from dignity, from status and position. Or we could just talk about fleeing from human beings. You can flee from speech as well. But all this seems to add up to a basic recommendation of withdrawal from self-definition provided by a shortcut through other people, and from our own self-depictions. Fleeing from human beings, from projection, from thoughts, from dignity, from fantasies about yourself, and fleeing from talking.

> *Abba Macarius one day said to the brothers at Scetis when he dismissed the assembly, 'Flee brothers!' One of the old men asked him 'Where could we flee to, we are on this desert?' Macarius put his finger on his lips and said, 'Flee that.' And he went into his cell, shut the door and sat down.*

You could almost imagine the scene. A slightly jaded monk saying, 'Flee but where to?' as he looks around the sands of the Egyptian desert. 'Haven't we flown far enough?' Macarius says 'Yes, but you are still talking, aren't you?' The running away there is from something which will cheapen, extinguish, weaken what's actually given to us.

There is a very fine line it seems between becoming the person God wants us to be with the kind of integrity and fullness we were reflecting on this morning, and then trying to lay hold on that identity given by God in such a way that we can project it, use it, and that we can actually make a tool of the identity given to us. That seems to be what the fathers are trying to undermine here and you could say fleeing here is a matter of running from what's easy. Running from what's easy. We've seen here, what's easy can include giving and accepting roles from one from another. We've seen that there are all kinds of shortcuts to finding who we are, and it's the avoidance of those shortcuts that I think this flight business is all about.

This also relates to some of what I was saying this morning about self-justification. That's one of the things you flee from because the projection of an imagined self, the projection of the self you would like to be and can manage, is in fact a very, very heavy task. However difficult the job is of fleeing, saying no to the shortcuts, however

difficult that job is, it is not actually nearly so difficult as sustaining on and on the various fictions, the labour of projection. That is manifestly something significant in a world of projected images and obsessional talk, such as all of live in, in and out of the church.

What strikes me as most important in this particular area of the reflection of the desert fathers is its relevance to where we are now. Projection controls us in all kinds of ways. We are invited and encouraged to project ourselves, to assert who we think we are in a set of relations that is essentially a contest of our power. And we are surrounded by and manipulated by the projected images of others. We live in a world in which politics is increasingly reduced to a kind of market in celebrity, in which politics and show business coincide more and more uncomfortably. We have to think about the ways in which our own patterns of life are similarly about projection and being projected upon, manipulating and being manipulated. Where then does the discipline of flight, leaving, fleeing come in?

It is a discipline certainly, as the fathers say to us, that has to do with speech, how we talk. I suppose that has to do ultimately, for the Christian certainly, with the sense of what the Word of God truly is. God speaks into darkness a word of creation and the word that God speaks sets up the endless harmonics of sounds in the world; and as we speak, we try to speak truthfully. Perhaps what we are doing is far less to hang labels round the necks of the things of the world, but to try and find those harmonics, to try and speak in tune with that Word first spoken into silence and darkness.

The image often comes to me of creation as if first God makes a cave, and then breathes into it, speaks into it a word, and from the cave the echoes come back, differently pitched, to create a world of word. And we find our place in that, listening for the harmonics, trying to speak in tune with them, not to speak from our will or our passion for control, but almost to speak because we want to join in what an earlier generation would call the music of the spheres.

Those people of faith who like myself spend a lot of time speaking in public need to think even harder about it. How do we speak in such a way that we make space for people? Only, I think, by looking for the harmonics that the Word of God sets up, by refusing mass

pressures, by becoming in our speaking as in our living a kind of invitation into the harmonics of God's world, into the resonances and echoes set up by that primordial utterance of God into the cave of creation.

In terms of the percentage of space that the desert fathers have locked to various sins and failures, this sort of thing we might regard as the prime target for talking about sin. Things like, areas like anger and sexuality don't feature that largely. There is certain amount about resentment, a fair bit about erotic fantasy, but absolutely nothing compared with this area, this fundamental area of our sin or our error or however you want to put it, which has to do with our misrecognition of what sort of beings we are. That misrecognition, which is expressed in passing judgement on others and clinging to fantasies of ourselves, that is the massive bulk of sin that has to be shifted. And unless we shift that, it is a complete waste of time addressing anything else.

It might be that all this stuff about fleeing and leaving is a bit like a word which I have used with some of you before, that wonderful word again from Simone Weil about *hesitation*. For her, part of the essence of spiritual maturity is hesitation, leaving the life-giving gap between you and the act and the person. Not so projecting your ego straightaway into a situation that you move right into solving it in your own terms, a drawing away for the sake of the other and for the sake of the truth. I think at the end of the day, this language about leaving and fleeing, running, is about the need constantly for us to be moving back into stillness, checking the impulsion to project and control, and moving back into the stillness where God draws us. And it is in that sense that leaving is bound up with staying.

