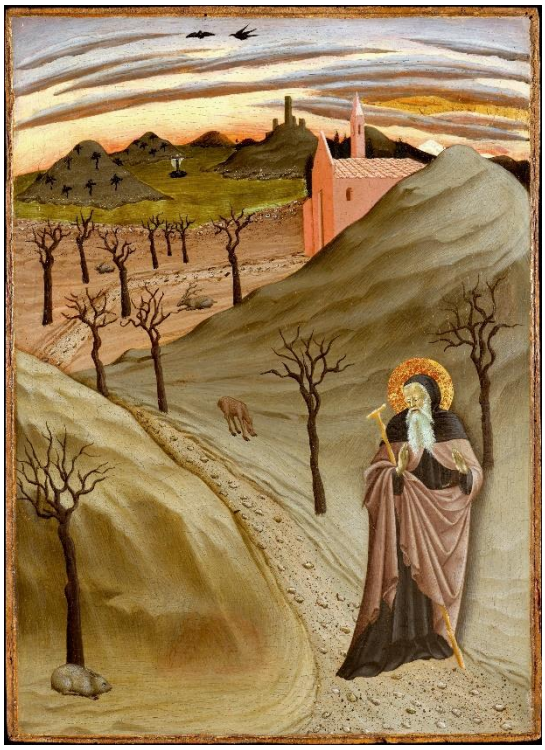
Reflection: A Teaching from St. Antony, January 20th 2021 prepared by Rob

Welcome! Thank you for being with us: We meditate together 'spiritually' in our own homes at 7.30pm on Wednesday. The tradition we meditate in is Centring Prayer which is fully inclusive of all traditions of Christian Meditation and welcoming of World Traditions. We have attached some pictures/ resources to accompany the words to help you in your meditation.

Welcome to Christian Meditation in the Centring Prayer Tradition: A very warm welcome from Fiona, Marie, Rob, Hazel and Paul, the leaders of the Christian Meditation group at Wisdom Centre, Romsey. The whole session is about 50 minutes. We meditate beginning with an opening prayer followed by reflections and then 25 minutes of silence. We hope you enjoy your meditation with us.

Opening Prayer: *Eternal God,* through our meditation may the ears of our hearts be attentive to your Word. May we seek and find You. Awakened to Your presence may we be joyful, embodying peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-awareness. May we follow Your teaching, seeking also, the wisdom of the Holy Fathers and Mothers. May we, therefore, commit to community, love of earth, peace and justice making. **Amen**



Introduction: Thursday, 17th January was the feast of St Antony of Egypt, one of the first of the Desert Fathers and Mothers. Tonight, I would like to share a teaching from his life with the help of the Chapter on the Desert Tradition by Kim Nataraja in 'Journey of the Heart' and of Fyodor Dostoevsky, a Russian Philosopher. I will start with the encounter of Jesus with the wealthy young man in Matthew Ch. 19.

"Jesus said to him, 'If you wish to go the whole way, go, sell your possessions, and give to the poor, and then you will have riches in heaven; and come, follow me.' When the young man heard this, he went away with a heavy heart; for he was a man of great wealth."

Antony heard those words in church, took them as personally addressed to him and literally sold most of his possessions, keeping some for his younger sister. He later heard 'Be not anxious for the morrow' and sold the rest, making provision for his sister to be taken care of by nuns.

Who was his equal? St Antony prayed to the Lord to be shown to whom he was equal and the reply was that he had not yet reached the level of a certain cobbler in Alexandria. So he left the desert, went to the cobbler and asked him how he lived. His answer was that he gave a third of his income to the Church, another third to the poor, and kept the rest for himself. This did not seem out of the ordinary to Antony who himself had given up all his possessions and lived in the desert in total poverty. So he said to the cobbler, 'It is the Lord who sent me to see how you live.' The humble tradesman, who venerated Antony, then told him his soul's secret: 'I do not do anything special. Only, as I work I look at all the passers-by and say, "So that they may be saved, I only I, will perish."'

St Antony then realised that Jesus's words were not necessarily a call to give up wealth, but to let go of whatever was held most dear and was holding a person back, and for him it had not been his wealth. To the poor cobbler in times more austere and uncertain than today, the only treasure to be cherished was the hope of eternal life promised by the Church, and he was, in his compassion, prepared to give that up for the sake of others. In her poem, sung as a hymn at Christmas, 'In the bleak midwinter' Christina Rosetti writes "What can I give him, poor as I am……..Give my heart." In other words to 'give my all, my whole life'.

