

ROOTEDNESS OR JOURNEYING?

By ESTHER DE WAAL

LOOKING BACK through the pages of my diary for the past year, and choosing random but also typical entries, I find something about the pattern of my life which I would guess cannot be so very dissimilar to that of many of my contemporaries.

January 2 Since I need to work in the library at Heythrop I cannot avoid travelling the length of Oxford St. From the top of my 137 bus I see the pavements crowded for the January sales where a tired glitter and tawdy decorations have become the setting for the search for bargains and discounts. From this vantage spot it feels as though I am watching a surging mass of people driven by some strange sort of desperate seeking.

February 12 Visiting my mother-in-law in the old people's home always takes a long time because I stop in the corridors and the day room and talk to the people I meet. But these are conversations which take me into the edge of shadowy worlds of people suffering from Alzheimer's disease, worlds which I feel I can never fully enter.

March 20 I have been asked to leave. They need my flat. I have only been here for eighteen months it is true, but still long enough to make it my own, to have my own possessions around me, things that mean a lot, are full of memories. 'Esther's rainbow kitchen' as my small godson calls it when he comes to tea. So taking it all apart is painful, even though I have somewhere to go, and I remind myself that that is not going to be true for most of the homeless, refugees, redundant, bankrupt, dispossessed today.

July 10 As I cross Charing Cross bridge I stop and talk to the young man who sits there begging. I guess that his is a story that could be paralleled many times over: leaving an unhappy home in Glasgow because of rows with a step-father, believing that London was a place where he could find work, and now alone, without work, too young for the dole, lost, sleeping rough.

August 15 Sitting in the garden of a Normandy farmhouse which old friends have just bought, having abandoned the attempt to live

any longer in London. Talking about what the future now holds for them, Brian quotes something that he had found in the Gnostic Gospel according to St Peter which caught his imagination. The reply of Jesus to Peter's question 'How far shall I go?' is 'Go as far as you can and stand there'.

September 10 It was only a small, part-time job but nevertheless it was something that I treasured, quite apart from the very welcome addition that it brought financially. So suddenly to find that I am no longer needed, that recession has hit me, and that I am now redundant, is painful, and much more painful than I could have imagined in advance. I feel loss at so many levels, and there is little prospect of anything appearing to fill the gap.

October 27 The trains are all delayed and we are given no reason but simply told to wait. At this time of the evening it is difficult to imagine a more desolate place in which to settle down for an uncertain length of time. The waiting-room full of anxious people, tired people, angry people. We are all totally powerless and I guess each of us is thinking of the cost of this broken journey.

December 10 Each birthday I am always grateful that in some mysterious way this day links me with Thomas Merton. Today marks the fiftieth anniversary of his entering Gethsemani, 10 December 1941. It was also of course the day on which he died in Bangkok, 10 December 1968. A man for our times, someone with whom to identify and from whom to learn. His whole life a journey—always searching, moving forward, crossing new frontiers and asking new questions, never afraid of the new or what it might cost. He once wrote:

My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me.

I cannot know for certain where it will end.

I feel that any discussion of rootedness or journeying as the image for the 'lay vocation' today must begin here, in the context of the untidy patterns with which many of our lives contend. Looking at those pages from a year's diary I am struck, re-reading them, by the absence of the sort of certainty and stability which, when I was younger, I might have expected to have found at this stage of my life. This might also be said to be true for many of those whose lives crossed mine. The assumptions of an earlier age about a stable family life and secure home, a steady job, a dependable framework in personal and professional life before final years of comfortable

retirement seem now to carry little conviction. In addition it also often seems that many people's suffering is compounded by the guilt that they may feel (perhaps this is particularly true for women) because the expectation that is still held out, possibly inadvertently, is that of stability, a life of rootedness and permanence.

Facing questions about change and place and commitment in a situation in which many of the familiar boundaries in my own life have disappeared and the securities that I felt I could count on have largely dissolved, I have found that it has increasingly been to the monastic tradition of the Church that I have turned for practical help, support and insight. My bookshelves are not short of books on spirituality, and because I go so frequently to the United States I have both sides of the Atlantic on which to draw. They are extremely attractively produced, and it is hard to resist buying them (a sort of spiritual addiction?) particularly when they promise me self-knowledge, and growth and progress, more love and understanding, and better relations all round—not only with God but with the world and with myself. And yet most of them now lie largely unread and unused: all that they could give me, and more, I discovered that I could find by turning to the desert fathers and mothers, the Rule of St Benedict, the twelfth century Cistercians, and writings from the Celtic monastic tradition.