Let me leave you with a couple of the sayings that relate to this. Abba Or propounded this saying: 'If you are fleeing, flee from human beings; otherwise the world and those who live in it will make you do foolish things. Abba Io questioned Abba Macarius and said, 'Give me one word.' Abba Macarius said to him, 'Flee from human beings, stay in your cell, shed tears for your sins. do not be gratified by the conversation of human beings, and you will be healed.'

▪

6
Staying

Amma Syncletica said:

> *If you find yourself in a monastery do not go to another place, for that will harm you a great deal. Just as the bird who abandons the eggs she was sitting on prevents them from hatching, so the monk or the nun grows cold and their faith dies when they go from one place to another.*

Our friend Moses the Black again.

> *A brother came to Scetis to visit Abba Moses and asked him for a word. The old man said to him, 'Go sit in your cell and your cell will teach you everything.'*

Sit in your cell, your cell will teach you everything. One of the things that the desert fathers most frequently return to is the problem of the rootless ascetic, the person who is always looking for the best place to be: 'This isn't quite good enough; I could be really holy if I was somewhere else. The old man who is looking after me here in the desert is not quite as spiritual and inspiring as some old men. I am not quite sure who they are, but I am sure I could find them if I left and looked.' That's the problem as it presents itself in general terms of stability.

But it is analysed with even more wit and perception by the great Evagrius at the end of the 4th century when he provides the first sustained discussion in Christian literature of the problem of what is sometimes called acedia or accedie, the sort of listlessness, depression, restlessness that comes out of boredom. You're in the cell, it's a hot sticky day, it's nearly lunch time but it feels like a very long time to go. You've had a rather dull morning, washing or plaiting reeds to make baskets; it's a long time since breakfast. 'Is this life really worthwhile? It doesn't feel very holy; I ought to be

making more progress. But then again the way you really make progress is to go out and be useful somewhere. Why don't I go to be useful somewhere? Why don't I go and visit one of the brothers who would love to see me? I might have something useful to say to them. Why don't I go to Alexandria and make my name as a great servant of God's poor? Why don't I…?' And the hours move on and the sun rises higher in the sky.

Evagrius with great perception identifies a feeling which is known to all of us in varying degrees in the routine of our lives. How do we *stay* with ourselves? How do we stay in the cell? The problem of the fact that unreality always looks so much more attractive than reality. Unreality always looks more attractive than reality, and so we always think if only a few circumstances were a bit different I could be a much better, nicer, more interesting and holier person. And while it is undoubtedly true that I could be a very much nicer, more interesting, holier person, the temptation to be avoided is thinking I can get there by being somewhere else.

We might use temptation and stress as an excuse for moving on – this is clearly not working for me; I ought to be somewhere else. The fathers used to say:

> *If a temptation comes to you in the place where you live, do not leave the place at the time of temptation, for wherever you go, you will find what you were running away from is there before you. Stay until the temptation has passed so that if you depart it won't cause offence, it won't cause distress to others in that place.*

You don't solve the boredom, the itch and ache of living with yourself by changing where you are. It is put very vividly in another of the anonymous sayings: 'Warfare is everywhere.' Warfare is everywhere. There was a brother who was a hesychast, that is a practitioner of deep silent prayer, in a monastery, but he often got angry.

> *He said within himself, 'I will go and live apart alone. If I have nothing to do with anyone else, my anger will cease. So he went away and lived in solitude in a cave. One day when'd*

> *filled his jug with water, he put it on the ground, and it fell over. He picked it up and filled it again, and it fell over again. He filled it a third time and put it down, and it fell over again. He was furious and picked it up and threw it at the wall. And he recognised that he had been deceived by the enemy. He said, 'Since I have been overcome even in solitude, I'd better go back to the monastery. Warfare is everywhere. But so is endurance, and so is the help of God.' So he got up and went back.*

Everywhere there is warfare, and staying – the most difficult job in the world – is just doing the next thing you've got to do. Once again, from the anonymous series which has a whole cluster of sayings on this:

> *A brother asked an old man, 'What shall I do? My thoughts trouble me. They say, "You can neither fast nor work; at least go and visit the sick, this is charity." The old man said to him, 'Go. Eat, drink and sleep. But don't leave your cell. You must realise that it is endurance in the cell that leads the monk to his full stature.'*
>
> *And for three days the brother did this. Then he began to suffer from boredom,* accedie. *So he found some palm leaves and trimmed them, and the next day he began to plait them. And as he was labouring he said, 'Here are some more palm leaves; I'll prepare them and then I'll eat.' He finished the palm leaves and said, 'Perhaps I will read a little then eat.' When he had done some reading he said, 'Now I'll chant some Psalms.' And so by the help of God he advanced little by little till he reached his full stature.*

