

ALONE WITH GOD

By JOHN DALRYMPLE

THERE IS a modern distaste for solitude. You meet it at two distinct levels. First of all there is the plain fear that many people have of being left on their own. Being alone frightens them. This fear is usually dread of silence too. To soften the impact of silent solitude, the transistors and tape-recorders are turned on, so that being alone is at least accompanied by a noise or a voice, however artificially produced. Anything rather than to be alone in a room in silence. I have known quite serious university students, with considerable inner resources, suffer from this modern malaise. Difficult research and the writing of intricate essays are conducted to the background of the transistor, and without the background noise the student would not feel sufficiently relaxed to be able to concentrate on the work. It is not surprising, then, to find that people with fewer inner resources depend even more on background noise to cushion them from solitude and silence. Going round visiting in a parish you very seldom enter a home where the family is sitting talking to each other. Almost inevitably the television is on, not very often being looked at, but always there at one end of the room to provide a back-ground of reassuring pictures and voices. Even when the sound is turned down, the picture is left flickering away as a sort of defence against the impact of the visitor.

At quite a different level, there is a similar distaste for solitude. This is the suspicion felt by modern christians towards solitude because of its connection with individualism. It is based on the theological conviction that 'it has pleased God to make men holy and save them not merely as individuals . . . but by making them into a single people' (*Lumen Gentium*, 9). Hence modern christians are critical of any spirituality which seems to place individual salvation in the centre and which does not foster a sense of community, be it in worship, prayer or good works. Solitude for them smacks of the imperfect past which the Church is busy putting behind itself. Christianity must be communitarian in the modern world, or perish. Clearly this bias against individualism is far removed from the instinctive fear of solitude and silence mentioned above. The latter is an immature reaction based on popular culture, while the former is

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a theologically based conviction in the main-stream of post-Vatican II thinking. And yet I would not too quickly dismiss any connection between the two. It seems to me that the two reactions share a common weak root. It may be more crudely visible in the modern teenager who has to be in a noisy crowd before he can feel relaxed, but my guess is that some of the modern theological bias against individual spirituality and 'saving one's soul' is rooted in that same reluctance for facing life on one's own.

It is interesting to observe the defences against solitude with which some retreat houses are equipped. A busy programme to prevent the retreatants being 'bored'; plenty of distracting amenities, from hot water bottles to late night cups of ovaltine; a well-stacked table of bright-looking books and periodicals; music at meals or another book; opportunities for discussion; a 'personality' to give the spiritual talks. How much of this is helpful? How much simply serves to cushion the impact of silence and solitude, and so keep God at a distance? Perhaps the best way to conduct a retreat would be to provide no such cushions, face the retreatants on the first morning with the stark reality of complete silence and nothing to do, and thus provide a truly free space for God to get to work in. The boredom might be intense for the first day or two. Certainly the fear of boredom would be formidable and would provide a strong urge to read, talk, discuss, write 'necessary' letters, eat, sleep, anything rather than be alone, without familiar defences, before God. But the result, after perseverance, might be that the retreatants bumped up against God almost for the first time in their lives. The desert is, indeed, frightening, but it is the place where God is met, face to face. Instinctively we know this and are afraid. So we arm ourselves with books, ideas, plans, programmes, group discussions, and successfully contrive to escape from actually meeting God. Seeing this, it appears that God keeps his distance too, for he rarely forces an entry into our souls and waits for an invitation. By constantly throwing stones into the pool of our souls we ensure that there are always ripples on its surface, and so we never see the reflection of God in the depths. In the face of such busy-ness God leaves us alone and remains a stranger.

Sooner or later, however, we must meet God, all alone and with no cushions. The tragedy is when we spend a lifetime running away from this destiny, and so, this side of Purgatory, are unprepared for the meeting. Sir Thomas More, that most sociable of men, experienced this naked meeting with God alone in his cell in the Tower

of London, but only because he had prepared for it all his life by a deeply private spiritual life. The prayer he composed and wrote down in the margins of his Book of Hours in the Tower begins challengingly:

Give me thy grace, good Lord,
To set the world at naught.
To set my mind fast upon thee,
And not to hang upon the blast of men's mouths,
To be content to be solitary;
Not to long for worldly company;
Little and little utterly to cast off the world
And rid my mind of all the business thereof.

