

2nd Sunday Year B

I Sam 3, John 1

17.1.21

Fr Peter Groves

Were today not a Sunday, it would be kept as the Feast of St Anthony the Great, traditionally called the founder of Christian monasticism. Anthony lived for the best part of a hundred years from the middle of the third century. The Life of St Anthony, attributed to St Athanasius, was written a few decades after his death. In it, we read of Anthony's decision to take rather literally the story of the rich young man who asks Jesus what he must do to inherit eternal life. Anthony's parents had both died, and he was left a wealthy man of about eighteen or twenty, to care for himself and his younger sister. In church, he heard Jesus' instruction to sell all he had, and went out to dispose of most of his material assets, keeping only a few over for his sister. On returning, he heard the text, Take no care for the morrow – and responded by going back and selling even those few things which

remained. It is one of the great stories of Christian heroism, though we might note that the reaction of his sister – who was deprived of all her family wealth and placed in a convent – is not recorded.

Anthony became a hermit, living a solitary life in the Egyptian desert, remaining remote from the wider world, battling temptations in his struggle to live in intimacy with God. Eventually his reputation for holiness attracted enough followers to have formed a small community which lived in the valley beneath his mountain cave. One can visit that same monastery today, and indeed climb to St Antony's cave. I did so, almost thirty years ago, and for a comfortable middle class Oxford student it was an experience. Lunch was a bowl of cold beans. Dinner was a bowl of cold beans. At breakfast we had a little honey, to be eaten with a bowl of cold beans.

The ascetic life, as practised by Anthony and the other remarkable people we call the Desert Fathers, is not a rejection of the physical world. Anti-materialism is a

doctrine against which Christianity has battled from its inception. The doctrine of the incarnation is a reaffirmation of the Biblical doctrine of creation, in that it reminds us that what God has made is very good. The term askesis, from which we take the word “ascetic”, really means exercise, an act of striving to improve. The askesis of the desert fathers and later of various forms of the monastic life represent possible ways of striving for intimacy with God, but they are not the only ways.

Through the gospel story, Anthony received a call. The need to give up possessions became for Anthony something properly ascetic – his exercise, his task of striving. This initial action was just the beginning of his exercise. Our scripture readings this morning present two more calls and beginnings. The boy Samuel lives and serves in the temple. Hearing his name being called, he runs straight to the priest Eli, assuming he has been summoned. But Eli has not called him, and when the boy persists Eli realises what is going on. His instructions are simple. Listen to the

voice of the Lord. Respond to his call with the words “Speak, Lord, for your servant listens”. And that is what Samuel does.

The initiative here is entirely divine. We do not call ourselves to God’s service. But the boy Samuel is a servant of the temple because of the gift of faith already given to his mother and his father. It is Hannah’s prayer for a son which is answered by the Lord, her faith which places the boy Samuel in the temple, and that faith which receives the further gift of God’s call. The temple is the place of vocation because the temple is the place of the Lord’s presence. Coming to the temple is coming into the presence of the Lord, bringing the faith one has been given and trying, through act and experience, to learn more of what God wills for the one who believes. Samuel is being called, because he has already been called. His growing up in the service of the divine presence is his asceticism, his exercise, his experience of being brought closer and closer to the divine life.

The disciples who encounter Jesus in this morning's gospel are pointed towards him by John the Baptist. He indicates Jesus with the strangest of phrases: "Behold the Lamb of God". They want to know more and so they follow. Jesus greets their following with a question: what are you looking for? And they reply with a question of their own "Teacher, where are you staying?" Jesus answers simply, "Come and see". So they go with him and because the hour is late, they stay with him that day. One of them, Andrew, then goes and tells his brother something remarkable: we have found the messiah. His brother, Simon Peter, is brought to Jesus.

Notice that the disciples are pointed towards Jesus. They do not find him alone, the initiative is not theirs, it is a gift that they receive. Their curiosity being troubled, they start to follow, and their following is rewarded and developed. Jesus responds to their coming after him by engaging with them, asking them what they want, responding when they ask him where he is staying by telling them to come and see. Come

and see. This is Jesus' response to their first question. He does not give them information, he invites them to come and participate, to share in his presence just as the boy Samuel is made a servant of the temple so that he can dwell in the presence of the Lord, just as Anthony was called to find that same presence not in a temple but in the desert, not in community but in its absence.

Jesus words, "Come and see" serve as a summary of the call to Christian discipleship. It is no accident that they have been chosen by our bishops as the title of a new initiative of Christian learning across the diocese. For all of us, they represent Christ's call to be active in his service. That action will begin and end with the presence of Christ himself. We might find that presence, like Samuel, in the sanctuary: in prayer and worship and the sacraments of the church. We might find it like Anthony – in retreat from the world, in the courage to look into our deepest selves and find that God has done so before us. We might find it simply by attending to God at work in the world – in the feeding of the hungry, the sheltering of the homeless and the

care for all in need. Just as there are many things to see, so there are many ways of seeing. But Jesus call is clear: if we do want to see, we must first of all come to him.