

Friday. Christianity has often been derided for promising to its devotees pie in the sky. It is an accusation we should not be too hasty to deny. The way our Lord put it was, 'I have come that they may have life, and have it more abundantly'.



## SPIRITUALITY OF THE JUDAEAN DESERT—II:

### Mar Saba and St John Damascene

ROLAND POTTER, O.P.

ALL pilgrims and visitors to Jerusalem include Gethsemane, the valley of the Cedron, and the Mount of Olives in their itinerary. This eastern side of Jerusalem is all 'holy place', for as St John tells us, our Lord was often there (cf. John xviii, 1-2). Very few however linger long enough to trace the course of that occasional torrent-bed or *wadi*, which starts as the Cedron and continues down towards the Dead Sea as the Wadi en-Nar. But let us suppose that we have done so and skirted the site of Old Testament Jerusalem, past the pool of Siloam (John ix) on our right. If we continue down the course of the *wadi* by what at best would be called a bridle path, twisting and turning, strewn with boulders, we finally plunge down between high cliffs of sombre and sinister rock. We start south, but a sharp bend serves to make the general direction south-east. After about three miles we have on our right the ancient site of Deir Dôsi, or the Monastery of Theodosius, where John Moschus began his monastic life about A.D. 538, and lived and struggled after perfection, little realizing that his *Pratum Spirituale* was to become centuries later a spiritual classic, throwing much light on those happy centuries of Palestinian monastic life, and at the same time tracing the first lineaments of a style of spiritual writing which is also exemplified in the *Little Flowers* of St Francis.

These are the memories of the Christian past which come to mind as we stumble down the stony path and enter a world of savage loneliness and rocky steppe-land, which constitutes the desert of Juda stretching from the Jerusalem-Hebron hill-ridge down to the western shores of the Dead Sea—now so much better known by the finds of the Dead Sea scrolls at Kh. Qumrân.

After some three hours of difficult walking we come upon the shrine of St Sabas, or Mâr Saba as it is known today, one of the oldest monasteries in the world, only comparable to that of St Catherine on Mount Sinai, and like it still peopled by monks and memories of martyrs and monks extending over long centuries of Christian living and Christian striving. This centre flourished in the desert of Juda for about three centuries, from Constantine to the Arab invasions, and then long after, despite complete turn and turn about of fortunes, a community lived on and even now still lives there. Mâr Saba seems to have been for the most part a regular or cenobite community rather than a *Laura* or grouping of hermits, each of whom lived in solitary grottoes yet sufficiently near to meet on Sundays and feast-days, as was exemplified in the Wadi Kelt further north.

Thus when we venture into the rocky fastnesses, the very existence of Mâr Saba reminds us of a flourishing period in eastern Christendom, when this part of the Church, like a true vine united to its parent stem, gave birth to a host of true penitents, martyrs, saints. Hard, barren, repulsive steppe-land and desert was made supremely fair by the qualities of those who lived happily and intensely there. We realize as we read John Moschus' tales of the struggles of St Jerome, that it was a hard-won happiness born of burning love for Christ, and willingness to be poor and chaste and obedient. We get an impression of essentials sought strongly: to have gone into the desert at all was already heroic. Take St Sabas whose tomb we have reached; this champion of the true faith worked to his dying day (he died at ninety-four), and prayed, and pleaded, and travelled at ninety-two across Asia Minor and back again, to spread the peace and truth of his divine master and to fashion the unity of the great Christian family.

This St Sabas came of a Cappadocian military family. His father at one stage was posted to Alexandria, and left his eight-year-old son with uncles in the home country (the story has a strangely modern sound). Anyway, the child was unhappy. Perhaps he only knew happiness when he took to the religious life at Jerusalem in 457. After various sojourns in various deserts, we find him in 478 in a grotto of the Wadi Cedron. Other hermits gathered round and peopled the neighbouring grottos. The rock formations of the Desert of Juda lent themselves to many caves,

grottos and hollows. Hence the many references to caves in the Bible. Soon a community of hermits of the *Laura* kind came to be, and then a monastery proper or *Cænobium* was built in 486. During the eighth and ninth centuries a number of distinguished writers, poets, doctors and ascetics made it their home. Amongst these were Stephen Thaumaturgos, Cosmas and Stephen the 'melody makers', Antiochus, St John Damascene, and many others. Despite Persian and Arab invasions and massacres, Greek monks held on to the site till the fourteenth century, when Serbs and Bulgars seem to have seized the property; however, the Greek Patriarchate recovered the site in 1623, and have held it ever since. There was a major restoration and rebuilding in 1840. Many of the priceless manuscripts at the Greek Patriarchate at Jerusalem are from Mâr Saba.

But this is going ahead. Let us pick up our footsore traveller, who has just arrived at Mâr Saba and sees a great ridge towering high over an open valley, whose rock faces are pierced by innumerable grottos, once the abode of monks and hermits. The monastery comes into view as a striking medley of disparate buildings, clinging to the side of a steep ravine, and girt by a great wall which makes the monastery also a fort to be held against the marauding Bedouin, Christendom's outpost in the world of Islam.

