

Sunday 3 March 2024
Evensong for the Third Sunday of Lent

Liverpool Parish Church

OT: Exodus 5.1-6.1

NT: Philippians 3.4b-14

There's a well-known distinction in Christian tradition between the active life and the contemplative life. The active life turns outwards: it works and serves in the world, interacting with others. The contemplative life turns inwards: it spends its time in prayerful meditation on the presence of God. Famously, it is illustrated by the gospel story of Martha and Mary: Martha busies herself serving Jesus, while Mary sits at his feet and learns.

There have been times in the church's history that the contemplative life has been seen as superior. As Jesus says in the gospel story when Martha complains that her sister is not helping, 'Mary has chosen the better part'. (This led to a long tradition of people feeling Martha was pretty hard done by!) The great mediaeval thinker Thomas Aquinas argued that the contemplative life was better for a number of reasons, but they boil down to the fact that the active life seems to be directed at externals and tends to satisfy the needs of the body; whereas the contemplative life is directed at God, and engages the highest part of our inner soul.

Nowadays, such reasoning is less likely to appeal to people. Protestantism challenged the ideal of monastic life and championed the idea of us living out our faith in secular vocations. Contemporary society, with its capitalist imperatives, often turns its nose up at things which, like contemplation, neither fulfil a useful function, nor offer any obvious pleasure and entertainment. As is often the case, a simple dualism or opposition fails to do justice to reality. Should we reject action and indulge in silent prayer while leaving injustice unchecked and service withheld? Or should we reject contemplation and lose ourselves in outward activity while our inner life withers on the vine? Neither option is appealing.

It is worth considering our first reading from Exodus in this regard. The story of the Israelites' liberation from slavery is ever-present as we prepare for Easter. There are many resonances: between freedom from slavery and salvation; between the Passover and the Easter feast, with Christ as the new paschal lamb; between the 40 years wandering in the wilderness, and the 40 days of Lent.

In the part of the story read today, we are building towards that Passover and the flight into the wilderness. And the wilderness plays a crucial role. On the way to the promised land, the people will wander, stray and eventually find their way. The wilderness was a place of otherness, where the safe norms of civilisation broke down. It promised transformation but also danger. The wilderness is a place of struggle, where a new self can be born only when the old illusions are let go. There is a strong tradition of Christian monks and nuns seeking solitude in the desert, where they could pray and wrestle with their demons.

The desert offers a place of silence and contemplation, of apartness. But our story reminds us that this is not a sanitised vision of well-to-do people seeking spiritual self-care. This is a displaced and bewildered people, lacking direction, grumbling. This is a people that finds themselves in the wilderness because of an urgent need to escape real conditions of exploitation and violence.

If contemplation drives us into the desert, then it is not a comfortable experience. It does not turn its back on oppression, hunger and lostness. The prophet Isaiah famously lays into those who seek solace in spiritual disciplines while allowing injustice to go unchecked. 'Look,' he writes in chapter 58, 'you serve your own interest on your fast-day and oppress all your workers'. He goes on: 'Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own

kin?' The people of Israel are constantly reminded that they were once slaves who longed for freedom. They have a vocation to confront oppression and injustice. The wilderness is their road to that vocation.

Even in the metaphorical wilderness of Lent, we are called to face the world's brokenness. True contemplation does not turn away from the world. It awakens our sense of God's presence *in* the world. When we see God's face in the faces of others, when we feel God's touch in the touch of the earth, we can no longer treat any of it as worthless and expendable. Contemplation is also a call to active love.

Equally, active love needs that contemplative dimension. An active life can be empty and bitter without it. To paraphrase Isaiah, we end up spending our money and our time on things that do not satisfy. Contemplation teaches us to let go of the small demanding ego with its unthinking drive to possess things or prove itself. Perhaps there is an echo of our reading from Philippians: all our status, identity and achievements are ultimately nothing. They are worthless rubbish, obsessions of a false self, unless they have the infinite mystery of love at their heart. Work needs presence. Doing needs listening. Speech needs silence.

The wilderness is where contemplation and action meet. Both are essential to our humanity, to challenging false certainties, indifference and cruelty. What matters is that they both spring from that living source that God puts within us: a spring in the desert, untouched by selfish care; a fountain whose ceaseless flow is also a perfect stillness.

Fr Steven Shakespeare