Giving up what is most precious: Militant atheists like Richard Dawkins mock the story in Genesis of Abraham's expedition, on God's instructions, to sacrifice his son, Isaac – calling God a 'filicide' (The God Delusion, Chapters 2 and 7). But what they miss is that these stories are not intended to be historically true but are spiritual teachings. In the early agrarian community in which Abraham lived, a father's most precious asset was his eldest son. A strong son was needed to carry on working the land and to provide for his parents in their old age. The moral of the story was the importance of being able to let go of the one thing which was most valued. In Richard Dawkins' case this might be an intransigent faith in science. The ram which was, in the story, eventually sacrificed may represent stubborn pride and it is quite possible that a large one will be found in a thicket for Richard Dawkins to sacrifice in place of science.

There is a well-known Buddhist chant which includes the words: "Whatever is mine, beloved and lovely, will become otherwise; will be separated from me." We know this to be true, and that true peace and release can only be found by seeing it clearly and understanding it. This is true mindfulness. In his book 'Satipatthana, The Direct Path to Realisation', Bhikkhu Analayo (A Buddhist Monk) writes, "The need to distinguish between a first stage of observation and a second stage of taking action is, according to the Buddha, an essential feature on his way of teaching. The simple reason for this approach is that only the preliminary step of calmly assessing a situation without immediately reacting enables one to undertake the appropriate action."

The Onion: Dostoevsky tells a story in 'The Brothers Karamazov' about a wicked peasant woman who lived selfishly all her life and on death was seized by demons and thrown into a fiery lake. However, her guardian angel would not give up on her and, searching through her life for some good deed, remembered that she had once pulled an onion from her garden and given it to a poor lady. So she went to God and told Him of the incident, imploring Him to save her, and God replied, "Then take the onion and hold it out to her in the lake of fire. Let her take hold of the onion and use it to pull her out. if you can pull her out of the lake, she can come to heaven, but if the onion breaks, she will have to stay where she is." The angel went straight to the fiery lake and held out the onion to the peasant woman, telling her to hold on tight, which she did eagerly. However, as the angel was pulling her out a crowd of other despairing souls saw what was happening and tried to hold onto her in the hope that they too would be pulled out. The peasant woman was furious and, in Dostoevsky's story she started to kick at the others to make them let go, crying "It's my onion, I'm the one to be pulled out, not you. Just stay where you are", and at that moment the onion broke, she fell back into the fiery lake and the angel wept.

However, when I read the story I realised that there was another possible ending of which, I am sure, Dostoevsky was aware. The woman was furious at the other souls holding onto her and knew that the onion could not bear all that weight, but just as she was about to kick out and shout at them, her eyes caught those of a soul who was coming to try to join the others who were holding on. The look of imploring despair of that woman then reminded her of the similar look of the beggar woman to whom she had given the onion all those years ago. So she reached out and offered her the onion saying, "Please take it; I am too wicked to be saved by it and deserve all that I am subjected to." The other woman took the onion and started to be pulled up by the angel, and when the crowd saw that the peasant woman was no longer holding the onion and had fallen back, they let go of her and moved away. The woman to whom she had given the onion then

reached down in gratitude, found her hand which was still stretched up and grasped it tightly. The angel was then able to pull both souls out of the fiery lake to the safety of heaven, and the onion held.

The peasant woman had given the onion the first time out of compassion. But when she passed it to the other soul in the fiery lake, she was giving up all the had – her only hope of salvation – giving her all. Fully seeing and feeling the despair in the other soul's face was the key to this. In Dante's 'Inferno' there was a notice over the entrance to Hell which read, "Abandon hope all ye who enter here!" Traditionally this has been viewed as a dire warning of the impossibility of escape. But what if, in fact, it had been put there not by a demon to taunt souls but by a good angel to help them? There is a way out of Hell. In the Inferno Virgil led Dante to it; but it was right in the centre, in the hottest part. The way out of Hell was to abandon all hope, which the peasant woman had done by releasing the onion to the other despairing soul.

