

The Ascension and St Agnes (ASA), DC, School of Theology and Prayer

July 19, Pentecost VII (Proper 11), 2020

‘Prayer in a Time of Pandemic and Social Unrest’, II: ‘Rediscovering the Early Monastic Tradition and Its Surprising Application to Today’s Crises’ (Dr. Sarah Coakley)

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Introduction: The Desert Fathers and Mothers – their applicability to today’s crises:

A brief consideration of the themes and topics that confront us in ‘lockdown’: anxiety, loneliness, anger (and other ‘passions’), repetitive ‘thoughts’, an ‘inability’ to pray (esp. without Eucharistic fellowship); yet also: reconsideration of priorities, acceptance of mortality, gratitude for many blessings, care for others, concern for the world and its agony, undergirding link to each other in the ‘body of Christ’ (1 Cor 12, Romans 12).

Consider ‘two ways of praying’ (Paul Bradshaw), from the 3rd. century on: the eremitical/monastic, and the Eucharistic. The Church needs both and they complement each other. Both are enshrined in the Anglican tradition of (monastic) ‘office’ (Morning and Evening Prayer), and of Eucharistic celebration.

The birth of Christian monasticism and its key Scriptural moorings: see esp. Mark 10. 17-27 and parallels; and the ‘counsels of perfection’ in the Sermon on the Mount: Matt chs. 5-7.

St Anthony the Great (251-356), his context and impact. Contemporary fascination and disgust with early monasticism (see Peter Brown, Michel Foucault): monastic ‘power’/extremism and the contemporary inverse problem of ‘armchair asceticism’.

Some key recurring themes in the literature of the desert:

1. ‘Staying’ and its Consequences: ‘Stay in your cell’: the monk ‘withdraws’ to the edges of society, but takes all his internal ‘passions’ with him, and there does battle with his ‘thoughts’/demons. The basic prayer is therefore the cry for divine help (‘O Lord, come to my assistance’: Ps. 69.2). The individual pray-er as the microcosm of the macrocosm: the ‘mystical body’ as it relates to my ‘aleness’. So why this ‘work’ now? How prayer can go wrong (in repeating ‘stuckness’, or a false competitiveness in asceticism), and how it can go right (by the ‘interruption’ of the Spirit, and the growth of ‘humility’ and compassion). The political as well as personal significance of this ‘internal’ battle of transformation. How can I know that the God with whom I do daily interaction is not a figment of my imagination, a mere ‘idolatry’? (This is a life-long task: Scripture and the ‘abba’/‘amma’ convict and guide.)

2. *The Erotic Realm and its Ambiguities*: monks, ascetic women, bishops and ‘harlots of the desert’. The life of prayer as the training and purification of desire(s).

3. *Anger and Blame - the Irascible Passions and their Dangers*: application to contemporary issues of racism, stigmatization and political or moral blame.

Discussion (at two points in the Webinar), and further application to current concerns.

Select bibliography:

- Paul F. Bradshaw, *Two Ways of Praying* (Maryville, TN, OSL Publications, 2008)
- Athanasius, *The Life of Antony* (CWS series, New York, Paulist Press, 1980)
- Ed. and tr. Tim Vivian, *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers and Mothers* (Collegeville, MN, Cistercian Publications, forthcoming)
- Tr. John Wortley, *Sayings of the Desert Fathers: The Systematic Collection* (Collegeville, MN, Liturgical Press, 2012)
- Tr. Benedicta Ward, *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers: The Alphabetic Collection* (Collegeville, MN, Liturgical Press, orig., 1975)
- _____, *Harlots of the Desert* (Collegeville, MN, Liturgical Press, orig. 1987)
- Tr. Norman Russell, *The Lives of the Desert Fathers* (London, Mowbray, 1980)
- Thomas Merton, *The Wisdom of the Desert* (Abbey of Gethsemani, KY, New Directions Publications, 1960)
- Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (London, Faber, 1988)
- Michel Foucault, 'The Battle for Chastity', in ed. Jeremy Carrette, *Religion and Culture: Michel Foucault* (New York, Routledge, 1999), 188-97
- Rowan Williams, *The Wound of Knowledge* (London, Darton, Longman and Todd, 1979), ch. 5
- Andrew Louth, *The Wilderness of God* (London, Darton, Longman and Todd, 1991), ch. 3

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