No one may be in sight, yet a porter soon appears, and unlatches a small iron door. Steps lead down to the tomb of St Sabas; to the north lies a chapel of St Nicholas which appears to have been the first oratory of the monastic establishment, and the tradition obtains that St Sabas himself called this chapel the church of God's creation. Another tale of the earliest days tells how when water was desperately short the saint noticed a wild ass pawing the ground at a particular place. They dug there, water welled up, and water there is to this day. In a nearby building is a grim reminder of heroic ages, for you are shown the skulls of monks slain by Persians and Arabs on and off from the seventh century to the middle ages. Opposite the tomb of St Sabas is a large church which dates from 500 A.D. but was considerably restored and rebuilt in the seventeenth century. Then we must remember the palm-tree, reputedly planted by St Sabas (the East too has its tree as the West had St Dominic's orange tree). We may then emerge upon a little terrace which looks from a height of three

hundred feet over a desolate valley. Five miles eastwards is the famous site of the Judæan scrolls; and ten miles north-east lies Jericho.

There remains the cell of St John Damascene to be seen: last but by no means least, for this brings back to mind the amazing story of this high Christian official in the Court of the Damascus Caliphate, who played such a great part in the turmoil of his time. He seems to have retired to Mâr Saba in 710, perhaps when the Caliphs grew rather less liberally disposed towards their Christian subjects. The course of his life is not too easily traced, but certainly St John Damascene was made a priest by the Patriarch of Jerusalem in 726 or before. He emerged from his retreat from time to time, as when the Patriarch asked him to preach in Jerusalem against the Iconoclasts, which he did with the vigour we would expect of him.

But now he had found his true home in Mâr Saba, in its isolated quiet, with the tradition of prayer, and monastic ideals, and Christian scholarship. He owed much to those who had lived before him in this haven of peace. We know for instance of an Antiochus, a seventh-century monk of St Sabas, who wrote the *Pandectes Sacrae Scripturae*, a kind of moral theology based on scriptural texts<sup>1</sup>. This work certainly influenced St John Damascene in the following century. And St John Damascene's great theological work, *The Fount of Knowledge*, is dedicated to a fellow monk and companion at St Sabas, one Cosmas, who became bishop of Maioumas, near Gaza on the coastal side, in 742.

St John Damascene lived on at Mâr Saba, and died in 749. A great part of his voluminous work was the fruit of peace and quiet in monastic retreat. Let us simply listen to the voice of one crying in the wilderness. Thus St John speaks to us:

(a) *On the Blessed Sacrament.*

If the word of God is living and efficient and keener than any two-edged sword (Heb. iv, 12), and the Lord did all that he pleased (Ps. cxiii, 11), if he said, Let there be light and there was light, Let there be a firmament and there was a firmament (Gen. i, 3); if the heavens were established by the word of the Lord, and all the host of them by the breath of his mouth (Ps. xxxii, 6); if heaven and earth, water and fire and air and the whole glory of these, and even more if this noble creature,

<sup>1</sup> Migne, P.G. 89, 1431-1850.

man, were perfected by the word of the Lord; if God the Word of his own will became man and of the pure, undefiled, holy, and ever-virgin Mary, who knew not man, fashioned his flesh, can he not then make the bread his body and the wine and water his blood? He said in the beginning, Let the earth bring forth grass (Gen. i, 11), and even until this present day, when the rain comes it brings forth its proper fruits, urged on and empowered by the divine command. God said, 'This is my body', and 'This is my blood', and 'Do this in remembrance of me'. And so it is at his omnipotent command until he come: for it was in this sense that he said 'Until he come'; and the overshadowing power of the Holy Spirit becomes through invocation (*epiclesis*) the rain to this new tillage. (P.G. 94, 1140-41.)

(b) *On Our Lady.*

Joachim then took to wife that admirable and praiseworthy woman, Anna. But just as the earlier Anna (1 Sam. i, 2) who was barren, bore Samuel by prayer and by promise, so also this Anna by supplication and promise from God bore the Mother of God, that in this too she might not be outstripped by those renowned mothers of old. Accordingly, it was Grace ('Anna' means grace) that bore the Lady: (for she became true Lady of all creaturehood in becoming Mother of the Creator). . . . Then, planted in the house of God and increased by the Spirit, like a fruitful olive tree, she became the home of every virtue, turning her mind away from every secular and carnal desire. Thus she kept her soul as well as her body virginal, as was right for her who was to receive God into her bosom; for he is holy, he finds an abode with the holy. And so, she strove after holiness and was declared a holy and wonderful temple fit for the most high God. (P.G. 94, 1157-1160.)

