

Sermon, Advent 2

Charles de Foucauld: Faith in Silence

Introduction

This is the second in the series of Advent Sermons. Last Sunday the Dean began the series by speaking about *Faith in worship* this week my task is to share some thoughts about *Faith in silence*. This could be one of the shortest sermons I've preached! " ... Drawing on my fine command of the English language, I said nothing ..." (*BENCHLEY, Robert, 1889-1945*).

Yet before you get over-excited the title *faith in silence* is in connection with the life of *Charles de Foucauld* who is remembered in the Church's calendar about this time of the year (1st December) and I was fascinated to find out more about a life that, until now, I knew little about.

Biography

If you take the Church Times you may have noted a short article featuring the life of Charles de Foucauld a week or two ago entitled *Inspiration from a hidden 'Nazareth' Ministry*, written by Angela Ashwin, which gives a bit of background to his life and ministry. There is also an interesting description to be found in what's called the *Little Guide*, which serves as a guideline to the spirituality of brother Charles as he later became known.

He was born in 1858 into an aristocratic Strasbourg family yet sadly orphaned by the age of six and was cared for by his maternal grandfather who was a colonel in the army. It is hardly surprising therefore that Charles was encouraged to follow a military career and in 1876: he entered Saint-Cyr Military Academy. However he was dismissed before the end of the year on the grounds of laziness and ill-discipline. By the time he was 20 years of age his grandfather died making Charles heir to a considerable fortune much of which he managed to squander. So something of the prodigal comes through at this point.

At 21 years of age he graduated from the Saumur Calvary School, though perhaps with little distinction, he qualified 87th - out of a class of 87! ... Well someone has to! His military career was brief and chequered though he did distinguish himself as an officer during some

dangerous action in Tunisia. It is conjecture but his formative years and early adulthood I imagine to have been shaped by emotional wounds provoked by the early death of his parents. Then comes another formative period of journeying and seeking, much of which takes place in Nazareth and the Holy Land but with particular fascination also for North Africa. Here, brother Charles learns to speak Arabic and Hebrew and undertakes a dangerous expedition travelling through Morocco disguised as a Jewish Rabbi. Though he was not practicing a faith of any sort, these explorations among the local tribal communities had a profound effect upon him – when he returned to France he began to live a more sober and austere life and found himself articulating these words: “God, if you exist, make yourself known to me”.

His eventual return to the Christian faith in his early thirties resulted in a visit to the Holy Land and Nazareth where he felt compelled to live what he called the "the hidden life of the poor and humble worker of Nazareth", a lifestyle that became characteristic of his emerging spirituality. Nazareth being interpreted as: “living anywhere in littleness and poverty and in communion with Jesus” (Ashwin).

He took up holy orders as a Trappist monk and served for a time in Syria but this didn't fulfil his desire. His desire was to "go to Nazareth alone, and live there unknown as a labourer doing everyday work: solitude, prayer, adoration, meditation of the Gospel, humble work". And so he became a house worker for the Poor Clare Sisters where he lived in a hut near their cloister for three years.

In 1901 brother Charles was ordained priest. His intention, to return to Algeria to found a monastic fraternity called the “Little Brothers of the Sacred Heart of Jesus”. His aim was “to live out in the Sahara, the hidden life of Jesus at Nazareth, not in order to preach but to live in solitude, the poverty and the humble work of Jesus”. Yet there were times when he was not content to be silent - in particular he drew attention to the pernicious evils of slavery where he encountered it.

He committed himself to working with the Tauregs in the Sahara learning their language in order to translate the gospel but also to learn more about their culture through their songs

and poetry. His hope was to establish this Fraternity, or Union of brothers and sisters of the Sacred Heart, this being an assembly of what he called "Fervent Christians from all walks of life ... able to make known through their example, what the Christian religion is, and to "demonstrate" the Gospel in their lives" (Rules and Counsels, 1910-1913). Of himself he claims, "My apostolate must be the apostolate of goodness. In seeing me, people should be able to say to one another, "Since this man is so good, his religion must be good."

The final part of Foucauld's story is bound up with the outbreak of the 1st World War, which contributed to destabilising the area as raids by Senoussites from Libya became more frequent. It was one such raid that led to him being fatally shot on the 1st December 1916, his body was buried in a ditch outside Tamanrasset where he had spent these closing years of his ministry.

Application: hidden life – *leaven in the dough*

The interesting thing for me is that this man's desire to form a Fraternity, or Union remained unfulfilled in his life yet since his demise many communities world-wide have come to share the spirituality of brother Charles. There are two characteristics in particular from his spirituality that are important for us as we contemplate our own faith journey during this Advent season. Firstly, the power of silent witness, Foucauld's own apostolate of goodness; and secondly, his valuing of all human life as being sacred in the eyes of God. Thus, the vision embodied in the Fraternity, or Union, endorses the very vitality of a lay ministry intended to be the leaven in society, in the church and in the world. "By what means?" In his words, "By giving the very best of themselves to those whom they meet and to all without exception with whom they have any rapport whatsoever, by means of goodness, tenderness, filial affection, the example of virtue, humility and gentleness which are attitudes, (he says) that are always appealing and so Christian." In this way he saw Nazareth as being embodied anywhere the gospel was being lived and the poor served. Leaven is very little and unobtrusive. It cannot be identified when mixed with the flour but it has a value of its own. Through this insertion into the lives of others transformation takes place. Which means even if we are small in numbers, we can truly become a sign of God's friendship and love by a gratuitous presence not looking for success ... The whole dough is raised from within and this tiny insignificant little pinch of leaven truly becomes a life force.

Yet, if one is to be the leaven in the dough, our option for and with the poor must be very clear. Imitating the life and ministry of Jesus Christ we cannot support unjust evil structures. As Brother Charles showed when challenging slavery and elsewhere is emphatic where he says of Christian service: "We should not be as mute watchdogs who do not bark."

Conclusion

So a distinction can be made between 'faith in silence' and 'faith that is muted' the one redolent with hidden power and potential, the other simply hidden. Faith in silence invites us to become seekers of a deeper encounter with the living God. That encounter happens gradually by making space in our often busy lives to create our own desert places. Here we may in silence seek afresh God's abiding grace for us in order that we may be harbingers of that gift to others and become grafted into the powerful apostolate of Christian goodness.