Words from the Desert

May 30th, 2021

1st Sunday after Pentecost

In the stories of the Egyptian and Ethiopian monks, there was hardly any higher praise than to say that someone was full of the Holy Spirit; as we read: “Some say of Saint Anthony that he was ‘Spirit-borne’, that is, carried along by the Holy Spirit, but he would never speak of this to men. Such men see what is happening in the world, as well as knowing what is going to happen” (*The Sayings of the Desert Fathers: The Alphabetical Collection.* Tr. Benedicta Ward, SLG. Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1975. 7); “[Arsenius] was a good man ‘filled with the Holy Spirit and faith’ (Acts 11:24)…” (19). In our gospel reading today, Jesus spoke to Nicodemus about the coming age of life in the Spirit: “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’ The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.” (John 3:5-8). Jesus would return to this theme when speaking to the Samaritan woman at the well: “God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth” (John 4:24). Both Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman were hesitant—they wanted faith and God on their own terms, but Jesus reminded them that salvation comes from God and through God’s ways, and those who follow God will enter into a mystery as hidden and yet as powerful as the way of the wind. What Jesus is announcing to them is nothing less than the coming renaissance, the coming salvation of the world. It is a tremendous expression of hope and love. As Robert Cardinal Sarah says: “After the Ascension, Christ did not leave mankind orphaned. As at the beginning of creation, like a gentle breeze, ‘the Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters,’; so the Son of God entrusted humanity into the hands of the Holy Spirit, who spreads the love of the Father and silently disburses his light and wisdom. This is why it is scarcely possible to let oneself be guided by the Holy Spirit in the noise and agitation of the world” (Robert Cardinal Sarah and Nicholas Diat, *The Power of Silence: Against the Dictatorship of Noise.* Tr. Michael J. Miller. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2017. 77). Remember that the Spirit first led Jesus into the wilderness—to be tempted, sure, but also to get away from the world—His ministry would come from the Spirit and from God and not from the world. It was this concern that drove many early Christians into the deserts of Egypt and Ethiopia—to find the silence of the wilderness where they could listen to the Holy Spirit. Though we might not feel the need to escape in such a drastic way today, there is yet a lesson in this. And today, I want to share a few stories from the Desert Fathers that speak to us about life in the Spirit.

Our first tale involves a warning about quenching the Holy Spirit in our lives. The sayings record the following words of Orsisius: “I think that if a man does not guard his heart well, he will forget and neglect everything he has heard, and thus the enemy, finding room in him, will overthrow him. It is like a lamp filled with oil and lit; if you forget to replenish the oil, gradually it goes out and eventually darkness will prevail. It is still worse if a rat happens to get near the lamp and tries to eat the wick; it cannot do so before the oil is exhausted, but when it sees the lamp not only without light, but also without heat, it tries to pull out the wick and it brings the lamp down. If it is earthenware it breaks, but if it is brass, the master of the house will fill it with oil again. In the same way, through the soul’s negligence, the Holy Spirit will gradually withdraw until its warmth is completely extinguished. Finally the enemy devours the ardour of the soul and wickedness spoils the body, too. But if a man is sound in his attachment to God, and has only been led away through negligence, God, in his mercy, sends his fear to him and the remembrance of punishment and so prepares him to be vigilant and to guard himself with more prudence in the future, until his visitation.” (161-162). I do not like the image of the rat eating the wick at all—I have a deep fear of rodents. Though vivid and even disturbing, this saying of Orsisius reminds us of what Jesus has told Nicodemus: “What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit” (John 3:6). Similarly, the apostle Paul would later say: “For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. For this reason the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God’s law—indeed it cannot, and those who are in the flesh cannot please God” (Romans 8:5-8). Our lack of peace and our lack of fullness in life comes because we have not set our minds on the Spirit and have not allowed the Holy Spirit to shape us and give us what we so hunger and thirst for.

One of the signs of spiritual life and thriving comes from changing your perspective, or how you view the world. When we attempt to approach the Spirit from the way of the world, we will fail again and again to know the Spirit. When we are filled with the Spirit, not only will we know God, but we will now look at the world through the Spirit. In modern times, our approach is often very backwards. In the sayings of the *Desert Fathers,* we read of the very humble and wise John the Dwarf, who had set his mind on the things of heaven: “Some brethren came one day to test him to see whether he would let his thoughts get dissipated and speak of the things of this world. They said to him, ‘We give thanks to God that this year there has been much rain and the palm trees have been able to drink, and their shoots have grown, and the brethren have found manual work.’ Abba John said to them, ‘So it is when the Holy Spirit descends into the hearts of men; they are renewed and they put forth leaves in the fear of God” (87). Not long ago, we spoke of this spiritual fruit. The psalmist says: “But I am like a green olive tree in the house of God. I trust in the steadfast love of God for ever and ever. I will thank you for ever, because of what you have done. In the presence of the faithful I will proclaim your name, for it is good” (Psalm 52:8-9). Perhaps the first and most important fruit of life in the Spirit is a prayerful disposition and a prayerful way of looking at the world, a disposition full of the humility and mercy that John the Dwarf displayed to his visitors. They sought to distract him with the affairs of the world, but he was not distracted—the world had now become a place speaking of God. For one who is full of the Spirit, the world becomes a landscape of the work of the Holy Spirit. It becomes a landscape of prayer.

