**St. Anthony**

Today I want to begin what is going to be a three part series on Spirituality by looking at the broad outlines of what a spiritual journey looks like. I want to do this by looking at the outline of the life of one Saint, St. Anthony. Now it is first of all important to recognize that each person’s spiritual journey is unique, so there is no blue print that must be followed exactly, there is only a response living according to God’s Spirit. Still by looking at the lives of others, especially one such as Anthony, who is seen as one of the central founders of the monastic tradition, from which much of our wisdom about spiritually comes, we are able to see, and better understand some of the elements of our own life of faith. So who was Anthony.

**Calling**

Anthony was born of a wealthy Egyptian family in the middle of the third century. He was born as a Christian, He went to Church. Then when he was around 20, everything began to change. His Parents were both killed and he was left in charge of his sister and his parents estate. This was just the beginning. One day while attending church he heard Matthew 19:21 being read “If you would be perfect, go and sell all that you have and give to the poor; and come and follow me and you shall have treasure in heaven.” These words touched his heart as if God was speaking directly to him, calling him to a new life. So he sold off all that he had, and he began a life dedicated exclusively to religious exercises, living in a hut at the edge of town, praying, fasting and doing works of piety in order to grow in virtue.

Like Anthony many of us be begin the Christian life in a kind of Christian childhood. We are saved, grace has been given, and we go though the routines of faith, but we remain on the surface. Now for others, it might begin quite differently, perhaps you were far from the church, far from faith, far from Christ. No matter where we begin, there comes into our life at some point God’s calling and invitation. It is the invitation to actively follow Christ with our life, to truly have Christ be not just our savior, but our Lord and teacher as well. And when this happens we are called, from the surface of life into its holy depth.

So what does God’s calling look like. Well it comes in many forms. For some it comes, like St. Anthony in the midst of tragedy, or through scripture, for others it comes in the encounter with something that can only be described as the wonder and mystery of the Holy. For some it is an experience where it is like God’s own self speaks to us, and for other it is felt in the desires or emptiness of our heart, or simply experienced in the situation of our life. While the way God calls varies, what is important is that spirituality really begins with God’s action, and it develops only when we make a choice, and choose to respond to this invitation with our life, giving our life over to the guidance of God’s Spirit. It is only when our intention becomes an intention to follow Christ and Christ alone does Spiritual maturity begin.

**Community and Learning.**

Even though this calling is deeply personal, it is not a calling that calls us to an individual spiritual journey. It is interesting, St. Anthony, is held up as the very paradigm of what is understood and the path of the solitary hermit, and yet St. Anthony did not go from his being called to then live by himself. Rather he went to live where others who had taken on this monastic life lived. He sought out those who were more advanced in wisdom and piety in order to learn from them. And he didn’t just learn from one, but sought out one and then after another to learn from each the gift that they could give him.

There is a dangerous myth of the spiritual life. It is the lie that says that spirituality is something individual and personal, and this lie says that the great spiritual examples are simply a result of some almost supper human characteristic of that person, and that is how we often tell the story of Saints, even of St. Anthony, only it is wrong, dead wrong, dangerously wrong. With out community, with out learning from others, and the sharing of wisdom, spiritual growth and progress is almost impossible, even St. Anthony could not even begin his journey with out the community and wisdom of others. The Same is true for us.

**Trials**

A part of the reason is that if any of us follow the calling to the spiritual life and journey in time trials will come. In the ancient world, they called the source of these trials the devil and demons, modern psychology might call it our false self or shadow, while the language is different, they all point to a similar reality. Today, because it is the language St. Anthony used I will use the language of the devil and demons. Our spiritual journey often begin with sweetness and joy, but soon temptation and trials will come. For St. Anthony, for this young man it began with the temptation of lust which attempted to pull him from his path, then came the lure of his past life with its ease and pleasures which stood in stark comparison compared to harshness and scrifice of his calling and his new home, a hut above the city dump. Next came the temptation of reclaiming his previous wealth, and then the desire for glory, advancement in society. All of these came, sometimes even in the guise of people, intending to get him to abandon the greater spiritual calling of God, the devil even used lies that were covered with the veneer of compassion for his deer sister (who despite the devils suggestions was actually doing quite well on her own). All of these were like arrows from the devil that piereced his heart that tried to pull him from his Spiritual path, a path of poverty, prayer and piety.

If any of us truly choose to follow God’s call into the spiritual journey, in time we too will face these attacks. It is amazing how often these initial attacks by the devil succeed in pulling people, in pulling us from God’s call. Oh there are so many other things to do on a Sunday morning, Oh God really doesn’t want me to give up my luxury? I remember a youth once telling me how a friend sneered at Christianity, because there was the expectation of faithfulness and love in matters of lust. I also marvel at all of the activities we will prioritize over the condition of our spirit? We all have our week spots, that the devil is good at taking aim at.

