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Walking the Ancient Paths of Prayer

BY Diane Sekuloff

One thing I have asked of the Lord; this is what I seek; that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life; to behold the beauty of the Lord, and to seek Him in His temple. (PSALM 27:4)

WHEN MORNING COMES, I am less inclined to sing than later in the day - but to dance these powerful words helps to set the intention of my day's work, and of my relationships. So begins my morning prayer, day by day. This wonderful psalm opens the office (service) of morning prayer in the Celtic Daily Prayer of the Northumbria Community (HarperCollins, London, 2000), of which I am an associate member. The office moves on to proclaim,

To whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life, and we have believed and have come to know that You are the Holy One of God. (JOHN 6:68-69)

After reading and prayer, the reality of Christ's presence around, before, behind, within and without me is affirmed, dancing to the words of St. Patrick in J.M. Talbot's rendering of 'Christ as a Light' (from The Hiding Place album, Sparrow Records, 1990).

Finally, my prayer closes with a blessing.

This is an ancient pattern of prayer, from the monastic tradition of the Desert Fathers, which reflects an even older pattern of prayer from the Jewish people, long before Jesus' time. There is a deep mystery in joining with those generations of saints who have sought Him for Himself and His blessing on their lives, whether through chanting these ancient prayers, dancing them, meditating on them or proclaiming them from the rooftops. To enter into that tradition is to embody once again, the ancient paths by which saints of old have sought to know Him, and through which they have been led to make Him known from one generation to another.

The Desert Fathers were a group of men, and women, who sought to live a life that seemed radical, in response to the emergence of the Church as a newly proclaimed state-approved religion in the 4th century. The conversion of Constantine's mother led to the



change in the status of the Christian Community. The resulting culture shock appeared to compromise the integrity of the gospel, which had been at the core of their identity. For many, this huge social upheaval was overwhelmingly disturbing. Where the beatitudes had proclaimed, 'Blessed are the poor' (MATTHEW 5), now Christians could be wealthy and influential. Where previously, Jesus seemed to emphasize 'if a man strike you on your right cheek, turn to him your left' (MATTHEW 7), now they could belong to an army, where even the shields were marked with the cross. A movement began which had an extraordinary effect upon church and the society. Some Christians began to leave the cities and gather in communities in the desert, where they could live a lifestyle adhering to the challenges of the gospel. They could seek God for Himself, and live a life authentically free of the contradictions of the city. They lived simple lives, uncluttered by personal possessions. They worked at simple trades allowing them to feed and clothe themselves, but didn't tempt them to lose their hearts to these things of the world. Their intention was not judgement or rejection of their society, but rather to live in contrast to the world. A trickle became a torrent, and soon the monastic communities of the fathers (and mothers) became a source of refreshment and wisdom, both to those called to join them, and those who visited for short periods of time, while continuing to live in the mainstream of society.

These communities produced missionaries, who felt called to take the Gospel to the nations. Martin of Tours, Patrick, Columba, Aidan and those who took the Gospel to the northern British Isles, the Picts, Welsh, Britons and Irish, had their roots in those desert communities and established the Celtic Christian Church. This branch of the Church became the gem of Christendom during the 7th century, with the establishment of schools, monasteries, hospices, churches and one famous library at Jarrow in the north of England.

In time such as ours, when world powers are shifting, and the principles by which our fathers lived are being questioned, what appeal can the Celtic Christian tradition have? And what does that have to do with dance? Over the last decade there has been a rebirth of Celtic music, art, story telling and culture, which has swept Europe and North America. If one allows the cynicism of 'trend culture' to colour one's thinking, an opportunity can be missed to find something of significance in this particular fad.

The Desert Fathers focused primarily on seeking God for Himself alone rather than for what He could give them. They sought to "worship Him in Spirit and in Truth" (JOHN 4:23) by focusing their hearts on Him through the mundane, everyday tasks of their physical lives. They prayed corporately and individually, spending time in adoration of a God, whose grace was lavishly poured upon them, as well as interceding for others. They sought to bring an authenticity to their lives, so that the physical expression of faith, in relationships and in deeds, was a reflection of an inner reality of closeness to the fountain of grace.

I have found dance to be a vehicle of that authenticity. It has enabled me to put flesh to my prayers, particularly when my prayer life feels dry and unrewarding. Like the Desert Fathers, I have found that in the grasping for gesture to express the heart of the words as an act of prayer, adoration, or intercession, there has been a deeper reality to my life. Dancing some of the ancient Celtic hymns, and scripture, has opened my heart anew to the mysteries of God's grace in contrast to the rage of any self-made righteousness.

I have found that word becomes meaningful movement, and sometimes, then completes the cycle to become word again, at a deeper level. Recently choreographing the passage of EZEKIEL 37, 'Valley of the Dry Bones', to music, the group I was with explored many ways of expressing the various images. Our last couple of minutes of dancing, as the 'exceeding great host' (vs. 10) led to a dance which then became a poem of life as a servant of God:



*Lord, we strive and limp through the tasks of daily life,
often distracted by the temptations of this world
to seek meaning and fulfillment elsewhere,
but You gather us unto Yourself, and show us once again,
that You are God most high,
and we offer once again,
all that we are
and all that we do,
to You,
for Your honour and glory.*

It has been conjectured that perhaps dance is such a powerful medium of ministry, because movement is pre-verbal. Movement is basic, the underlying foundation of all our thinking, knowing, and being. In teaching dance to others, as well as in my own life, I have discovered that movement to scripture is an aid to memorization of the scripture, and at the same time, a resource for insight and revelation. A scripture verse comes alive in new ways when I move through it. It moves from an intellectual experience to a heart-felt experience. The Desert Fathers used to recite psalms with one another as they walked from one community to another. Perhaps the psalms of ascent become more meaningful as one is puffing up a hill! I have often wondered if, by moving with the words of our worship, it assists the Spirit to move us in living the good news out, beyond the walls of the church, in more radical contrast to those of the world.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, "The renewal of the church will come from a new type of monasticism which only has in common with the old, an uncompromising allegiance to the Sermon on the Mount. It is high time men and women banded together to do this." Perhaps it is this generation which will dance its way through the ancient paths once again, along the highway of our God, and into the glory of His kingdom.

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