

TRAFFIC ON THE ROAD TO THE DESERT

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***'If you would be perfect'- towards an understanding of
what it means to be a saint***

A biblical perspective on holiness and the Church

It is probably as a result of the overworked stories of saints in Europe in the Middle Ages that we have acquired the picture of 'saints' as a very rare breed of people who lived lives of near moral perfection.

The Bible is not so exclusive.

In The Old Testament books of *Psalms* and *Daniel* the saints are presented as the people of God, marked out for their devotion to him and living as a hard pressed minority in a hostile and alien world.

In the New Testament, the words of greeting in most of *Paul's Epistles* refers to the 'saints' - sanctified people - in each of the churches. The word for saint appears almost exclusively in the plural in the Old and New Testaments. In biblical terms sainthood is a collective concept which nevertheless impinges on the life of the individual.

The qualification for inclusion among the 'saints' of the New Testament is being incorporate 'in Christ'; and 'in the Church'. In this sense the saints are together the charismatic and eschatological ^{Charismatic} and eschatological – the Church as a community of people practising the gifts of the Spirit in anticipation of the coming of the Lord. **Body of Christ** on Earth. Sainthood is about ethical living with a heart renewed and indwelt by the Spirit of God, looking towards the time when we will stand complete in Christ before the presence of His Father.

Beloved we are God's children now; and it does not yet appear what we shall be, but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. And everyone who thus hopes in him purify himself as he is pure.

1 John 3: 2

Two-tier Religion

However, it would be also be true to say that, in the pursuit of holiness through the years, a number of Christian teachers have advocated the idea that Christianity can be lived on two levels. The term 'second blessing', once used more widely than is the case today, might encourage such thinking. Yet there are many other expressions of religious experience and practice which have produced what might be described as 'two-tier spirituality', or in some cases, 'multi-tier religion'.

Eastern religions are particularly given to the veneration of holy men and women, and Judaism was not without its 'saints' (or holy people) in biblical and post-biblical times. Christianity has produced its own abundance of saints: people who live out their faith in a striking or self-denying way, often in the midst of trouble or temptation.

But can we extrapolate from the Bible and Church history the idea that Christian faith can be lived or experienced at a variety of levels? The key to this lies in what the believer might desire to achieve in terms of experience, often through an austere or ascetic lifestyle. In Christianity, as with some other faiths, this has led to a pattern of 'swings' from 'formalism' to 'rigorism'; the path of duty *versus* the path of self-denial.

The Maccabean Saints

In pre-Christian days, like the Nazirites and others before them, the Righteous Ones who took part in the revolt against Antiochus IV (the Maccabean Revolt around the years 167-165 BC) were noted for their simple and ascetic lifestyle. Their immediate aim was to gain enough freedom from Greek culture and influence to live out the Law (Torah). However, they also had two long term goals:

- To initiate the righteous conditions that would herald the reign of God.
- To gain the resurrection life promised in the Book of Daniel.

The religious heirs of the Maccabean 'saints' subsequently became the party of the Pharisees, a classic demonstration of a 'rigorist' group becoming set in their ways and practising a 'formal' religion.

The Teaching of Jesus

The Gospel story of the rich young man (as St. Matthew records it) has been cited by H.E. Kirk (*The Vision of God*) as evidence that it might be possible to practice the faith on two levels:

If you want to enter life, obey the commandments.

Matt. 19:17

If you want to be perfect, go and sell your possessions and give to the poor, then come and follow me.

Matt 19:21

It is as if the exchange between Jesus and the young man leads to Jesus asking him on what level he wants to live. Duty is acceptable, but sacrifice (losing your life) is better.

Mark and Luke are less strong in their use of language, but their accounts say much the same thing. Only Matthew draws the contrast between having life and being perfect, between duty and sacrifice.

Is Jesus really saying that one can be a disciple on either level, but the hard way is better? Or was he introducing a new concept in discipleship which would only become clear following his own crucifixion? How does this fit in with the rest of his teaching on discipleship?

When Jesus made his call to discipleship, he left his hearers in no doubt as to the cost:

'If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it; and whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it.

