

Seeking Sanctuary Beyond *The Monastery*

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A few weeks ago, I went back to Worth Abbey for the first time since the making of *The Monastery*. It was wonderful to be there again, to catch up with the brethren, and to share in the outcome of the programme's success. After mass on Sunday, I met a family whose son – perhaps about twelve years old – told me that the most interesting thing about the programme was discovering that Christians meditate. I suspect he was not the only viewer to have been taken by surprise. Monks are, on the whole, a perceptive bunch, and perhaps anticipating the fact that people would be interested in the meditation angle, they have been promoting the notion of 'sanctuary'. That's what we're encouraged to see *The Monastery* as being all about, together with related ideas such as 'calm', 'spirituality', 'healing', 'peace', and 'space'.

This is all good, and good for all – but at the same time I can't help feeling a little disappointed. Is that *all* it was about, I wonder? I know it's meant to be a hook, a way to get people interested – but as hooks go, couldn't it have been a bit sharper? Sanctuary is important, a big part of the big picture, but not the whole of it. By deliberately linking 'sanctuary', with its rich theological connotations, to meditation the impression I get is that we're not being offered anything that isn't available anywhere and indeed everywhere else already. Meditation is ubiquitous at all levels of popular culture; the market is, if anything, over-supplied. The risk, then, of emphasising sanctuary in terms of healing, peace, calm etc., is that divorced from its appropriate context, spirituality runs the risk of being reduced to mere 'feel good' therapy. Worse still, there is a real danger of spirituality becoming a product of, rather than an antidote to, consumerism.

This commodification of spirituality was perfectly expressed in the Channel Four series broadcast a few weeks after *The Monastery* called *Spirituality Shopper* (whose title says it all) in which three people try out various different spiritual 'products' to see what works best for them. Noticeably absent from their 'practice' were the essential elements of discipline, personal sacrifice and commitment. It was spirituality with all the difficult bits left out. Unfortunately, spirituality as 'self-improvement' (strangely paralleling our obsession with that staple ingredient of TV schedules, home-improvement) epitomises the rampant individualism and fragmentation that characterises contemporary secular culture, and to which spirituality should be the radical alternative. Instead, however, in this essentially heretical form, it actually reinforces, *and itself manifests*, the very secular norms that it ought to be contradicting.

The monks, I know, are well aware of all of this. They know better than anyone that spirituality divorced from the context of a specific tradition, and the vital but often overlooked discipline of obedience, becomes, in the end, vacuous. They would also be the first to point out that 'sanctuary' is only part of the story, and whatever else it might be, it certainly should not be seen as a withdrawal from the world. On the contrary, the working out of one's spiritual life *in community* is absolutely central to the Christian ethos. As one of Worth's own brethren, Dom Mark Barrett writes in his book *Crossing: Reclaiming the landscape of our lives*, "faith takes us deeper into the reality of human living, not away from it". The fact remains, however, that as a culture we have grown accustomed to the idea of meditation as a kind of relaxation therapy for achieving inner calm and sometimes even material

goals, rather than a rigorous ascetic discipline whose purpose is to challenge and transform the very foundations of our self-understanding and worldview. By playing to the former to get people interested, we risk losing the latter. I suspect that in the popular imagination, many common misconceptions about the spiritual life as ‘opting out’ still persist. I hope the programme has managed to dispel some of them, but I fear others remain, and may even have been reinforced by what at times came across as an emphasis on ‘therapy’. There is a fine line between healing in a psychotherapeutic sense, which all too often has self-affirmation as the objective; and healing the breach of sin, the ultimate purpose of which is, arguably, self-transcendence. So while healing and comfort are an important part of the spiritual path, it would be a mistake to suggest that’s the *point* of it when these terms have clearly lost their theological meaning in contemporary usage.