The common assumption that monastic spirituality applies only to life in the cloister, life under vows, the life of enclosure and separation from the world, has meant that many ordinary lay people have not been encouraged to turn to the monastic tradition as a resource that will help them to discover and live out their Christian calling in their ordinary daily lives in the world. I feel that this is a loss that we should now reverse. For the monastic tradition speaks to us out of hard-won experience. Here is something that has come out of facing issues which we all have to face, struggling with those questions which are fundamental and inescapable. How do we learn to live with ourselves? How do we learn to live with others? How do we stand still within ourselves and try not to run away from the place in which we find ourselves, both literally and figuratively? How do we move forward so that we make our life a journey, and prevent it from becoming too safe and without risk? Above all how do we hold these things together so that our life recognizes the appropriate place both of stability and of change? How do we learn to stay still at the centre and allow it to hold the moving, growing periphery?

There are no easy answers here and no automatic promise of success. This stands in contrast to the tendency of much contempor-

ary spirituality, whether books, workshops or retreats, which seems rather too often to take on the colour of today's consumerism with a promise of growth, fulfilment, progress, so that if a chosen guru or system or guide does not come up with the acceptable answer it is always possible to turn elsewhere to find something better. The message that life does not necessarily add up, that the contradictions will not necessarily be resolved, and that we should not be looking for easy answers, is for me immensely liberating. As I have come to know the text of the Rule of St Benedict I have increasingly appreciated the extent to which it brings together two streams within the existing monastic tradition and the theological thinking of the day, so that they are juxtaposed and allowed to interact with each other. As I see increasing polarization in politics and in the Church I am grateful to be shown a way which allows, indeed insists, that two things can be held together dynamically in a dialectic which recognizes the importance of remaining open to different, even divergent, aspects of one truth. There can thus be a dialogue, a conversation as it were, between the eremitical and the coenobitic, the vertical and the horizontal, the ascetic and the humane, above all between the vow of stability and the vow of *conversatio morum* or 'conversion'. The actual writing of the Rule has grown out of a situation of contradiction, but St Benedict is presenting it in terms that are life-giving and energizing, rather than fragmenting and disabling. And what is true of the text of the Rule is also true for myself in my own life, my own inner geography: I am helped to come to terms with these differing elements within myself.

The most familiar image of the Benedictine is that of a man or woman bound by the vow of stability, earthed by the enclosure in one particular place and one particular group of people. And yet that vow is held in tension with the vow of *conversatio morum*, the commitment to continual conversion, to living open to the new, to moving forward on an inner journey which makes the monk, in a phrase of Thomas Merton's, 'a stranger and a wanderer on the earth'. If we turn to the Celtic Church the image of the hermit alone in his hut in the wilderness, where he lives out the eremitical tradition of the Egyptian desert in the *dysarts* or *disearts* of Ireland or Wales, is one of the most familiar figures of the Celtic monastic tradition. Yet equally powerful are the figures of the *peregrini*, the pilgrims or exiles who are prepared to leave the land of their birth and set out for the love of God on travels that will carry them they know not where. Here the image is one of stepping into a coracle without oars, leaving behind any form

of human security in exchange for what is totally unknown and unimaginable.

But perhaps even before this question can be faced, there is something else even more fundamental. I feel that before anything else it is time to re-emphasize a spirituality of the solitary. Whoever we may be and wherever we are, the failure to nurture this pole of our humanity will weaken our value to ourselves and our usefulness to others. It does not seem to be a common practice of either Church or society today to help people to live with themselves, to encourage the solitary within. As I heard someone put it rather crudely recently 'We are all relationship junkies now'. Yet more and more people today are likely to be alone (not necessarily from choice), and it is here that they need to find the place of their vocation and ministry.

In his wisdom St Benedict knows that the solitary within each of us must be addressed and his Rule, written as a practical guide for living in community, opens with the words, 'Listen, my son'. The underlying image is of the prodigal son and of the need to come home, to return home, to be at home in all the many levels of meaning that this can carry. I cannot safely set out on a journey unless I have a base from which to leave and to which to return. Unless I am at home in myself I cannot exercise hospitality (hospitality of the heart) and welcome others in. Unless I am at home how can I answer the Christ who knocks on the door and seeks admittance? I may or may not have an address, but I do most surely need to be at home, in my innermost self, in the cave of my heart. Stability means not running away, not trying to escape, whether from myself or from the situation in which I find myself. It asks for perseverance, steadfastness, staying still and staying firm. Michael Casey would say that a more eloquent symbol of today's restlessness than either car or plane is the remote control device for changing TV channels. There is no need to persevere with something as undemanding as watching television without switching to see if there is not something better somewhere. Stability is a reminder that our Christian commitment asks that we stay around sufficiently long for the process to work in us, that we give it a chance to work. The monk holds on without 'weakening or seeking escape' (7.35,36). Refusing to give up because we are in it for the long haul puts things into a very different perspective. It may simply mean courage in the very undramatic sense of patient endurance. It demands patience, not the sort of patience that is close to apathy or the wrong sort of acceptance, but that tough waiting which holds on against all odds—patient endurance.

