

## The Inner Monastery of the Heart

It's difficult to believe how much our lives have changed in the past few weeks. Small pleasures that we took for granted such as visiting family or friends, freedom to travel, window shopping, holidays, sitting in a café and watching the world go by, doing our work in the way we've always done it, exercising when and where we want to, are now things of the past as we all adjust to the new normal of life with coronavirus restrictions.

Of course, for key workers and those on the front-line, this is also a time of anxiety and uncertainty and risk. There is nothing like looking squarely at death to make the gift of life seem all the more precious.

So how do we adjust to lives which have become smaller and how might the wisdom of the desert mothers and fathers of the past help us in our desert time of enforced isolation?

Thomas Merton, in **Wisdom of the Desert**, said: "Sit in your cell and it will teach you everything." He recognised that we don't have to live in an enclosed monastic order, in order to deepen our relationship with the Divine and our understanding of ourselves. Inner work can begin wherever we are.

Each of us, in our enforced isolation, can use this desert time to develop a quality of consciousness or state of heart in which the Divine and soul can be at one. The still point. The sweet spot. The place of unconditional love from which all our other relationships flow and grow.

So how do we do this? By paying attention to what is happening right now, in this moment. There is no need to go anywhere else to find enlightenment or transformation. The lesson can begin right here because the cell is the cave of our heart. That interior place of reflection and struggle.

In the book of Proverbs 4:23 Solomon said: "Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it." He recognised that our inner thoughts, feelings, desires and will can affect and inform our actions and deeds. Similarly, Jesus referred to the Pharisees as "whitewashed tombs," who looked clean on the outside but were rotten on the inside. (Matthew:23-27) Attending to our inner life will have a positive impact on our outer life.

This week, in the Christian tradition, we begin Passiontide, where we encounter the suffering of Jesus before his crucifixion and death. Certainly, he had plenty of material on which to do his inner work as he worked through the pain of rejection and betrayal, of humiliation and hurt, until he was able to transform it into love.

If you don't already keep a personal journal or blog, perhaps now would be a good time to do so. What is bubbling up for you? Irritation? Resentment? Anger? Fear? Irritability? Welcome all. Whatever you encounter in the cave of your heart is a microcosm of the macrocosm of your life. Where do those feelings originate from? Can you recall a time when you experienced them before? What do you usually do to pacify those feelings? How do you feel after that? Is it life-denying or life-enhancing? Draining or energising?

Imagine that Jesus is with you as you experience these feelings. He loves you unconditionally. He hears you. He understands you. Have a conversation with him. What would he like to say to you now? Write down his words.

Everything you need to be whole and holy is within you. You contain within you a crucible of struggle and freedom. In this season, give yourself time to be present to the way the world is inviting you into deeper attention to the gifts of this moment.

Yours in Christ,

Deborah Parsons