

Weekly Teachings 3/2/2013



Clement of Alexandria

How the early Church Fathers see this connection between our Martha and our Mary, between the 'ego' and the 'self', our Divine spark, is best illustrated in the teaching by Clement of Alexandria (150-215).

We know really very little about Clement of Alexandria, as is the case of most notable figures in these early centuries of Christianity. He was born somewhere around 150 C.E. probably in Athens, as he was thoroughly familiar with Greek culture and literature. We know that his parents were pagans and that he studied philosophy in Athens. Clement was a person who came to the faith later on. He was a convert. Like many young seekers of his time he travelled widely and explored various schools. Sometime before he arrived in Alexandria he discovered Christianity. His challenge was to understand Christianity against the background of his own Greek education. In so doing he became the first Christian philosopher/theologian, who tried to express mystical experience and the relationship between the human soul and the Divine.

As the Revd Professor Andrew Louth explains in his chapter in 'Journey to the Heart?' 'Clement's central insight is a sense of human inwardness, a sense that what we really are is hidden within us and therefore needs to be searched for. The first step towards knowing anything is therefore to know yourself; thus begins a voyage of self-discovery. The 'self' is the 'soul', though in Plato and Clement a more specific word is used, namely 'psyche' meaning 'life-force'. They were tempted to go as far as stating that we are souls inhabiting bodies. They did not deny that we are souls and bodies, but the essence of what we truly are is found in the soul.'

The Greeks believed that the highest point of our soul was the 'nous', our intuitive way of understanding reality. Clement interpreted that in Christian term as the 'image of God' within us, where we are 'like' God and can therefore relate to Him. As Andrew Louth continues to explain:

'The word 'nous' is difficult to translate into English. The normal translation is the 'intellect',

but the trouble with 'intellect' in English is that it doesn't convey what the Greeks meant. For Plato the 'nous' or the soul was right at the centre of what it meant to be human. 'Nous' does include an intellectual capacity, but it was more than that; it was having some sense of the real value of things, knowing the Truth.

In fact, our 'nous' is our point of contact with God. Plato had this idea that the soul or the 'nous' either can concern itself with the world of shifting reality in which we live, or it can attempt to see what lies behind this reality and try to find out the nature of Truth itself?. And in so doing two things happen. Firstly, we enter that Reality itself, which allows us to judge things directly and properly. Secondly, we discover who we really are. We discover in ourselves a centre that is capable of relating to Reality itself, which is not distracted by things in this world. It is not tempted to build up a picture of the world that is really simply our own construct, the way we would like things to be? There we are purely spiritual beings, entirely free beings, and these he sees as reflections of God.

The 'nous' is also seen as 'the organ of prayer, stressing that prayer/meditation leading to deep silent prayer is the way to an 'engagement with genuine Reality, which is God.'

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