So how do we overcome these attacks, well this is why we have a community, to guide us and support us and call us back. For Anthony, and us, we overcome these temptations as we preserver in re-shaping our life even our patterns of thought , we overcome these when we confront our temptations with truth, above all, like St. Anthony these things are over come by the faith given us by God and by the constant practice of prayer, by constantly, no matter how hard we fall, to again allow our selves to be picked up by God’s grace and begin again. For if you stumble, you are not alone, we all stumble again and again, and again and again, and when we do God’s grace picks us up, forgives us and with great love and compassion God says, it’s ok my child, let us try again.

**Departing for the Tombs.**

For St. Anthony this life of following God’s calling, of being fed and taught by a community of faith and daily facing the temptations of the devil continued for about 15 years, and for most of us this early part of our faith journey also can take years. It is during this time that we begin to learn what it means to make Christ our Lord , and to submit our life to his council alone. It is during this time that we are formed, and it is during this time that we are equipped for the ministry that God has for us. For St. Anthony it was a time when God shaped and prepared him, so that boy, who was once to timid to even go to school and play with other children would be the one to battle with the demons themselves.

For there came a time when as St. Athanasias writes “Thus tightening his hold upon himself, Anthony departed to the tombs” . Now 1700 years later, we miss the significance, of this, but back then this would have thrown the audience into amazed terror. The tombs, not the tombs, what daring, how could he! For the tombs were understood as where demons dwelled and had power. St Anthony is moving from the defense, to choosing to go into the very place of darkness and evil.

God’s big plan is to bring love, healing and light into the very brokenness and darkness of our world. Which means the spiritual life, calls us all into the pain and brokenness of the world so that we might be the ones the bear God’s love and light. And it is not easy, St. Anthony describes how the attacks of the demons in the tombs were so severe that he we was left laying on the ground, speechless from excessive pain, at one point his friend, who brought him food found him, and thought he was dead.

So why does God allow such blows to land on God’s children. In part because in this world evil is a reality, life is brutal, people are brutal, sin is real, but in the midst of it Anthony was never abandoned by God. He may have felt the pain of the demons attacks, but they had no ultimate power over Anthony, and in the midst of this Anthony learned to trust God completely. Until at one point this once timid boy was attacked by the devil with visions, of his hearts deepest fears, Lions, Snakes and wild creatures, his greatest weakness, his fear threatened to finally undue him. And it was precisely at this point when he felt most helpless, that he fully learned that it was not by his power that the demons were defeated, but by God’s grace, and God’s word.

At the heart of the Spiritual life there is a growing and deepening relationship with God. This relationship seems to grow to the extent that we are purified, and purified, not just of the ways that we may misbehave, not just of our false self an prejudices, but of the very heart of sin, our tendency to place our self, and our own sense of self, instead of God at the heart of our life and of our power. And for most of us, this letting go of our self, for God is perhaps the greatest and often the most painful struggle of life.

But as that struggle is won, as God becomes the very heart and centre of our life, something amazing happens. It is almost as if some profound energy is released into our life. This energy is not only the source of joy and peace, but there is also power in this; God’s power, which works though us to bring light into our world.

And so Anthony, after being purified in the tombs, went out even deeper, not just into the tombs, but into the heart of the desert, understood as not just the dwelling, but the very fortress of demons, but now it was not he who was under attack, but rather it was he, equipped with God’s Word and God’s Spirit that drove the demons out, in time the desert, that place where demons once dwelled, would be filled not only with Anthony but thousands of monks, following not only the example of Anthony, but ultimately the example of Christ. From this came the tradition of the desert fathers and mothers, whose dedication to following Christ would lay the foundation not only for monasticism, but how we continue to understand the depths of the Christian life.

For when God purifies us, and sanctifies us, it is for ministry, it is so that we may be a part of God’s healing and transformation of the world. And it is ongoing. Even the Saints are not perfect. There is this great story of Anthony, latter in his life, flees from all the people that had gathered to learn from him, as he flees, God shows up, to basically tell Anthony that he was going the wrong way. And so the Spiritual journey is for us.

For those who God gives God’s grace, God calls, and those that God calls God calls into communities of faith in order to equip, those that God equips God calls into service, and those called into service, God purifies, and those God purifies God Sanctifies, and those that God Sanctifies become the shining example of God’s love in the world, finding not only the true depths of joy, of love and power in the Gospel, but also finding themselves growing in ever deeper union with Christ. And it is this, this growing union with Christ which is the very heart of the Christian Spiritual life.