

from
the
Desert

Christ withdrew to the desert to pray and suffered temptation. In the 4th Century others followed. Some lived many years alone, while some joined others on Saturday and Sunday to celebrate the Eucharist followed by an Agape meal. Afterwards they might gather round an Elder and ask, "Give us a word, Abba", "Give us a word Amma". And so arose the tradition of spiritual guidance through wisdom from the desert. Their path spread throughout the Christian world and developed into the eremitic form of monasticism that we know today. We continue to be guided towards God by this wisdom.

The novitiate for desert life took the form of discipleship to an Elder. Sometimes, inadvertently, the Elder learnt from the disciple....

Centuries ago, in a desert community of monks – or so the story goes - the brothers chose one of their number to go each day to a distant town to beg. It was always hot as he returned home after long hours of abuse in the city, bringing whatever food or money he'd been able to beg. But day after day in the late afternoon sun he re-crossed the desert with joy, never complaining. God marveled at the old monk's faithfulness and, in response, created every evening there in the desert a well of cold water to refresh him on his way back across the sand.

The monk was profoundly grateful for the gift, but returned even greater glory to God by choosing not to receive it. Thinking himself unworthy of miracles, he always passed by the well, stopping only to express his thankfulness and joy. Later each night as he lay down to sleep, he'd look up through the small window of his cell to see a single bright star in the sky, knowing God had placed it there just for him. He slept with the greatest peace.

And so the man counted out the years of his life. Eventually the brothers chose a younger man to go along with him, to learn the work he soon would no longer be able to perform. The two of them set off for the city on their first day together.

The young monk found it hard persisting in begging, accepting abuse from people, and especially enduring the heat returning across the desert in the afternoon sun. But when he saw the well of cold water, something he hadn't noticed on the trip earlier that morning, he quickly ran to it and drank deeply with the greatest appreciation.

Meanwhile, the old monk was torn. If he refused to drink as usual - and told the young monk why – the young man would feel ashamed of his own impulsiveness, not having been as devout as the revered older brother. But then again, if he drank, he wouldn't be offering back the same gift to God he'd been able to give with joy all these years. Finally he thought of the young monk and ran to drink with him.... to the glory of God.

The rest of their way back home that evening, the old brother was a little more silent than usual. He feared that maybe he'd disappointed God by what he'd done, by drinking the water. But as he lay down to sleep that night, looking up through the small window of his cell, he saw the whole sky lit with stars just for him. The joy was too much to contain. They found him dead next morning. He'd slept with the greatest peace. And if they'd been able to see the words that last fell from his lips, they might have found the words from Hosea that love is always better than sacrifice.

*Quoted from: The Solace of Fierce Landscapes: exploring desert and mountain spirituality
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For I desire mercy and not sacrifice, and the knowledge of God
more than whole burnt offerings. *Hosea 6:6*