Mark 8:34,35

'The cross may have become a moving, even sentimental image for us,' says Chick Yuill. 'For those first Christians it had a very different emotional impact. When they saw a man carrying his cross they knew it meant only one thing - he was under sentence of death, on his way to his own funeral! And Jesus is saying that his disciples must shoulder the cross!'

There can be no discipleship without personal cost.

An example from St Paul

Paul's teaching on marriage is found in 1 Corinthians chapter 7.

It is good for a man not to marry.

1 Cor. 7:1

It is better to marry than to burn with passion.

1 Cor. 7:9

Paul's approach to marriage implies that its sole virtue is as a morally acceptable outlet for passion. Hence his advice to virgins, widows and especially to unmarried men:

*An unmarried man is concerned about the Lord's affairs -
but a married man is concerned about the affairs of this world.*

1 Cor. 7:22

The *Book of Common Prayer* takes a hardly more exalted view of marriage:

First, It was ordained for the procreation of children, to be brought up in the fear and nurture of the Lord, and to the praise of his holy Name.

Secondly, It was ordained for a remedy against sin, and to avoid fornication; that such persons as have not the gift of continency might marry, and keep themselves undefiled members of Christ's body.

Thirdly, It was ordained for mutual society, help and comfort.

This may go some way to explaining why celibacy and Christian piety have been closely linked in some traditions. Was marriage the 'broad way' and celibacy a 'narrow way' in Paul's thinking? It may also explain the explicit linkage of sexual morality with holiness in Paul's epistles.

The Early Church

Once the expectations of the Lord's early return had cooled in the second and third centuries, it was inevitable that the Church would become more formal, both in worship and lifestyle. It was also inevitable that at some stage there would be a revolutionary reaction to 'formalism' – the living out of one's religious principles or faith according to a set series of rules or conventions.

These early centuries saw occasional outbreaks of religious fervour, ecstatic experiences and other religious phenomena. But what caught the imagination and aspiration of many was a whole new movement - a movement which led to physical separation from the world.

About the year AD 270, Antony, a young man of 18, inherited considerable wealth from his parents. Exercised by two texts from the Gospels -

Go and sell all your possessions,

Matt. 20:21

And

Do not worry about tomorrow;

Matt. 6:33

he did as he felt he was bidden.

Settling his sisters in a house for young women in his home village in Egypt, he went into the desert to live a life of solitude, fasting and prayer. Apart from a brief period instructing imitators and disciples, he remained in solitude in the desert. (Gk. *Heremos*)

Why?

Anthony's aim was to attain the vision of God in this life. His self-denying retreat from the secular world to the solitude of the desert was intended to bring about the absolute purity of heart that he believed was a necessary condition before he would be fit for an encounter with God.

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God;

Matt 5: 8

And

Make every effort to live in peace with all men and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord.

Hebrews 12: 14

Athanasius said of Antony:

He eagerly endeavoured to make himself fit to appear before God, to become pure in heart, and ever ready to submit to his counsel and to him alone.

For Antony, the hermit-life (his separateness) was his preparation for the encounter with God that would come to fruition *after* this life, but could sometimes be glimpsed in the present.

To many of his followers it was the vision of God in *this* life that was the main purpose of their retreat to the desert. There were many who went to extreme lengths of self-denial in order to pursue the vision (e.g. taking up strange or extremely limited diets following the example of John the Baptist who ate locusts and wild honey. Some sought to survive on the Eucharist alone, others fasted five days every week. Some took to wearing heavy chains of iron, others (particularly in Northern Syria) took to living on pillars, while still more lived in holes in the ground).

Such 'separateness' had a threefold effect:

- The hermits became a recognised religious caste, and their early solitude gave way in many cases to something approaching community life.
- They became objects of veneration for their self-denying lifestyle.
- Many had ecstatic or intense spiritual experiences.

The ascetic lifestyle and ecstatic experience

The fourth and fifth centuries AD provide evidence that in Egypt and Syria there was thought to be a strong link between extreme self-denial and ecstatic experience. However, there is little evidence that such experience was widespread in the general Christian population. This would accord with the pattern that may be discerned in Scripture.

The Bible clearly shows that there has always been a witness to *intense* religious experience. For example in the Old Testament we read of Moses at the burning bush, or on Mount Sinai; both were moments of intense experience and encounter with God. The New Testament similarly bears witness to intense experience in the story of the Transfiguration of Jesus in the presence of three disciples.