And this prayer should inform all of our speech and our actions. There is a story about Ephrem, who was highly respected in the desert:

“Another time, one of the saints had a vision. According to the commandment of God, a band of angels descended from heaven, holding in their hands a *kephalis* (that is to say, a piece of papyrus covered with writing), and they said to one another, ‘To whom should we give this?’ Some said, ‘To this one,’ others, ‘To that one.’ Then the answer came in these words, ‘Truly, they are holy and righteous, but none of them is able to receive this, except Ephrem.’ The old man saw that the *kephalis* was given to Ephrem and he saw as it were a fountain flowing from his lips. Then he understood that that which came from the lips of Ephrem was of the Holy Spirit” (59). Again, that is high praise. I can only imagine that listening to Ephrem must have been a real delight, a real encounter with the life-giving peace of the Holy Spirit. I regret that much of my life I did not care about how I spoke to others and I did not shape my moments with prayer. I wasted time and I hurt people through my aggression, condescension and even anger. That was not the work of the Spirit but the work of the flesh. Our mouths should be fountains of living waters, and they should be directed first and foremost to prayers—praise, intercession, supplication, comfort, encouragement, truth, kindness. In my life, there are several fountains that I will remember for all time because of the goodness of the water I drank. One was on the southern coast of Hokkaido, in a quiet garden near Date-Monbetsu. Another was in the mountains near Jasper. There have been others as well. I cannot forget how sweet and refreshing the water tasted. And there are people in my life who likewise spoke in a way that evokes the old man’s vision of Ephrem. This does not come about on our own. Ultimately, our speech should be centered on the hope within us, Christ in us, the hope of glory (Colossians 1:27). As the apostle Paul says: “For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience. Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose. ” (Romans 8:24-28). It is impossible to care for others; it is impossible to pray—unless you have real hope, and that hope comes from Christ and the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Lastly, the life of the Spirit is one of deep meditation on the word. This is not an academic exercise. It is not a theological exercise. It is not an emotional exercise. It is the foundation of your prayer life. It is foundational to life in the Spirit. It is when you let the Lord speak to you. There is a wonderful story about Poemen, whose name means “Shepherd”—because he was considered to be such a kind and helpful guide to others: “One of the Fathers asked Abba Poemen, ‘Who is he who says, ‘I am a companion of all who fear Thee’ (Psalm 119:63)? and the old man said, ‘It is the Holy Spirit who says that" (186). Poemen knew the life-giving power of the scriptures; he knew that through them the Spirit speaks to us and creates life in us. And this is what Robert Cardinal Sarah says as well: “Memory is a word made fruitful by the Holy Spirit. It is a tomb, a tilled soil in which man deposits the seed of the word, and the latter takes root and springs up silently, developing a new, more abundant life that bears hope within it. Having died in the silence of listening, the word flourishes again under the sun of the Spirit that reawakens to life. Assimilated and made fruitful through meditation, it appears as a new being laden with many fruits: if the grain of wheat does not die, it bears no fruit. The death of the seed is the life of the plant. And the plant, the only being in all nature that is simultaneously silent and animated, is offered to us precisely as the most perfect image of what occurs during the moments that follow silent listening” (Ibid, 82). In order for this to happen, we must make room for Christ in our hearts; we must let Christ speak. As Jesus said to Nicodemus: “ ‘Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things? ‘Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man” (John 3:10-13). The one who descended from heaven himself became like a grain of wheat, dying in the earth to produce a harvest—and we are that harvest, if we allow his word, this heavenly testimony from above, to abide in us.

The wind blows where it wishes because it is free; it is not bound to the earth, it can bring rain clouds to parched lands. It can clear clouds to bring the life-giving sunlight. That is our task, in a way. To bring living waters and the light of God to this earth. I visited the desert off and on as a child—the Sonora Desert, Nogales Desert and Chihuahuan Deserts were especially impressive to me as a child and adolescent. In the desert, one learns to see differently and listen differently. Though I do not believe monasticism is necessary for salvation or even a spiritual life, I can understand why the early Christians went into the desert. And I believe I can understand why Jesus often went into deserted places to pray. The one thing I have always loved about the wilderness is the sheer immensity of the landscape. The sand and dust itself is incalculable. As Psalm 139:17-18 says: “How weighty to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them! I try to count them—they are more than the sand; I come to the end—I am still with you.” The wilderness speaks of the immensity of God, but also of the immense importance of what God has made. All of the stars, all of the mesas, all of the saguaros and all of the living creatures—from the scorpion and tarantula to the armadillo and Gila monster to the burro and long-horn cattle to the human being—they are loved by God—it was for this earth, for these creatures, for us that Jesus was lifted up on the cross: “‘For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. ‘Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him” (John 3:16-17).