**Journeying with the Desert Mothers and Fathers**

**Prelude The Lord is Now about to Enter His Temple**

**(André Gouze)**

**Opening Prayer Let us pray,**

Eternal light of attention:

Resting in you, I remember myself,

and in so doing, I remember you.

In this busy world it is easy to forget.

Although there appear to be many paths for my life,

I feel drawn to this path of quietness,

in gentleness and surrender.

Solitary in silence you kiss my soul, and I feel more alive.

Thank you for this gift and open me now in your peace.

**Amen.**

**Introduction**

The Desert Mothers and Fathers lived mostly in the 4th and 5th centuries A.D. Christianity was granted legal tolerance by the Emperor Constantine in 313 A.D. This ended the persecution of Christians by Roman authorities that had gone on for over 200 years.

As people observed the newly freed Christian Church take on the outward trappings and hierarchical structure of the Empire some became concerned about preserving the simplicity of the message of Jesus. They felt that his commandments of love – love of God and love of neighbour - were being diluted by their materialistic and upwardly mobile leaders. Those in authority seemed to be spending much time working out their theology at the loss of their inner spirituality, simplicity of life and prayer. As a result, people began to go out to the deserts of Egypt and Syria, in particular, to find a way to be faithful to their Christian calling, to be people of love and simplicity with Jesus Christ at the centre of their prayer and life.

**Song You Are The Centre (Margaret Rizza)**

**All sing:** You are the centre, you are my life,

You are the centre, O Lord, of my life.

Come, Lord, and heal me, Lord of my life,

Come, Lord, and teach me, Lord of my life.

You are the centre, Lord of my life.

‘One historian of the times tells us that there were twice as many women as men in the deserts. Another scholar said that there were so many Christians who sought to live this life in the desert that “the desert became a city.” There were even accounts of “tourists” going out to the deserts to observe the mothers (ammas) and the fathers (abbas) who were spiritual guides

We know the names of some of the women whose sayings have been preserved like Amma Matrona, Amma Sarah, Amma Syncletica, Amma Melania, Amma Theodora and Amma Paula. We know a little about their lives. Some gave up large fortunes to support services to the poor and the needy. Their spirituality was practical. We know, for example, that Amma Theodora was what we might call a spiritual director to bishops and other men in public positions. We know that she was clear in her teaching and strong in her rebukes. We learn that Amma Syncletica and her sister sought the life in the desert after their parents died. Amma Paula was a great student of Hebrew and assisted St. Jerome in the translation of the bible. Thousands of women lived this life of simplicity and stillness. Their hearts yearned for the Lord in the silence.

**Song My Spirit Yearns (Taizé)**

**All sing:** My spirit yearns for you in the night, O Lord

I seek you, O Lord with all my soul.

My spirit yearns for you in the night, O Lord

I seek you, O Lord with all my soul.

**Why?**

You might ask what these remote people from another era have to say to us.

As you will see, their wisdom is timeless and offered to us free of charge.

When Pope Francis visited Egypt he pointed to them for inspiration believing that their words and example remain relevant for us today.

Their places of quiet were deserts. Their companions were the gracious gifts of nature that they became more keenly aware of because they were not weighed down with other preoccupations and distractions. Many lived long lives. One of the most famous is St. Anthony of Egypt who lived to be 105 years old and St. Paul the Hermit who lived to be 112. For water, Paul went to a nearby spring, and a palm tree served as both clothing and nourishment. What green credentials?

Today, some people make a fortune doling out advice through various media that is really just common sense. We have only to think of the sayings of our own parents to recognise wisdom in its plain truth. ‘Don’t cast a cloth ‘til May be out’. ‘One swallow does not a summer make.’ These women and men of the Desert are the closest we come to social commentators of the 4th and 5th centuries. Their spirituality is deep, sharp and healing. They lived with complete trust of God.

**Song All Will Be Well**

**(Julian of Norwich 14thc/S. Warner)**

**All sing:** All will be well and all will be well,

All manner of things will be well.

**Anger**

These spiritual men and women, though living remotely, understood human nature very well. They were aware of the damaging effect of unrestrained anger. Nowadays we have road rage, revenge cyber bullying, aggressive behaviour and hate speech with anger at their core.

**Abba Macarius**

‘If you are stirred to anger when you want to reprove someone, you are gratifying your own passions. Do not lose yourself in order to save another.’

*Brief pause*

**Amma Theodora**

“It is good not to get angry, but if this should happen, the Apostle does not allow you a whole day for this passion, for he says: Let not the sun go down. Will you wait ‘till all your time is ended? Why hate the one who has grieved you? It is not they who have done the wrong, but the devil.

Hate sickness but not the sick person.”

*Brief pause*

**Abba Arsenius**

‘Why, words, did I let you get out? I have often been sorry that I have spoken,

never that I have been silent.

*Brief pause*

**Amma Syncletica**

“Imitate the publican, and you will not be condemned with the Pharisee. Choose the meekness of Moses and you will find your heart which is a rock changed into a spring of water.”