It takes a lot of courage to pray to be content to be solitary. Unless we face this challenge, however, we will be of little use to man or God, to the world we want to save or to the God who loves us. Contemplative prayer happens when a man is alone with God, face to face, defenceless. I do not deny that it can also happen in a community situation – in prayer groups, in shared silence after Communion at Mass, at latin high Mass singing gregorian graduals – but I would be suspicious of anyone who said that he met God only in groups and had never faced him alone. I would wonder whether he had not merely had an experience of the group at a deep level: a most satisfying experience, but not the same as meeting God at a deep level. To meet God face to face it is necessary to be alone. It is not a cosy experience.

Sooner or later, then, you have to switch the transistor off, forget all about the hundred and one things crying out to be done, put out of your mind the prayer-group, bible study group, house Mass, and go into your chamber in secret, and pray. It requires considerable discipline. For many lay people it is not possible to do this on a daily basis. They can manage a few scrappy prayers in the morning and at night, preserved from their childhood. But prayer, as described above, is not possible every day. The best thing for people so circumstanced is to bypass the twenty-four hour cycle in their life and concentrate upon the seven-day cycle. In an agricultural society the twenty-four hour cycle matters most. It is geared to milking the cows and feeding the horses. But in our urban condition the seven-day cycle is, in fact, the one we live by. From Monday to Friday we put our heads down and go to work without much energy for anything else. Then at the weekends the house is cleaned, the

store-cupboard is replenished, and we think of visiting relations and friends. The Monday to Friday rush only makes sense if taken with the Saturday-Sunday leisure to recharge the batteries. We are, in fact, living by a seven-day cycle, not a twenty-four hour one. Surely, then, our spiritual life could be conducted on this weekly rhythm too. From Monday to Friday there is often no place for any but quick routine prayers. But the weekend could see time being devoted to *prayer*, not just prayers. Then is the time for discipline, when we switch off the noises and set about creating a period of silence for ourselves. This can be done by staying at home and deliberately making a desert, behind locked doors if necessary. If this is not possible, then a visit to the local church for an hour or half an hour is always possible. There in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament the conditions for the solitary encounter with God are often ideal.

The point to note in this is that we need discipline to create the space and time in our week for prayer, a discipline which is based first of all on believing prayer to be worthwhile, and secondly on letting nothing come between our resolution and the actual doing of it. In my experience the second resolution is easy if that first conviction is present. Once you are convinced that an hour spent in prayer is worthwhile, then you can easily put aside the alternatives and organize your life to fit it in. Finding time for things which are thought to be *necessary* is the easiest thing in the world, and we all manage it without bother. The problem for christians is to be convinced that an hour spent in solitary prayer each week is 'necessary'. You have to be in love to speak like that. Or rather, you have to want to be in love. For by the mercy of God wanting to love him is the same as loving him.

Thomas More did not learn to pray in prison. He had trained himself to it as a young man. He devoted himself to prayer for the rest of his life, setting aside time in the early morning, before the multifarious duties of the day took over. Because he had trained himself to be content to be solitary, he was indeed superbly able to set his mind fast upon God and not to hang upon the blast of men's mouths. We may not be asked to give our lives to show that we value God's word before the blast of men's mouths, but we should recognize the connection between loving God and loving solitude so clearly underlined by Thomas More. The sociable family man, Lord Chancellor of England, made solitude part of his daily routine. In this way he was prepared, when it was asked of him, to choose God rather than the company of his family or his good repute at court.

Solitude in the Tower held no fears for him, because by then solitude for him was not empty but full of God.

God takes a hand

God is not indifferent to our struggles. Sometimes he sees how difficult we find it to choose solitude, so he takes a hand himself and thrusts solitude upon us. It is not a physical solitude but a terrible kind of mental isolation which comes upon us. Fear is the chief isolator. You find yourself afraid of nearly everything, of people both before you meet them and during the meeting, of situations, real and imagined. Your whole life becomes dominated by fears and anxieties, not so much of one or another particular thing, but of everything in general, of life itself. You are also filled with an envy of other people who seem unafraid and enjoying life, especially of those who have problems but are facing them with courage and laughter. They make you feel worse, because they have courage and you have not. In fact you feel so lonely and isolated that there seems to be a fog between you and other people, a fog which cuts you off from everyone and which reduces you to the condition of an immigrant in society. You wander like a stranger in the middle of people.

Self-hate is an ominous presence when you are in this state. A grim feeling of worthlessness accompanies you everywhere and is part of the fog. It affects your contacts with people. You think you are boring them. Is it worthwhile to engage them in conversation when they must find everyone else more interesting? You find yourself cutting short conversation with people because they must be so bored. After a bit you even avoid beginning conversations at all, for the same reason. This fear also affects the work you do. How can you begin any work when you feel incapable and know you will fail? Getting up in the morning to another day of failure becomes a daily ordeal. Most of all, you feel always guilty. You are constantly looking over your shoulder in case someone is there to criticize and condemn what you have done. You feel that all you do may be wrong. You prefer to do nothing, but that too could be wrong. You are caught both ways. Acting and not acting are equally vulnerable to being a failure. It makes you apologetic before you start to speak or act. And you hate yourself in the midst of it all for being so cowardly and for standing for no values. You know that other people fight for their beliefs and values and get inspiration from the battle. But they are the other side of the fog and you know you could not follow them there.

