

FRIENDS OF AUGUSTINE

AUGUSTINE FOR TODAY



THE DESERT

THOUGHTS FOR LENT

THE WORD

The Spirit drove Jesus out into the wilderness and he remained there for forty days, and was tempted by Satan. He was with the wild beasts, and the angels looked after him.

Mk. 1:12-13

After sending the crowds away Jesus went up into the hills by himself to pray.

Mt. 14:23

Then he took them with him and withdrew to a town called Bethsaida where they could be by themselves.

Lk. 9:10

Elijah walked for forty days and forty nights until he reached Horeb, the mountain of God. There he went into the cave and spent the night in it... Then he was told, "Go out and stand on the mountain before the Lord. Then the Lord himself went by. There came a mighty wind, so strong it tore the mountain and shattered the rocks before the Lord. But the Lord was not in the wind. After the wind came an earthquake. But the Lord was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake came a fire. But the Lord was not in the fire. And after the fire there came the sound of a gentle breeze. And when Elijah heard this, he covered his face with his cloak and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave.

1.Kings. 19:9-13.

FROM AUGUSTINE

The Christian may sometimes envy
those who have renounced the cares of the world
for the supposed calm of the desert;
but then those who live in the world
may at any time find within themselves the true desert,
where no one enters,
where no one is with you,
but where there is only you and God.

It is hard to find Christ in crowded places.
We need solitude.
If your heart is attentive,
God allows himself to be seen.
In the crowd you will find noise,
in the silence you find God.

**Enter into yourself,
leave all noise and confusion.
God speaks to us in the great silence of the heart**

REFLECTION

The theme of the desert recurs throughout the Scriptures and the development of Christian spirituality throughout the ages. Aloneness with God is understood as an essential element in spiritual growth.

The desert is a powerful place, it is a place where one lives on the edge. It is a place where there is little protection. It is a place where, without the trappings which go with everyday life, one is faced with great and ultimate realities. It is not surprising that in the story of God's people the desert is often the arena in which God acts and in which God's will is made clear. It was in the years of wandering after the departure from Egypt that God formed the former slaves into a people. It was in the desert experiences of defeat and exile that God recalled and reformed the people who wandered far from the purity of the relationship into which they had been called. Hosea, who likened Israel to his faithless wife, speaking in the name of God, said that the loving God would allow Israel to experience the desert of desolation so that he could heal and restore:

*That is why I am going to lure her and lead her out into the
wilderness
and speak to her heart . . .
There she will respond to me as she did when she was young,
as she did when she came out of the land of Egypt (Ho.2:16 -
17)*

In his own life Jesus too knew the need for the desert and for lonely places. The Public Ministry began only after Jesus had spent forty days and forty nights in the desert where he had been driven by the Spirit (Mk.1:12-13.). In the desert Jesus was face to face with the Father and with the demons. In the desert Jesus was open to the goodness of the Father and it was in the desert that he faced the power of evil. The desert brings one to the ultimate questions and personal challenges.

At other times in his ministry Jesus withdrew into lonely places to be alone with the Father. Sometimes he took his friends aside to a place where they could be alone. It was after such a time, when his friends witnessed him at prayer, that they asked him, "Lord, teach us to pray."

Augustine knew the need for the desert and he also knew the need to share the desert time with others. He loved to share the prayer, the search, the discussion and reflection with his friends. He constantly gathered round him friends to share the deepest longings of the heart.

Above all, Augustine knew the need to be totally alone with God. But Augustine was not called to the life of the solitary, he did not try to model his life on that of the desert hermits. Instead Augustine learnt to withdraw into the immense space of his heart. There he discovered God and there he faced his struggles. Throughout his life, even in the midst of all the activity of his ministry in Hippo, Augustine returned to his heart and created, in the everyday business of life, desert time and desert space. Augustine knew:

God speaks to us in the great silence of the heart

POINTS TO PONDER

- What does the idea of the desert mean to me?
- Do I make space in my own life for “desert time” by myself?
- Do I go off into the “desert” with friends to share the journey?
- What action do I need to take for myself?

FROM ANOTHER TRADITION

Just behind the Priory, off the coast of Lindisfarne, there is a little island called either Hobthrush or St Cuthbert’s Island. The island, like Holy Island, is accessible at low tide. It was to this island that, when he was living in the Lindisfarne community, St Cuthbert would withdraw from time to time to be alone. For the space of a tide he could be cut off from the main island and be alone with God.

Anyone who has spent time on Holy Island knows the healing which takes place when the tide rises and the island goes into quietness. This has brought many to a realisation of the need to have times of withdrawal, silence and stillness. The image of the rising tide cutting off Lindisfarne and Hobthrush has a powerful message for all of us. There is such a need for us to be alone with God, it is this time that prepares and strengthens us for the mission and ministry to which our baptism has called us.

Augustine would have surely understood and appreciated this prayer which comes from the *Celtic Night Prayer* of the Northumbria Community.

Leave me alone with God as much as may be.
As the tide draws the waters
close in upon the shore
make me an island, set apart,
alone with you, God,
holy to you.

Then with the turning of the tide
prepare me to carry your presence
to the busy world beyond,
the world that rushes in on me
till the waters come again
and fold me back to you.

Celtic Night Prayer The Northumbria Community Marshall Pickering

Love of truth seeks the quiet of contemplation,
while the urgency of love accepts the activity of the apostolate.

De Civ 19:19

Some Final Thoughts

Practice the art of “aleness” and you will discover the treasure of tranquillity.
Develop the art of solitude and you will unearth the gift of serenity.

William A Ward

The very best and utmost of attainment in this life is to remain still and let God act
and speak in you.

Meister Eckhart

The Father uttered one Word; that Word is his Son, and he utters him for ever in
everlasting silence; and in silence the soul has to hear it.

John of the Cross.

Compiled by Nigel Bavidge