

## Notes on 'Our soul's desire' – Holy Week talks 2018

### Holy Monday – Humility

Holy Week is the earliest Christian 'season'. The first mention is from the 'Pilgrimage of Etheria', a document from Jerusalem in the 4<sup>th</sup> century, describing the ancient practice established by the Emperor Constantine and being very similar to the special days we keep. Therefore 'Holy week' is the oldest liturgical season predating even the celebration of Christmas, (335 AD). In English, the word 'holy' means something 'separate' or 'special', these are special days.

In observing this Holy Week, I am using the lectionary gospel readings which are all from St John. The theme I have chosen is from a saying of St Antony the Great, one of the four Greek Fathers. Antony lived 261 to 365 AD, and following the Edict of Milan in 313 he went to live in the North Africa desert after the example of Jesus, who went outside the city to pray quietly in the garden. The aim of the talks is to learn from Antony how we might be faithful as Christ's disciples in keeping this week special. Antony was brought up under persecution and so could only observe his faith in secret, many of his friends being martyred. He also only knew of the gospel as written by St John, as a result he is appropriate to be our guide this week.

For Antony humility was the key virtue, and vital in understanding Jesus. The reading from John 12:1-11 tells of Mary anointing Jesus and his response, both point to humility in seeking God's will. The reading from another Greek Father St John Chrysostom, sums up the way of humility.

### Reading - Humility & Love, St John Chrysostom

Let it be known to you that if in your life you have mastered every virtue and every good deed such as mercy, prayer, fast, and other virtues but have no humility in you, your toil will be in vain. For humility in all these virtues is the solid foundation. Without it, we cannot master any of the virtues and all these virtues will become impure, filthy, and discarded before God because they were not sown with humility and love.

### Prayers – The Examen of St Ignatius of Loyola

*The examen is a method of reviewing your prayer in the presence of God. Here it is in a nutshell:*

1. *Ask God for light. I want to look at my day with God's eyes, not merely my own*
2. *Give thanks. Be grateful*
3. *Review the day. I carefully look back on the day just completed being guided by the Holy Spirit.*
4. *Face your shortcomings. I face up to what is wrong, in my life and me.*

*Look toward the day to come. I ask where I need God in the day to come'*

### Holy Tuesday – Discernment

'Sir, we wish to see Jesus', is the question put in John 12:20-26 for us in Holy Week in response to the humility of Jesus. For Antony as well as the Desert Abbas and Ammas (Fathers and Mothers), we find Jesus in the relationship of prayer. Antony said that if we spend our lives in prayer, this will teach us everything. Antony always refused to give a Rule of Life rather reminding all enquirers that Jesus only gave one commandment which was 'to love one another' but he did offer advice about prayer, (there are many of his sayings in a collection known as 'The Philokalia').

Fifty years after he died those seeking for guidance followed the Augustine Rule, which was similar in teaching to Antony, that our primary calling is to prayer. This cathedral is an Augustinian foundation and so we are reminded in this place of the primacy of living our lives prayerfully. A modern Augustinian Martin Laird puts this simply, '*Communion with God in the silence of the heart is a God-given capacity, like the rhododendron's capacity to flower, the fledgling's for flight and the child's for self-forgetful abandon and joy*<sup>1</sup>. He also points to the essential truth for us in seeking Jesus that we will find the answer in the prayerful heart, '*An ancient Christian view is that the foundation of every land is silence, where God simply and perpetually gives Himself. This self-gift is manifested in the creation, in the people of God and their inspired (if stumbling) pursuit of a just society, and most fully, in the Christian view of things, in Jesus Christ. This is the homeland, to which every spiritual pilgrim is constantly being called, called home, as St Augustine says, "from the noise that is around us to the joys that are silent. Why do we rush about looking for God who is here at home with us, if all we want is to be with him"*<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Laird, 'Into the Silent Land', DLT, London, 2006 p.1

<sup>2</sup> Ibid p.6

### **Reading – ‘Our Soul’s desire’, St Antony of Egypt**

A brother asked Antony, ‘what good thing shall I do and have life thereby?’ He replied: ‘not all works are alike. For scripture says that Abraham was hospitable and God was with him. Elijah loved solitary prayer, and God was with him. And David was humble, and God was with him. Therefore whatever you see your soul to desire according to God, do that thing, and you shall keep your heart safe’.

### **Prayer – St Augustine ‘On seeking God’**

O Lord my God, I believe in you, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Insofar as I can, insofar as you have given me the power, I have sought you. I became weary and I laboured.

O Lord my God, my sole hope, help me to believe and never to cease seeking you. Grant that I may always and ardently seek out your countenance. Give me the strength to seek you, for you help me to find you and you have more and more given me the hope of finding you.

Here I am before you with my firmness and my infirmity. Preserve the first and heal the second.

Here I am before you with my strength and my ignorance. Where you have opened the door to me, welcome me at the entrance; where you have closed the door to me, open to my cry; enable me to remember you, to understand you, and to love you. Amen.