In this fearful and terror-laden state, when you walk through minefields in society, all criticism knocks you over flat. At other times you can stand back from criticism and view it with a healthy detachment and learn from it. But in this state you crumple at the first sign of it. Consequently your life becomes an anxious avoidance of any possibility of being criticized, and you know even as you do this that it is cowardly and self-destructive. Some people threaten you greatly and you feel paralysed in their presence, like a rabbit before a stoat. It is miserable.

At first this mental state makes you turn to other people for advice. Then you learn two further awful truths about the fog you are in: first, that you cannot explain what is happening without seeming to distort it, and secondly that what other people say does not help at all, because whatever they say in reply, you do not believe them. The kindest and most understanding and sympathetic things that are said to you, even by those you trust most, have no effect. You cannot believe good of yourself. You 'see through' all attempts to help, as attempts to help and not the truth. You are, you realize, bound fast in a grip which you cannot get out of. You have to live with the truth of your worthlessness. Every day seems to make it worse.

Finally you turn to prayer. This, too, does not help, and in the acute form of suffering, is practically impossible. It is almost impossible to sit still to pray, and the suffering which the attempt to pray brings flooding into the soul is more than you feel able to bear. A tension rises in the breast which you think will burst if you do not stop immediately. You leave off prayer and resign yourself to slogging on alone, without help from anywhere.

I do not want to exaggerate or overdramatize this mental isolation which afflicts people, perhaps especially in their middle age. I have, however, outlined it because it seems to be more prevalent than is usually realized or admitted. Because of this, it is worth trying to find a pattern in it. There are, no doubt, valid psychological explanations of what I have described, in terms of repressed anger, overdeveloped Super-ego, and so on. There is also, however, a spiritual explanation, which does not contradict the psychological ones, but which tries to provide an answer in terms of deeper causes, namely God's plan for us and the mystery of redemption. The explanation of this mental isolation, which, so uncannily, happens to mature, sane, people surrounded by their friends, and which is therefore so largely subjective, is surely that God thrusts it upon us

with a purpose. The purpose is to teach us to depend on him, to teach us to be solitary, to show us (with horrible clarity) that human society is only able to support us so far in life, and that ultimately we are alone before God, answerable to him and responsible for ourselves. We are taught solitude, not to make us avoid society, but paradoxically to equip us better for a useful life in society, by painfully teaching us self-responsibility. We are, to speak in metaphor, forced into the desert in order to make us stronger at living when we return to the green pasturelands.

It may seem absurd to claim that the experience of weakness in society strengthens us for the part we are meant to play in it; but that, paradoxically, is the truth. To begin with, we learn our weaknesses. That is nothing but gain. The strong person is not the one who has no weaknesses, but the one who knows the weaknesses he has, just as the brave man is the man who tries to overcome his fears, not the (non-existent) man who has no fears. In this way the experience of fear in isolation has the effect of pulling away the masks from our personalities which up to now have hidden us from ourselves. We know the truth about ourselves with painful reality. Although it is painful, this vision of reality is therapeutic; and when the pain has subsided, the truth remains as permanently helpful. We become more humble. Secondly, in learning our weaknesses, we learn also to depend on God. It is true that during the experience prayer is not possible. But faith is still possible, although desperately shaky, and when the pain and tension have lifted, faith blossoms into a life of rich prayer, and we discover to our surprise that God was involved in the experience all along. We discover that we have, mysteriously, drawn closer to God and have forged a strong bond with him which will not now be broken because it goes so deep. (After twelve particularly odious weeks in the Guards Training Battalion there was a very strong bond of affection and loyalty between our squad and the merciless sergeant who had put us through it all.) The reality of God as a God of Love looms large in our lives now. He has become more real. Solitude holds less fears for us, not only because we have been toughened by being through it once, but chiefly because we have discovered God in it. Solitude is not empty now. It is full of the rich presence of God. We could happily pray to be content to be solitary. We fear much less the blast of men's mouths, and, frankly, do not long for worldly company, and all the business of the world. We realize, with wonder, that we have learnt not to be frightened by silence and solitude, but to welcome them.