*Brief pause*

**Song Give Us Your Peace (Michael Mahler)**

**All sing:** Jesus, give us peace

Bring us together, let all the fighting cease.

Shatter all our hearts of stone

give us a heart for love alone

**Anxiety**

In the 4th century, one of the Desert Fathers – Evagrius - compiled a list of scripture phrases to use as a mantra to counter various emotions or passions such as fear and anxiety. The collection called Antirrheticus – literally ‘talking back’ – suggests various biblical lines as antidotes to the plague of temptations, fears and distractions that surround us. He gave as an example the temptation of Jesus in the desert and how he only answered the Devil with scriptural phrases.

To work against the suffering of anxiety he suggested the following passage from Leviticus 26:6 ‘I will bring peace in your land and you shall sleep’. ‘I will bring peace in your land and you shall sleep’. ‘I will bring peace in your land and you shall sleep’.

*Brief pause*

**Song Nothing Can Trouble (Taizé/Saint Teresa of Avila)**

**All sing:** Nothing can trouble, nothing can frighten.

Those who seek God shall never go wanting.

Nothing can trouble, nothing can frighten. God alone fills us.

**Evagrius**

‘Cut the desire for many things out of your heart and so prevent your mind being

Dispersed and your stillness lost.’

*Brief pause*

**St. Anthony of Egypt**

A hunter in the desert saw Abba Anthony enjoying himself with the brethren and he was shocked. Wanting to show him that it was necessary sometimes to meet the needs of the brethren, the old man said to him, "Put an arrow in your bow and shoot it." So, he did. The old man said, "Shoot another," and he did so. Then the old man said, "Shoot yet again," and the hunter replied "If I bend my bow so much I will break it." Then the old man said to him, "It is the same with the work of God. If we stretch people beyond measure they will soon break.

*Brief pause*

**Song Calm Me Lord (Margaret Rizza)**

**All sing:** Calm me, Lord, as you calmed the storm

Still me Lord, keep me from harm

Let all the tumult within me cease.

Enfold me, Lord, in your peace.

**Awareness**

**Abba Moses**

‘A brother went to see Abba Moses in his hermitage at Scetis and asked him for a word. And the old man said: Go and sit in your cell, and your cell will teach you everything.’

*Brief pause*

Because the Desert people spent so much time in isolation their awareness of themselves and the world around them increased. They learned to live in peace with God, with themselves and with nature. Their love of God and all creation deepened. Remember the Covid lockdowns and those who were cocooning. Four years later, we might wish that the daily broadcasts and relentless figures could have been sprinkled with common sense words of wisdom and love. Some people grew into a deeper awareness of their wallpaper, their garden and their food. We learnt to appreciate the extraordinary commitment of the on the ground hospital and nursing care workers and the importance of love in action.

How is that awareness now?

**Song Faith Hope and Love (Ronan McDonagh KSG)**

**All sing:** Faith, hope and love,

let these endure among you;

Faith, hope and love,

and the greatest of these is love.

**Joan Chittister OSB**

‘What is right in front of us we see least. We take the plants in the room for granted. We pay no attention to the coming of night. We miss the look of invitation on a neighbour’s face. Learning to notice the obvious, the context in which we find our distracted selves is the beginning of contemplation.

“Oh, wonder of wonders”, the Sufi master says, “I chop wood. I draw water from the well”. In other words, I live in the present. See everything in life as sacred. It is only when we learn to ask what the world around us is saying to us at this very moment, in this particular situation, that we tend to the seedbed of the soul.

Awareness mines every relationship, unmasks every event, every moment, for the meaning that is under the meaning of it.’

**All sing:** Faith, hope and love, let these endure among you;

*Brief pause*

**Intercessions**

**All sing:** O Lord, listen to my prayer, my prayer as I cry to you,

O Lord, listen to my prayer, my prayer as I cry to you.

We remember the great Amma, Mary, mother of Jesus and our mother and give her praise for her ever present love and care.

**Song Mary, Temple of the Lord (Marie Dunne CHF)**

**All sing:** Mary, temple of the Lord, Mary bearer of God’s word,

Ave, Ave, Ave Maria

**Postlude**

“They did not talk, not because they hated conversation, but because they wanted to listen intently to the voice of God in silence; they did not dislike eating, but were feeding on the Word of God so that they did not have room for earthly food or time to bother with it; they did not avoid company because it bored them, but, as one of them said, ‘I cannot be with you and with God.’ It was not a dislike of sleep that made them keep vigil, but an eager and longing attitude of waiting for the coming of Christ:”

**Closing Prayer Let us pray,**

Beloved source of security:

I wish for total freedom from all forms of destructive fear.

In its place, lead me into the freedom of surrender.

You hold me while I grow, and in this confidence I release anxieties about my life – its survival and success – and trust you with my unfolding story – through Christ our strength. Amen.

**(Peter Traben Haas)**

**Song The Lord Bless You And Keep you (Arr. T.C. Kelly)**