

## **Self-imposed Isolation – help from the Stephen Tucker:**

The word 'monk' means in origin, one who lives alone. The first monks who lived like this came from Egypt. Many of them lived in single cells rather than in monastic communities, and they left a body of sayings which relate closely to our present experiences of being alone. Living alone generally, let alone in the present circumstances, gives rise to various thoughts and feelings which can be hard to cope with.

The monks often felt that they had embraced a state of permanent loss. Comparing their lives in their cells with their former lives in the world, they felt they had given up everything that provided them with a sense of self-worth. They felt both nostalgia and an enervating sadness, which cut them off from natural and simple enjoyment. This is the kind of grief which produces grievance.

At the same time, they felt a kind of spiritual boredom or listlessness. They lacked motivation. They found it easy to fritter away the time to avoid whatever their usual timetable required of them. And this in turn gave rise to a deep weariness, a sense of helplessness, a desire to give up, to criticise everyone and everything, to lose hope. Perhaps some of this might sound familiar now to us.

The Sayings of the Desert Fathers provide a wide range of advice for dealing with such feelings, though sometimes the advice can seem odd.

"Go sit in your cell and your cell will teach you everything."

"Go and sit in your cell and offer your body as a pledge to the walls of your cell." A visitor said to a recluse, "Why are you sitting there?" "I am not sitting; I am on a journey" he replied.

The cell can be a place of confrontation; its importance lies in its ordinariness. The monks discovered that prayer means, first of all, making sure that you are really there. And the discipline of simply staying in your cell is intended to bring you face to face with yourself and your real needs and your capacities. If God is not here and now in this moment he is nowhere - presence to God is presence to self, staying at the point of pain or frustration or boredom to enter into healing. Find yourself in this place and give your whole self to yourself as a gift.

Of course, the monks didn't have cell phones, lap tops, TV or radio. All they had was a mat to sit and sleep on, a table, a cupboard with few things to cook and eat with, a lamp and a few religious books. There was little to distract them except their thought and memories, their desires and fantasies, though these could be wholly distracting at times.

We have rather more distractions, but if in this time of enforced solitude, we end up watching more TV, exploring more of the Internet, eating more than usual, rearranging the furniture and doing more housework, we may be wasting a valuable opportunity. So, finding some time each day simply to accept the isolation, simply to sit with oneself, and pledge oneself to our set of walls, may prove surprising.

In a world which is now so mobile, so busy, so time consuming, having to stay by oneself in one place for a while may be spiritually significant as a way of getting back in touch with ourselves. And finding ourselves we will, of course, find God.

[After Mark 6:45]

I too have kept a little ship at sea

In those cold grey hours before the dawn

When human spirits reach their lowest ebb,

Companions faces yet shadows in the dark

Where shows no sign, no rim of light; that herald

Of the day, is not yet come to touch the eastern sky

And silver up the sea with promise of the dawn.

I have kept with others the loneliest watch:

Moments when it seems that day will never come

No promise then that ever night will end;

Long hours before the sun's first touch, in  
Which we humans fear most easily what  
Is half seen, half understood, by the ebbing tide  
Of night chilled spirits in those cold grey hours

Troubles come as to the sailor, so in life, to wake  
Our fears when calm has ebbed away and life seems  
A storm tossed sea with full contrary winds. Is there  
No dawn; must we face them in our darkest hour?  
Have we then companions whose faces are not shadows  
In the night but real enough to calm and turn us  
To a tide of hope from whence our peace returns.