

### Day Six: Hermits in the desert

Today is a 'desert day' for the pilgrims in Avila; a day of silent prayer and reflection providing the opportunity to assimilate all they have experienced so far. The day begins with silent meditation in chapel at CITEs, and continues in silence until this evening.

The practice of going out into the desert to seek silence and solitude emerged in the Christian tradition about the same time as the practice of pilgrimage, namely somewhere around the end of the third century AD. The first monks went out into the Egyptian desert, living in single huts or 'cells' grouped around a spiritual master from whom they received instruction in the spiritual life. Only as they grew accustomed to the demands of solitude did they go further into the desert to live completely alone, for as the monks quickly discovered, solitude, silence and the commitment to continual prayer make radical demands on the hermit and are not to be undertaken lightly. Indeed, the desert monks soon came to see themselves as engaged in a spiritual warfare, a continual battle with the demons of temptation and self-deception.

Despite the hardships involved, the desert or 'eremitical' life quickly became popular and small groups of monks established themselves throughout Egypt, Palestine and Syria. Since they were seeking a life of solitude, it is perhaps ironic that they rapidly became something of a tourist attraction with Christians travelling long distances to listen to the wisdom of the desert fathers and experience something of their way of life. Thanks to these visitors, we have various accounts of their lives, and collections of their sayings, which have come down to us through the centuries. Indeed, we know that St Teresa herself had a high regard for the wisdom of the desert fathers and had extracts from their teachings read to her each day.

When the Carmelite hermits settled in Palestine around the end of the twelfth century, they established a way of life very much in keeping with that of the first desert fathers: single cells grouped around a prior, with some shared liturgical prayer, but an emphasis on silent, continual prayer in the solitude of one's own cell. Teresa never wavered in her admiration for these 'holy fathers on Mount Carmel' and it is notable that when she seeks to reform the Order she looks not outwards to the many new orders flourishing in the church at the time, but turns her eyes to Carmel's origins, to its roots in the desert life on Mount Carmel. 'Let us remember our holy fathers of the past,' she counsels, 'those hermits whose lives we aim to imitate' (*Way of Perfection*, 11.4).

For Teresa, these first generation Carmelites embodied the ideals of her reform; prayer, solitude, detachment, and the rigorous poverty which she regards as the 'insignia' of the order. Teresa's desire is that we should imitate these holy fathers in all their radical zeal:

Fix your eyes always on the ancestry from which we have come, those holy prophets [...] let us adopt the holy presumption that with the Lord's help we will be like them. (Foundations, 29.33)

At times, Teresa's esteem for the truly eremitical life led her to long to escape to the desert, although she felt equally strongly the pull of her apostolic work, engaged in the needs of the world and embedded in it.

The soul wants to flee people, and it has great envy of those who have lived in deserts. On the other hand, it would want to enter into the midst of the world to try to play a part in getting even one soul to praise God more.

(Interior Castle, VI.6.3)

Of course, as Teresa really knew, there is in fact no dichotomy, no conflict, between the life of contemplation and service to the world. Indeed, it was her genius to retrieve in the monastic tradition the idea that the eremitical life is both ecclesial and political; for the needs of the church and the whole world. This too, was one of the key insights of the early desert fathers. These monks knew that in leaving the world they were not abandoning it, but offering their lives on its behalf. The desert fathers understood themselves as standing before God, bringing to him the whole of broken humanity for its healing and redemption. They pleaded for the world, interceding on its behalf, and their privations and penances were undertaken in a radical and generous act of self-gift in the place of the other. Perhaps most importantly, these monks saw themselves as humanity's representatives, waiting in the desert for Christ's return at the end of time, that they might greet him in the name of all. As such, the monk knew that his solitude was physical only; spiritually he knew himself to be 'united with all' as one early desert author put it.

Teresa reclaims this wisdom for her own day, and for ours too. In the first chapters of the *Way of Perfection* she orients the lives of the sisters at St Joseph's firmly to the needs of the whole church. 'The world is all in flames'; their whole lives must be the response they offer to God. As Teresa so clearly understands, the life of prayer and purification to which they have dedicated themselves is

not for them alone. Teresa never ceases to insist, 'If beginners with the assistance of God struggle to reach the summit of perfection, I believe they will never go to heaven alone; they will always lead many people along after them' (*Life*, 11.4). St Teresa of the desert and of the world, pray for us!

### Pilgrims' Liturgy

Albert, called by God's favour to be Patriarch of the Church of Jerusalem, bids health in the Lord and blessing of the Holy Spirit to his beloved sons in Christ, Brocard and the other hermits under obedience to him who live near the spring of Elias on Mount Carmel [...] You may have foundations in solitary places, or where you are given a site that is suitable and convenient for the observance proper to your Order [...] Each of you is to stay in his own cell or nearby, pondering the Lord's law day and night and keeping watch at his prayers unless attending to some other duty.

*(Rule of St Albert; cf. 1, 4, 8)*

*We pray for steadfast, generous hearts which are willing to submit to the purification of the desert. We pray for pure, attentive eyes, fixed on our Saviour alone; we pray for stilled, hushed minds, listening only for his voice. We ask for the graces of the desert.*

*We pray for our world. We stand alongside it in its suffering; we bring it before God in its need; we ask that our prayers may bring the rain of his grace coursing down on all of humanity.*

We offer all our intentions through the intercession of Our Lady, Queen of Carmel:

Flower of Carmel, vine blossom laden,  
Joy of heaven, who yet a maiden  
Bore God's holy one,  
Becoming mother, without the aid of man,  
Bless Carmel's children, as you alone can, Star of Ocean!