These rare occurrences are what Rudolph Otto describes as '*Numinous*', fear and fascination in the awesome presence of God. (*Das Heilige*: 1916)

Two Salvationist examples of *intense* spiritual experience are to be found in the testimonies of Eric Ball and Will Brand. Although they were contemporaries – one was a soldier at Southall Citadel in the suburbs of London and the other a local officer at the Regent Hall – there is no record that they ever shared their experience, and neither account was published while they were alive.

Simply put, each man was working in a quiet room on their own when he became aware of a 'presence.' They discerned that this was not a ghost but they were in the physical presence of God. (The technical term from this is a *theophany* – God revealing himself.)

Both men bear witness that this was a deeply disturbing time for them. They were deeply frightened by what they had seen and experienced, and yet at the same time could not draw themselves away. These are classic examples of 'fear and fascination' in the sense described by Otto.

Ecstatic experience is different. It tends to be expressed in great joy, in speaking in tongues or some other form of communication, and in prophecy. There is evidence of this in Saul's experience among the prophets. In the New Testament there is evidence of similar manifestations, for example the 'friend' of Paul 'caught up into the third Heaven'.

In *Echoes and Memories* Bramwell Booth tells of similar ecstatic experience amongst early day Salvationists. But he also explains how these manifestations were left behind when the Army began to move forward as a missionary work. It seems that there was a period of 'release' giving way to the business of mission.

In all of these cases the common denominator has been the rarity and temporary nature of intense or ecstatic experience. On the other hand there is no record that the ecstatic nature of the Apostles' experience at Pentecost was so short lived.

As with other outbreaks, the rigours and ecstasy of the desert were eventually overtaken by a quieter approach to sanctity, and a more contemplative seeking after God.

The Monastic Movement

The first known experiment in monastic life was the gathering together by St. Pachomius of a group of male ascetics into a monastery, living under a common discipline and directed by an Abbot. By the time of Pachomius' death in AD 346 there were nine such monasteries and two convents. For a number of centuries the Pachomian rule was the only significant Christian monastic order.

Pachomius discouraged extreme asceticism and solitude, 'Let each man eat and drink as he needs ... and hinder him neither from fasting nor eating ...' He encouraged very large communities, in some cases numbering thousands, much to the disgust of Bishop Basil of Caesarea.

For Pachomius also the whole point of the monastic life was to gain the vision of God.

At the end of the 6th century Benedict gathered together an order in Italy which shifted the emphasis to prayer as the central activity of the monk or nun, bound in an austere lifestyle in small communities or 'houses'.

Benedict's model of the monk serving God and the Church through prayer became the pattern of monastic life for centuries to come, refined or revised by other orders basically following the same philosophy.

Monastic spirituality was an example to the whole Church, but it was inaccessible to ordinary people. It emphasised the divisions between the 'spiritual' and the 'secular', the 'religious' and the 'lay'. It has been said that, until the Reformation, Catholic piety was imprisoned behind monastery walls, and spirituality was put out of reach of ordinary people: a classic yet possibly divisive expression of two-tier Christianity.

Some conclusions

The question, 'How deep do I want to go with God?' is relevant and valid. But to choose an option which is less than everything, less than total commitment, less than 'taking up our cross' is not worthy, according to Jesus (Matthew 10:38).

Catherine Booth displayed a typical directness on the subject:

I do not find two standards of Christian experience at all. I do not believe God ever intended there should be a lower life and a higher life, and I am afraid that those people who rest in the lower life will find themselves awfully mistaken at the last. I believe that religion is all or nothing. God is either first or he is nowhere with us, individually. The very essence and core of religion is 'God first', and allegiance and obedience to him first.

The thread that runs through Christian history is that the life lived to please God is the truly self-denying life, though this life can be lived in the 'every day' and doesn't inevitably require extreme practices. The Army's tenth doctrine speaks of holiness as 'the privilege of all believers.' The possibility of holiness is not therefore confined to a self-denying few.

Bramwell Booth expressed it this way:

If holiness is possible anywhere for anyone at any time, it is possible anywhere for everyone at all times.