This interior stability, this refusal to run away, whether from the external situation or from one's own self, applies to any lay person whatever their specific vocation may be. The familiar aphorism of the desert fathers, that it is in the cell that everything is learnt, speaks of the heart. This is the place in which the battle has to be fought out. That ancient monastic understanding of the correspondence between the inner and the outer worlds is based on excellent psychology. In the cell of the heart we hear all the many voices, all the fractures and storms which tear the world apart. As St Macarius puts it, all things are here. 'The heart is but a small vessel: and yet dragons and lions are there, and there poisonous creatures, and all the treasures of wickedness; rough uneven places are there, and gaping chasms. There likeness is God, there are the angels, there life and the kingdom . . . all things are there.' It finds echoes in St Francis' *Canticle of the sun* where it is possible to see his celebration of all the creatures as an acknowledgement not only of the created world outside but also of the unconscious depths within, so that in fraternizing with them we are also fraternizing with hidden parts of ourselves.

It is this ability to be at home in oneself, the cave of the heart, the inner cell, and to face there the totality of that whole inner world, that makes the journeying possible.

To go to Rome
Is much trouble, little profit,
The King whom thou seekest there,
Unless thou bring Him with thee, thou wilt not find.

There is an important distinction to be made between the Celtic *peregrini* who, because they already carry God within, can launch themselves upon their long travels into the unknown, and the *gyrovags* so severely castigated by St Benedict who recognized the wrong sort of journey, motivated by the need for novelty and excitement, and which is in effect a running away. The interdependence of stability, (taking that to mean an interior stability) and journeying is vital, for the one brings the firm base that makes the other possible and creative. The image of the Christian life as a letting go and 'going forth into strange countries', is as old as Abraham. The Celtic monks understood just how demanding this could be, but the fact that *peregrinatio* was so costly was precisely part of its strength. This is a journey which involves a tearing apart from what is known and loved, familiar and safe. To become a stranger and an exile for the

love of Christ—*pro amore Christi*—meant leaving home, a stripping of family and possessions, rooting out from heart and mind of all one's own aims and desires, and what would be most painful of all for a Celt, forsaking one's native soil for some remote place in which possibly to end one's life without hope of return.

'Are you hastening towards your heavenly home?' That is St Benedict's question to his disciples in one of the later chapters of the Rule. This man who is so well known for propounding the virtues of stability, moderation, balance, the man who has been called the last of the Romans, is also the passionate preacher, the zealot, the man who writes with urgency telling his followers that there must be no postponement, that they must turn to Christ today and not tomorrow, that they must set out on the road without delay, that they must run and not walk. The Benedictine vow of stability is held together with the vow of *conversatio morum*, an archaic term whose modern translation carries the idea of *metanoia*, returning, journeying on, living open to the new, ready always to change and to move on. Ultimately it means the living out of the paschal mystery, for it is a commitment to dying and to rebirth, not once but time and again throughout life. It asks of us a letting go which may often be painful because it is so difficult at the time to make any sort of sense of what is happening.

Pious statements about the good that comes from 'stripping' or 'pruning' seem particularly unacceptable in situations of bewilderment, betrayal, blatant lack of justice. It is only probably much later on that it is possible to look back and to recognize that what was happening was in some mysterious way life-giving and freeing. There are many idols in our lives which we do not see as idols because they were once good in themselves. It is the clinging to them when the time is past that prevents us from clinging to God and God alone, and finding our dependency in him alone. God is in the facts. If the vow of *conversatio* is telling us anything at all it is this, that God is always there, throughout all the changes which open up like chasms before us, uncertain, frightening, unpredictable as they may be at the time. This asks of us a changing response to a continually changing experience of God. This is the God of surprises who will reveal himself to us in new and surprising ways, and will allow us to be changed and be reborn in surprising ways—provided that we are willing to co-operate, and not escape into the wrong sort of stability which is static, deadening. The acceptance of a static or negative state and the refusal to journey on are the ultimate in sinful self-love. It is

precisely this which the vow of *conversatio* challenges. It demands a willingness to move forward all the time. There is no final stopping place in this life, no matter how far we may have come, though there will of course be the lesser stopping places along the way where, like Abraham, we may build a small shrine and offer thanksgiving for all the gifts, the new gifts that we find along the way.

NOTES

Much of what I say here about the Benedictine tradition can be found in *Seeking God: the way of St Benedict*, (Fount, 1984) and *Living with contradiction: reflections on the Rule of St Benedict*, (Fount, 1989), and about the Celtic in *A world made whole, the rediscovery of the Celtic tradition*, (Fount 1991). Michael Casey O.C.S.O. was writing in *Tjurunga*, the Australasian Benedictine Review 24, May 1983. The discussion of St Francis' *Canticle of the sun* can be found in Leclerc, Eloi: *Le Cantique des Créatures ou les symboles de l'union* (Paris, 1970) p 201. (I owe this reference to Canon Donald Allchin.) The quotation from the homilies of St Macarius comes from Ware, Timothy (ed): *The art of prayer* (London: Faber, 1959), p 19.