

Back to the Desert

Someone asked Abba Anthony, 'What must one do in order to please God?' The old man replied 'Pay attention to what I tell you: whoever you may be, always have God before your eyes; whatever you do, do it according to the testimony of the holy Scriptures; in whatever place you live, do not easily leave it. Keep these three precepts and you will be saved. *Anthony the Great from 'The sayings of the desert fathers'*.

In the third century AD a man called Anthony was attending church with his family when he heard the words of Jesus 'sell all your possessions and give to the poor and come and follow me'. These words spoke to his heart; so he did just that, left home and went to live as a hermit in the desert of Egypt seeking to know God. He was followed by others and they became known as the "desert fathers". He became known as Anthony the Great and inspired others by his wisdom and teaching.

The desert fathers (and mothers) largely lived alone or in very small groups isolated from the world because they felt they could get to know God better when not enmeshed in the usual rituals of life. The desert fathers were the forerunners of the monastic system that spread throughout the world. I see a similarity with these hermits in our present state of isolation caused by the pandemic. The big difference is that we have not chosen to give up our regular church worship but have had it taken away from us by the closure of our church buildings.

We are not hermits as we have our homes and a ready supply of provisions and we might have time to fill. Perhaps, having the time and space we might reflect on our spiritual life and consider our dependence on the rituals and liturgical language with which we are familiar, find comfortable and non-demanding.

The question we have to ask ourselves might be 'has my personal relationship with God been diminished by not having these times of regular corporate worship?'

Alongside this we can perhaps question whether we gather to worship God or are we gathering to worship the rituals and rites bound up in our traditions? Many love the beauty of the language of the prayer book. For some it would seem that sharing the Eucharist is essential to our relationship with God. Fifty years ago, Communion was often an add-on to Morning Prayer, possibly on a monthly basis. We also use modern English instead of Shakespearian English. How things have changed.

So, where do we go from here? It is highly unlikely that we will just slip back into the familiar pattern of 'church' once our buildings are open and gatherings are once

again allowed. In the meantime, we are in the digital age and are able to link up, albeit virtually, through facilities such as Zoom or group telephone services.

For some, who have been housebound for a while, it has meant that they can once again share fellowship with other members of the congregations. For others it might be a non-threatening way to join Christian fellowship without all those concerns about doing the right thing in a church service.

Moving on, it might be that there will be 'normal' church services but we may need to run alongside with our digital offerings. So, if you feel that you are in a bit of a spiritual desert at present, perhaps reflect on those early desert Fathers whose ascetic way of life drew them closer to God. We can rediscover a new relationship with God which does not depend upon the trappings of traditions and our church buildings but on a relationship with God the Father, with Jesus our brother and the Holy Spirit walking alongside us.

When we are able to gather to worship God together, how much richer and more meaningful might that experience of being together in God be to each one of us and to all of us as the family of God.

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June 2020