

15. January 2024

The life of the hermits

In the traditional calendar, today is the memorial of Saint Paul, the hermit. We will therefore listen to the reading appropriate to this occasion. If you prefer a meditation that corresponds to today's calendar, you can find it here:

<http://en.elijamission.net/the-value-of-fasting/>

Phil 3:7-12

But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as refuse, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own, based on law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith; that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that if possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead. Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own.

Blessed is the one who can apply these words of the Apostle Paul to his life!

This is certainly true of his namesake, St Paul the Hermit, who, at the age of 16, retired to the desert of Thebaida in Egypt during the persecution of Decius in the 4th century. Because he was the first hermit, he enjoyed great respect and esteem. He died at a very old age: 113 years. St Anthony Abbot, who was also a desert father, saw in a vision how the soul of St Paul was taken to heaven by the angels, surrounded by the multitude of apostles and prophets. He himself buried him with his own hands.

What do such hermits teach us? They are shining examples that remind us of the most important thing in life: intimate communion with Christ, without putting anything before Him. They teach us to "count all things as loss" in comparison with the sublimity of the knowledge of Christ Jesus, as the Apostle says. This requires a deep faith and an interior experience of this reality, as the hermits certainly had. Since their lives were totally centred on Christ, they subjected all things to His lordship. This also meant

ordering their thoughts, leaving room only for those that led them to God and were compatible with Him. It was love that drove them, for in the midst of their solitude they recognised everything that could distract them from their intimate relationship with God. Therefore, they would never have allowed their minds to "wander" and dwell on useless things that would weaken their souls.

There are very good books on the lives of the Desert Fathers, on the struggles they had to go through and on how their hearts became more and more purified on this inner path of following Christ. The "asceticism of thought" is part of this process, as I mentioned earlier. An important point here is not to let oneself be carried away by any fantasy and thus live in an illusory world of one's own making, i.e. in dreams. This is what the desert fathers call "chimeras", and they must be resolutely fought against. If you are interested in the "asceticism of thought", I recommend listening to a lecture I gave on the subject:

<https://youtu.be/CscWQp6bVSo?si=1cNpywI2evg4dpUy>

The life of a true hermit is like an awakening to the loving reality of God that surrounds us all. Here, all the circumstances of life are directed towards realising what St Paul so well described: " I do not consider that I have made it my own; but one thing I do, forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead," (Phil 3:13b).

The life of hermits bears much fruit for the whole of humanity. With each struggle against all kinds of temptations, in which they emerge victorious through God's strength, they weaken the power of evil. By constantly growing in love, they make the light of the Lord shine more brightly in the darkness of this world. Certainly, hermits understand their life in this sense as an act of unconditional love for God and deep love for their neighbour.

Even if we follow the Lord in other circumstances of life, what can we learn from the hermits?

With the same unconditionality, we should put the Lord first in everything. It is only from this principle that the spiritual order that shapes our lives from the essential arises. It cannot be that we live absorbed in the things of this world and think a little of God; rather, our whole life must be shaped and permeated by the Lord.

Moreover, today's reading and the example of the hermits show us that we must not allow ourselves to be so distracted by the things of this world that we lose sight of the Lord. It is part of Christian prudence to limit the use of modern means of communication so that they serve us well and do not become a source of temptation and distraction. If we live too much in the "media world", we will become more and more immersed in an unreal and virtual world that does not correspond to real natural life, let alone spiritual life.

Another thing we need to learn from the hermits in the desert is how to pray fruitfully. This is not only extremely important for our personal spiritual life, but it is also the contribution that we as Christians are called to make in this difficult situation in which the world and, unfortunately, the Church find themselves.

I will speak about this in more detail in the meditation for 17 January, the day on which the memory of St Anthony Abbot is celebrated in both the traditional and the current calendar.