

The power of language

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Gossiping and slander was frowned upon, because they were part of judging others. But there was another reason: the desert hermits were convinced of the power of language to heal or to harm. We need to remember that the third century was still largely an oral culture. Spoken words were considered potent, especially those from Scripture and the words spoken by the Abbots and Ammas. They would use words of criticism to the young hermits but only to correct their behaviour and bring it into line with the Beatitudes. They were, however, 'pure of heart', and no unconscious self-centred feelings and motives were behind their words and behaviour. Consequently, theirs were words of power that healed and renewed life. They were also very aware of the damage a careless word could do. They considered carefully when to speak and when to be silent. Hence the importance they attached to silence in general amongst the hermits and their advice not to speak unless necessary. It avoided careless, harmful talk and allowed the possibility of words of wisdom to emerge. Although we no longer live in an oral culture, we too know the power of an encouraging or disparaging word to those walking the spiritual path with us.

One important reason why they would utter an admonishing word was when Scripture was involved. Most of the hermits' knowledge came from hearing the Word at the synaxis, the weekly gathering of monks. One saying tells of a brother, who had temporarily been distracted and forgotten to say some words of the psalm that was being recited. An elder

came to him and said: “Where were your thoughts, when we were saying the synaxis, that the word of the psalm escaped you? Don’t you know that you were standing in the presence of God and speaking to God?”

Meditation, repeating certain words from Scripture, reciting them by heart, helped the monks to deal with their thoughts and temptations, their own inner ‘demons’. Often they were plagued by memories of their previous life or remorse for things they had done or left undone. The formula Cassian recommends – ‘O God come to my aid, O lord make haste to help me’ – was in his eyes “an unassailable wall, an impenetrable breastplate, and a very strong shield”. You no doubt remember, how he stressed that: “You should, I say, meditate constantly on this verse in your heart. You should not stop repeating it when you are doing any kind of work or performing some service or are on a journey. Meditate on it while sleeping and eating and attending to the least needs of nature.”

Scripture was the foundation of their life. When some monks came to ask St Antony, how they should live, they were told: “You have heard Scripture. That should teach you how.” We too should not neglect reading Jesus’ words in Scripture. Reading Scripture after meditation or even better at another time in the Benedictine ‘Lectio Divina’ way, i.e. taking a small passage and reading it several times slowly and carefully is very helpful. Laurence Freeman, our director said, that in doing so “we read Scripture and let Scripture read us.”

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