### **Holy Wednesday – Glory**

Jesus says ‘God has been glorified’ in the reading John 13:21-32. We are so used in Holy Week to confronting the human suffering of Jesus that we often miss what Jesus says to us in the gospel. In this week, Jesus is glorified by God, and it is difficult for us to understand. For Antony though all life and creation gives God glory, and his teaching comes directly to us in Cumbria through our founding saints. Ninian, Patrick, Kentigern, Cuthbert and Bega were all influence by the teaching of Antony. They prayed in a very similar way, Cuthbert even copying the design of Antony’s cell on the Inner Farne. For Antony and our founding saints Jesus pointed to the glory of God all around us. We only keep Holy Week faithfully if we recognize God’s glory, as well as the humility of Jesus and our own seeking in the life of prayer.

### **Reading – The greater glory, St Antony of Egypt**

A bishop visiting Father Antony looked around the simple cell he lived in and its sparse furniture, and said ‘Father how can you be so happy when you are deprived of the consolation of books?’. Father Antony replied, ‘My book is the nature of all created things, and any time I want to read the words of God, the book of His creation is always before me’.

### **Prayer – Circling Prayer**

God to enfold me,  
God to surround me,  
God in my speaking,  
God in my thinking.  
God in my sleeping,  
God in my waking,  
God in my watching,  
God in my hoping.  
God in my life,  
God in my lips,  
God in my soul,  
God in my heart.

### **Maundy Thursday – Service**

One of the most famous and familiar readings of Holy Week is Jesus washing the feet of the disciples, John 13:1-17. In our reading the key question is from Jesus, ‘do you know what I have done?’ The example of Jesus is of service. In this week, the readings have reminded us that Holy Week shows us the virtue of humility, the importance of a prayerful life and the eyes of faith to see God’s glory. This evening as we remember Jesus enacting his commandment ‘to love one another’ we see this in the loving service that is our vocation as his disciples. Antony himself took time to understand this calling and the image he gives us of clothes going rotten if not worn, is telling. St Benedict in quoting Antony in his rule developed his understanding of prayer and spoke of its transformation, he called it the ‘conversion of life’. In following the example of Jesus we are called to be changed, and our prayer to find its voice in service and righteous action.

### **Reading – Prayer into action, St Antony of Egypt**

Father Antony was asked about some brothers who were not staying in their cells but rather traveling into the towns to feed the poor. Antony replied to this criticism by saying, 'if you have a chest full of clothing, and leave it for a long time, the clothing will rot inside it. It is the same with our prayers and the thoughts of our heart. If we do not carry them out by physical action, after a long while they will spoil and turn bad'.

### **Prayer of Service, St Benedict**

Gracious and Holy Father,  
give us the wisdom to discover You,  
the intelligence to understand You,  
the diligence to seek after You,  
the patience to wait for You,  
eyes to behold You,  
a heart to meditate upon You,  
and a life to proclaim You,  
through the power of the Spirit of Jesus, our Lord. Amen

### **Good Friday – Acceptance**

'It is finished', these are the final words in St John's Gospel of Jesus from the cross, (John 19:16-30). The translation doesn't express the Greek word, Τελοσ. It means far more, it is a shout of elation, 'I've done it!', 'I have accomplished everything I set out to do!'. When Jessica Ennis won the gold medal at the 2012 Olympics, she said that it wasn't winning the competition but rather living up to four years of expectation that poured out of her, her primary emotion was immense relief. This is Τελοσ. In St John's Gospel Jesus doesn't die forsaken rather his death is a final acceptance of life, death and resurrection, he is our Redeemer. Antony understood the cross in this way, death had been defeated and we live the risen life of Christ. Death is no longer our enemy but has become our friend, teaching us to value each and every moment and to glory in God's creation - in us, through us and around us. Brother Roger frequently quoted from St Antony and the teachings of The Philokalia, his words on Good Friday sum up for us 'the way of holiness' which calls us into acceptance in following Christ.

### **Reading – Choosing Love, Brother Roger**

In following you, O Christ,  
We choose to love and not to harden our hearts,  
Even when the incomprehensible happens.  
As we remain in your presence with perseverance,  
Day after day, and pray with simplicity of heart,  
You come and make us into people  
Who are a leaven of confident trust by the way we live.  
And all that your Gospel calls us to,  
All that you ask of us, you give.

### **Prayer of Abandonment by Charles de Foucauld**

Father, I abandon myself into your hands; do with me what you will.  
Whatever you may do, I thank you:  
I am ready for all, I accept all.  
Let only your will be done in me, and in all your creatures.  
I wish no more than this, O Lord.  
Into your hands I commend my soul;  
I offer it to you  
with all the love of my heart,  
for I love you, Lord,  
and so need to give myself,  
to surrender myself into your hands,  
without reserve,  
and with boundless confidence,  
for you are my Father. Amen

*Notes by Cameron Butland, March 2018.*