But we do not need to wait for death to go to hell or to seek a way out of it. There is, sadly, a good deal of suffering in the world, and many who feel themselves in various kinds of hell, and we need to look deeply and mindfully when we find ourselves there and to be brave enough to let go of our hopes and fears – in effect of our egos. It is important, however, not to confuse these egotistical hope which we need to abandon with the hope which, in last week's inspiring meditation Sister Marie was quoting Pope Francis as advocating. The difference is that the egotistical hope is personal and looks for something in the future, whereas Pope Francis's hope is universal – not relating to individual desires - and is essentially here and now in the present, "something deeply rooted in every human heart", and it is called "hope" only because we have not yet fully realised it in our lives.

St Anthony: When he heard the story of the cobbler, St Antony realised the deep compassion with which the tradesman was watching the people passing by his shop, and how this had led to his having the courage to give up for himself, that which was most precious to him. It helped Antony to look deeply into what he valued most, and to let go of his own pride and feeling of uniqueness. In his 'Letters' he stressed the importance of knowing ourselves as essentially good, not sinful; he encouraged his readers to keep in mind that they were created in the image of God and therefore could rely on God's grace. He laid stress on insights coming from reading the Scriptures – the meeting place with Christ – that would lead to transformation in preparation for the coming of God's grace; moreover, he saw asceticism as a way of restoring the body to its natural state rather than punishing it for its sins and escaping from it. He also said "Life and death depend on our neighbour. If we gain our brother we gain God. But if we scandalise our brother we are sinning against Christ."

Preparation for Meditation: So let us now find and move into a comfortable position, relaxing the body, noticing its contact with the chair or cushion and with the floor. Letting go of the efforts, difficulties, triumphs and worries of our day, and bringing ourselves into the peace of the present moment. Noticing our breathing as it slows and deepens. Giving attention to any points of tension or discomfort in the body. If you use a sacred word you might notice its rhythm, perhaps co-ordinating it with the rhythm of the breathing. Or you may wish simply to focus on a candle or to follow the breath. Returning to our medication object or point of focus whenever we are aware of the mind wandering off, in a spirit of non-judgmental acceptance. Accepting everything which arises, whether a sound, a thought, a feeling either pleasant or unpleasant or some other distraction; noticing it just as it is and letting it go without following or attaching to it. Knowing it as just a part of nature and not something which we need to make our own, but returning with ease and joy to the meditation object.

We will meditate together for 25 minutes.

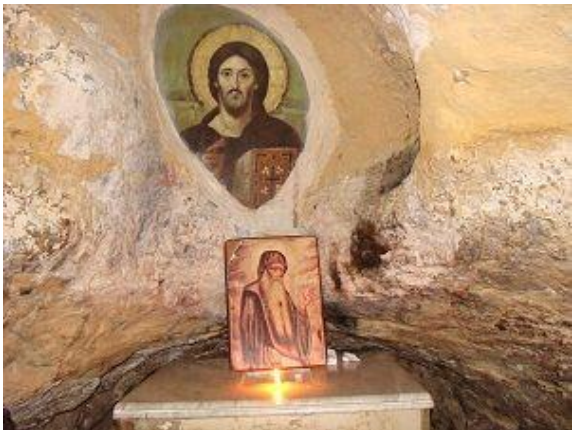


The Five Reflections: I would like to end by sharing the five reflections which the **Buddha** encouraged us to practice and from which I have quoted above.

I am of the nature to age.
I have not gone beyond aging.
I am of the nature to sicken.
I have not gone beyond sickness.
I am of the nature to die.
I have not gone beyond dying.
All that is mine, beloved and pleasing, will become otherwise, will become separated from me.
I am the owner of my actions,
Heir to my actions,
Born of my actions,
Related to my actions,
Abide supported by my actions.
Whatever action I will take, for good or for ill, of that I shall be the heir.
— The Buddha —

Closing Prayer: Loving and Eternal God, we thank you for the gifts of prayer, meditation and contemplation. We thank you for being with us and for this community. May we therefore, pray with all others, as one community, one world and one spirit to One God…Moments of your personal prayer follow…Amen

Thank you for meditating with us, please join us again soon. Stay well and stay safe.





Monastery of St Anthony (Egypt)



Our peaceful outdoor spaces promote wellbeing and are open to all, free of charge.