In the months since the programme was transmitted, I’ve met a lot of people who were either profoundly moved or otherwise in some way deeply impressed by what they saw. But frustratingly one of the comments people still frequently make is that they can see why the lifestyle might be appealing – all that peace, quiet, nice countryside, time to read and take leisurely walks - but they wouldn’t be able to buy into the whole ‘God’ bit. Quite apart from the obvious slip into a consumerist mentality, this comment reveals two fundamental errors. Firstly it couldn’t be further from the truth to imagine that life in a monastery is all a bed of roses. From the little I know about it, and I’ve stayed in a few communities over the years, living cheek-by-jowl with a bunch of people you haven’t chosen to live with, under obedience to a discipline that compels you to stick with it, is not an easy option. It’s *very* challenging. Monks are no more perfect than the rest of us, but the usual escape routes we take for granted are simply unavailable to them. You can’t just slam the door and walk out. You can’t just switch on the TV or go down the pub. You have to sit there and deal with it. Secondly, and more importantly, if you don’t ‘buy into the whole God bit’, the religious life just doesn’t make any sense. The very fact that monasticism is a bit ‘odd’ by ‘normal’ standards would make its challenges impossible to bear for anyone who did not have a very good reason for being there.

I’m not suggesting that monasticism is the only or even the most valid form of Christian discipleship, but I do think that it offers a finely-tuned example, whose lessons can be applied beyond the cloister, and that this is something the programme conveyed admirably. Moreover, it often takes an exaggeration to make a point, and I was able to see these stark polarities most clearly as a result of visiting the Carthusian community at Parkminster. As an order of enclosed hermits, the Carthusians are either the ultimate escapists, or else the most deeply engaged with ‘the reality of human living’; either completely mad, or truly sane. I was quite simply awestruck. When we got back to Worth – a holiday camp by comparison – I skipped lunch and spent an hour and a half sitting in stunned silence in the Blessed Sacrament chapel. Most of the rest of the afternoon was spent trying, not always successfully, to hold back the tears. I’m not sure why I wanted to cry. Perhaps it was because I felt that I had glimpsed an ideal of the religious life so compelling that it made me realise just how strongly a significant part of me feels drawn towards it, while at the same time another part of me knows it is something to which I could never hope to aspire. If you want to know what monking looks like turned up to eleven, then that’s what you get. If you want to follow the path of self-transcendence to its logical conclusion, it ends somewhere like an unmarked grave in a Carthusian cemetery. Meeting Dom Cyril, the novice-master, was an inspiring and humbling experience. I may be mistaken, but the feeling I got was that he had really done it. Really done what I’ve merely talked about.

This was probably one of the most important lessons of my time at Worth. Spirituality is not about indulging in self-obsessed navel-gazing, but rather self-transformation through engagement with the *other*, whether understood as neighbour, or ultimately as God. The kingdom is not within but *among* us. The opportunity that the monks offered us was a chance to see that the religious life (and more broadly the life of faith) far from being an escape from reality, is in actual fact, a deeper engagement with the truly real. To follow a spiritual path is not to take the easy way out and withdraw from the world, but rather to choose a different and in fact far more challenging mode of being *in* the world. Learning this simple but profound truth has brought me out of myself, quite literally, into a fuller and more dynamic engagement with life. It has given me a sense of the urgent need to respond to what really matters. To get on with it. Now. In practical terms, this means that I am currently exploring the possibility of a vocation to ordained ministry in the Church of England.

So I think there's a great deal more to *The Monastery* than just sanctuary. That's not to say a monastery, or indeed faith in general, doesn't offer refuge – of course it does, and thank God too – it is a reservoir of spiritual energy from which we are all able to draw strength and nourishment. My point is rather that it might be more interesting to think about how that nourishment might be used. In other words, how are we to frame the relationship between sanctuary and that which the sanctuary is supposed to be a refuge from? Paradoxically, by offering a little respite from 'modern life', the language of much contemporary spirituality actually implicitly accepts as normative the 'modern life' it purports to critique. By contrast, I think the church's prophetic role is to be profoundly counter-cultural, to actively challenge the secular norms we take for granted – a message the current pope is already well known for preaching. Indeed St Benedict makes much the same point in his rule when he writes: "Your way of acting should be different from the world's way" (RSB 4:20). This is not a command to passively retreat to a place of comfort and safety, but rather a call to be more dynamically engaged – with the 'real', with the 'other' – and it's about the transformation that emerges from that engagement. Sanctuary is absolutely fundamental to all of that, but pointless without it.

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