The extraordinary prosaic character of holiness, which consists in doing the next thing, is a very difficult thing for us to come to terms with when we would like to think that being holy requires of us being extraordinary. Extraordinary, that is in our own terms. We would like to be noticed; we would like our lives to be dramatic, to speak in compelling ways. And here are the desert fathers saying to us: Do the next thing – eat, drink, sleep, plait a few leaves, or whatever the

equivalent is in your domestic situation.

And again, there is here a very clear, a very important commitment to the notion that you can't hurry the processes of growth. 'I'd like to be holy; I can make myself holy by being somewhere else or being someone else.' The last thing I want to do is the first thing I have to do. I need to start, but it is very difficult to start because I want to finish. I quoted Syncletica earlier, on hatching the eggs in the cell. She also writes or says,

> *There are many who live in the mountains and behave as if they were in the towns. It is possible to be a solitary in your mind while living in a crowd. And it is possible for one who is a solitary to live in a crowd of their own thoughts.*

Solitude in itself can be a very crowded place, but if we learn what it is to be solitary in a crowd, we've learnt to carry our cell with us, because our solitude becomes again an expression of that fidelity to who we are and where we are before God. And all that we do, if we are learning to be solitary in a crowd, comes to be an expression of faithfulness.

The fleeing that we were thinking about yesterday, running away, is not running from the real world but running *into* it, running into reality from the various kinds of managed and manipulated unreality which we habitually live in the midst of. Hence everything comes finally to staying, pledging the body. Only in the body is the soul saved.

It can sound as if going into the desert, in this tradition, is going into a kind of nowhere. Going into the desert is not going to be nowhere. It is going to discover a very particular kind of somewhere: To be yourself, your body with these people in this place with the sand and the rock and the extraordinarily annoying monk in the next hut, and the intense boredom of basket-making. Anchor yourself. You just have to *be* there, to make this *your* place.

Only in the body, through the body is the soul saved. Only as myself, my body pledged in this place, am I healed. And being my body pledged in this place is being with, pledged to the others God has given me here, a here that may be a monastic community, a

here that may be a family, a here that may be a church full of people with whom I am in all sorts of deep disagreement. It's not only in the monastic life that we think 'I could be so holy if only I was somewhere else.' We all of us have, somewhere in our minds, that wonderful dream of the real church that we ought to be able to occupy, the real church that's full of people like *me*. And the church that God gives me is of course dramatically different from that. And the pledging of my body to the actual ecclesial community that's there with all its faults and its horrors and its nuisances, its frustrations, and sometimes its outrages, that also is part of what God asks of us, because only in the togetherness does healing happen.

God has spoken to us in particulars. God has anchored the divine life in a body, a body that literally lived and died on this earth, a body that rose from the grave, and a body that now exists in the concrete reality of embodied Christian people by the gift of the Holy Spirit. If that's the case, then our healing is bound to be connected with the where and the who and the when. That's where we are meant to be. That's where meaning and glory descend. That's the cell. And as we turn repeatedly to God in the silence of contemplation, in the ordinariness of daily duty, just once in a while perhaps we catch a glimpse, round the corner of our vision, of the fire that actually surrounds us, in which the Son of God moves with us in the body and through time, a desert filled with flame.

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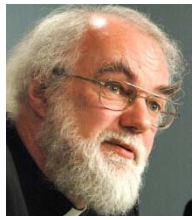
Asceticism is not self-punishment; it is a purification of seeing. It is about learning to contain that aspect of acquisitive human instinct that drives us constantly to compete and to ignore what is around us.



ROWAN WILLIAMS is acknowledged internationally as an outstanding theological writer, scholar, and teacher. He was Archbishop of Canterbury from 2002 to 2012, and he has held prestigious chairs at both Oxford University and Cambridge University. His books include *Lost Icons*, *Being Christian*, and *The Wound of Knowledge*.

In these talks Rowan Williams draws on the wisdom of the Fathers and Mothers of the Egyptian Desert in the fourth century, from which our tradition of Christian meditation has emerged. He reflects on questions that deeply touch our modern lives. How do we live in relationship with others? How do we discover the truth about ourselves? What are our priorities, our fears? What is the place of silence, of language? How do we live within our own limitations? Rowan Williams encourages us to enter into the challenges and simplicity of the desert and find healing for our fragmented condition.

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