(c) *On the Prayer of Christ.*

Prayer is the upraising of the mind to God or a petitioning of God for what is fitting. How, then, did it happen that our Lord offered up prayer at the raising of Lazarus, and at the hour of his passion? For his holy mind was in no need either of any upraising towards God, since it had been once and for all united in substance with God the Word; nor did it need any

petitioning of God. For Christ is one. But it was because he appropriated to himself our personality and took our impress upon himself, and became an exemplar for us, and taught us to ask of God and strain towards him, and guided us through his own holy mind in the way that leads up to God. For just as he endured the passion, achieving for our sakes a triumph over it, so also he offered up prayer, guiding us, as I said, in the way that leads up to God, and 'fulfilling all righteousness' (Matt. iii, 15) on our behalf, as he said to John the Baptist, and reconciling us to his Father and honouring him as the beginning and cause, and proving that he is anything but enemy of God. (P.G. 94, 1089-1092.)

(d) *The Cross.*

Every action, therefore, and every miracle-work of Christ is immense, divine and marvellous: but the most marvellous of all is his precious cross. Only the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ has subdued death, expiated the sin of the first parent, despoiled Hades, bestowed the resurrection, granted the power to us of contemning the present and even death itself, prepared the return to our former blessedness, opened the gates of Paradise, given our nature a seat at the right hand of God, and made us the children and heirs of God. For by the cross all things have been made right. 'So many of us', the Apostle says, 'as were baptized into Christ, were baptized into his death, and as many of you as have been baptized into Christ, have put on Christ.' Further, 'Christ is the power of God and the wisdom of God.' See, the death of Christ, that is, the cross, clothed with the subsistent wisdom and power of God. And the power of God is the word of the cross, either because God's might, that is, the victory over death, has been revealed to us by it, or because, just as the four extremities of the cross are fast bound by the centre bolt, so also, by God's power the height and the depth, the length and the breadth, that is, every creature visible and invisible, is maintained. (P.G. 94, 1128-29.)

(e) *Sitting at the Right Hand of God.*

We hold that Christ sits in the body at the right hand of God the Father, but we do not hold that the right hand of the Father is an actual place. For how could he that is uncircum-

scribed have a right hand limited by place? Right hands and left hands belong to what is circumscribed. But we understand the right hand of the Father to be the glory and honour of the godhead in which the Son of God, who existed as God before the ages, and is of like essence to the Father, and in the end became flesh, has a seat in the body, his flesh being glorified too. For he along with his flesh is adored with one adoration by all creation. (P.G. 94, 1104.)

It is often said that St John Damascene's writings lack originality, that they are simply a concatenation of passages from previous writers, an anthology of citations from Scripture and the Fathers of previous centuries. This is largely true, but we need other impressions to get the true measure of this great lover of God. His hymns or sacred songs are rich in scriptural and doctrinal content, and at the same time they show that this thoughtful saint could sing with fire and enthusiasm and vigorous fulness the wonderful ways of God.

Even a literal rendering<sup>2</sup> can show something of these impressive songs. Here is part of an Easter hymn (the original is rhythmical rather than metrical):

Resurrection day! Come, folks, in splendour.  
 It is the Lord's pasch; the pasch, I say!  
 From death to life, from earth to heaven  
 Christ, true God, has drawn us,  
 While we sing of triumphs.  
 Cleanse we every sense, and behold Christ  
 Gleaming in resurrection-light inaccessible.  
 Rejoice, and hark to every word he speaks  
 While we sing of triumphs.

Rightly may heavens rejoice and earth make merry.  
 May all the universe, seen and unseen,  
 Keep high festival: for Christ is risen again,  
 Rapture of joy unending.

Come let us drink a new drink, not drawn  
 By wonder-work from rock, rather from immortality's

<sup>2</sup> The virtuosity of a Ronald Knox would be needed to translate into the corresponding English *genre*.

Fount flowing from the tomb of Christ—  
In whom is all our strength.

All now is bathed in light, be it heaven or earth, or  
Things of earth. Let every creature feast the raising  
Of Christ—who is strength of each and all.

Yesterday I was buried with thee, O Christ.  
Today I am raised by thy rising.  
Yesterday, I with thee was crucified.  
Today, glorify me in thy kingdom!

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O Sion, cast thy eyes around thee:  
See, they come, luminaries divinely bright  
From the West, from the North, from sea, from the East,  
Thy children, blessing Christ within thee, for ever.

Father, Lord of all, Word and Spirit, one Nature  
In three Persons. More-than-substance and God supreme;  
In thy name are we baptized, and we bless thee  
For ever and ever.

Light of Light come upon thee, O New Jerusalem,  
For the glory of the Lord has risen over thee.  
Leap with joy now O Sion; and be thou,  
Holy Mother of God, full gladdened in the rising of thy Son.

O that divine, brotherly most sweet voice of thine, O Jesus!  
Who hast truly promised to be with us to the end of time:  
So cling we, full of faith, to hope our anchor, and rejoice.

O mighty pasch and most holy, O Christ,  
Wisdom and Word of God and Power,  
Grant that we may more and more exactly mirror thee  
In thy kingdom's endless day.

(P.G. 96, 840-844.)