

Time for a holy day

a sermon given by the Revd Alison Cozens on Sunday 19 July 2015

The readings were 2 Samuel 7.1–14a, Ephesians 2.11–22, Mark 6.30–34, 53–56

Jesus said, ‘Come away to a deserted place by yourselves and rest a while’, for many were coming and going and they had no leisure even to eat. Mark 6:31 (New Revised Standard Version)

The desert or wilderness is the place where God often tests his people in the scripture. We think of the forty years that the people of Israel had in the wilderness. It was in the wilderness at Mount Sinai that God entered into a covenant with Israel.

The desert is also a place for spiritual renewal. Fr Ross has just returned from his annual retreat with Cistercian monks, not in the desert but in a remote place. He told me that the chapel was cold, but he feels better for the rest, spiritually refreshed.

July and August are holiday months, although Peter and I like to go away in September after the crowds, and if you have not yet been on holiday, may I wish a happy one!

The word holiday comes from holy day, a special day in the calendar for rest and recovery from the routine of work and toil. I know that for many of you Sunday is still a Sabbath day for visiting family, for resisting retail therapy and not indulging in consumerism either at the shops or online. As a rule I try not to do any washing on a Sunday!

Ross and I both had Canon John Armson as a principal when we were at Coates Hall Theological College. And John was a great mentor for me. He once said: “Go into your cell, Alison, and it will teach you everything you need to know”. He was quoting one of the desert fathers.

Your cell might be the quiet corner in your house where you say your prayers, or it might be the room in the monastery or retreat house where you make your retreat. It might even be the pew you are sitting on this morning. And when you come early to church, use the silence before the service begins to listen to God, and God listens to you.

Early one Sunday morning, before the 8.00am service, someone said to me recently “I like coming into the church when the church is empty”, and I responded by saying, “The church is never empty”. For I believe it is filled with the great company of the communion of saints who surround us on our life’s journey through this world.

And these very walls are soaked with prayer, prayers of joy and of sadness, of all those people, who like yourselves, have come over many years for baptisms, weddings and funerals, for holy communion and evening prayer. As we say in our Scottish Liturgy, before we sing the Sanctus, “Holy, holy, holy Lord”, we say “in the company of angels and archangels”.

St Anthony of Egypt and St Paul the hermit, in a painting by Salvator Rosa that you can see on the ground floor of the National Gallery of Scotland, represent the very early Christian impulse to follow Jesus away from the crowd and distraction of daily life into the silence of the desert. Humility is a characteristic of Christian monasticism and this painting shows the two figures dwarfed by the desert.

So we too must learn like those first disciples to go away to a lonely place, to a deserted place to rest for a while. We must learn to look after ourselves in order that we can serve Christ in the world. Not just our physical selves but our spiritual lives.

We pray then for our community here at Rosyth and here at Holy Trinity. As the rule of St Benedict says: ‘The abbot is to temper all things so that the strong may still have something to strive after and the weak may not draw back in alarm.’ We must bear with one another in our strength and in our weakness.

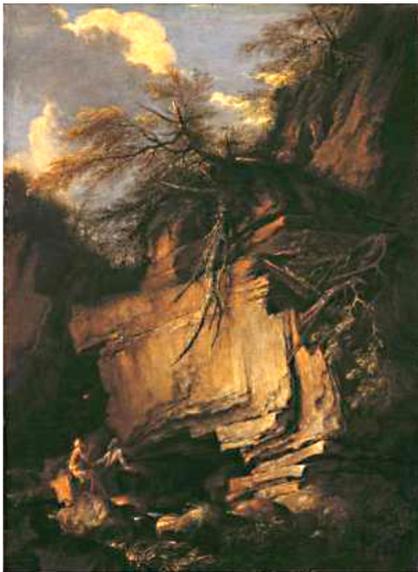
Jesus stepped ashore and saw the large crowd and had pity on them for they were like sheep without a shepherd. We too see the need of those in the new housing estates and those on the streets and we seek God’s guidance as we discern how we can be Christ’s hands and feet in this our local community.

So, whether you are going on retreat like Fr Ross to a remote and cold monastic house, or whether you are planning a holiday in the sun with family or friends, make space and time to be with God, to rest in God’s presence.

Know that because Jesus died on the Cross you are free, free to live life to the full, free to encounter God in the city and in the desert, and to live to the glory of God and for the well being of all God’s people.

Let us pray:

Almighty God, as we stand at the foot of the cross of your Son, help us to see and to know your love for us, so that in humility, love and joy we may place at his feet all that we have and all that we are, through Jesus Christ our Saviour. Amen.



Landscape with St Anthony and St Paul the Hermit by Salvator Rosa, painted in the first half of the 1660s. On display in the National Gallery of Scotland

Ed: For more about this painting, go to <http://tinyurl.com/o83x95g>. This article on pp8/9 of the July/August 2015 issue of *Magnificat*, the magazine of St Mary’s Episcopal Cathedral, Edinburgh, is the latest in a series by John McLuckie. The magazine isn’t linked on the cathedral website, but you can find the articles by Googling – “Looking at Paintings” “John McLuckie” – don’t forget the inverted commas.

A critic has said: “Rosa’s landscapes portray apocalyptic wildernesses – jagged cliffs, crooked trees covered in moss, and an overall brutal environment.” This is thought to be due in part to the fact that Mount Vesuvius had its biggest eruption for hundreds of years in 1631, when Rosa was a young man.