

Prebendal Sermon in Saint Paul's Cathedral



The Temptations of St. Anthony by Jeanne Mammen c. 1913

Today is the Feast Day of St. Anthony of Egypt. Anthony was born to wealthy landowner parents near Herakleopolis in Lower Egypt in 251AD.

As a Christian ascetic, he was a forerunner of the more celebrated St. Francis of Assisi and he devised a model Rule for the spiritual life some 200 years before the better known Rule of St. Benedict.

When he was about eighteen years old, his parents died and left him in the care of his unmarried sister. One day, he heard and understood deeply the words of Jesus who said "If you want to be perfect, go, sell what you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasures in heaven; and come, follow Me." (Matthew 19:21). Taking these words quite literally, Anthony gave away some of the family estate to his neighbours, sold the rest and donated the funds raised to the poor. His sister went to live in a nunnery, and Anthony became the disciple of a local hermit to learn the trade, as it were!

According to Anthony's biographer, Saint Athanasius Anthony was afflicted by boredom, laziness, and the phantoms of women, which he overcame by the power of prayer, providing a rich and colourful theme for Christian artists, notably Salvador Dali and Hieronymus Bosch. After that, he moved into a tomb, becoming dependent on local villagers who brought him food. According to Athanasius, the Devil beat him mercilessly, leaving him unconscious. When his friends from the local village found him in this condition, they carried him to a safe place in a church.



Temptations of St. Anthony
Martin Schongauer - 15th century

But he recovered, he went back to the desert, further out, to a mountain by the Nile. Most people expected him to have wasted away, or gone insane in his solitary confinement, but he emerged healthy, serene, and enlightened. Everyone was amazed that he had been through these trials and emerged spiritually rejuvenated. He was hailed as a hero and from this time the legend of Anthony began to spread and grow.



In 311, Anthony decided to become a martyr and went to Alexandria to make a challenging public show of teaching and preaching about Christ which was banned in the Roman Empire. He didn't manage to get himself martyred so off he went back to the desert. He travelled to the inner wilderness for three days, until he found a spring of water and some palm trees, and then he chose to settle there. On this spot now stands the monastery (pictured) of Saint Anthony the Great. There, he taught his followers to, "pray and work", by engaging himself and his disciple or disciples in manual labour. He and his disciples were regularly sought out for words of enlightenment. These statements were later collected into the book of Sayings of the Desert Fathers.

When Saint Anthony felt that the day of his death was approaching, he instructed his disciples to bury his body in an unmarked, secret grave, lest his body become an object of veneration. He stretched himself on the ground and gave up his spirit. Saint Anthony the Great lived for 105 years and died in 356.

He was secretly buried on the mountain-top he chose to live at earlier. But his wishes were not to be observed. His remains were reportedly discovered in 361, and transferred to Alexandria. Some time later, they were taken from Alexandria to Constantinople, so that they might escape the destruction being perpetrated by invading Saracens. Later, in the eleventh century, the emperor gave them to the French count Jocelin. Jocelin has them transferred to La-Motte-Saint-Didier, which was then renamed Saint-Antoine-en-Dauphiné. There, Anthony is credited with assisting in a number of miraculous healings, primarily from ergotism, a kind of food allergy, which became known as "St. Anthony's Fire". He was credited by two local noblemen of assisting them in recovery from the disease. They then founded the Hospital Brothers of Saint Anthony in honour of him.

What can we learn from Anthony? Here are just three things.

- 1) We still need people willing to accept the challenge to live a life-style which is counter-cultural because despite their sense of isolation, the good example of individuals may eventually yield much good fruit.
- 2) Martyrdom is not something to be actively sought, but rather, we should aim to live every day in the spirit of Christ and in the service of God and our fellow human beings.
- 3) It is hard for us to imagine the harsh life-style and commitment of people like Anthony, but we would do well to challenge the obsession with consumerism of our contemporaries. We don't live in a desert, but many people do find our bleak urban and suburban landscapes very similar in ethos and we can still seek the satisfaction of spiritual and unworldly joys that hopefully beckon us as Christian people.

Neil Richardson