

A Reflection for the final days of August

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I came home from my weeks of retreat in the monastery with a sense that the time I had spent there had been an *encounter with the radiance of God*. That sense has abided with me. I was confident that this light would continue to illuminate my path, and it has done so. I pictured the radiance of God shining over my shoulder and lighting up the way ahead of me. The Psalms speak of something similar: ‘Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path’ (Psalm 119.105); ‘He will command his angels concerning you in all your ways. On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not bear your foot against a stone’ (Psalm 91.11-12); ‘Though we stumble, we shall not fall headlong, for the Lord holds us by the hand’ (Psalm 37.24). My time in the monastery enabled me to make sense of these words, to learn how *dependable* they can be, how to *trust* them. This is especially true during times when I have begun to *falter*, as we all sometimes do: God is there too. To be confident of God in the place of struggle is at least as important as recognizing God when things run smooth, and this is the core of the spiritual learning I have taken from my continuing reflection on those three August weeks thirty years ago. What was opened up to me during those weeks has sustained me for three decades and helped guide my *sense of direction*; it has been especially important to me during times when I have felt surrounded by darkness. I have learnt to *keep faith*.

There are some *spiritual practices* which I have continued to develop to help me sustain this sense of being held within God’s embrace, especially when things are hard. Much of the spiritual life of monks and nuns has nothing much to do with ‘Church’ as such. It is about repeated *reading of the Scriptures* and *reflection on the presence of God* in the context of our *life as a whole*, and much of this takes place in the hiddenness of one’s own room, one’s ‘*cell*’. I have learnt the value of the cell – the capacity to find *stillness* within our own space – to live with my own self, to manage restlessness and impatience within me, and to find God there instead of becoming lost in my own self or in the things which weigh upon me. The *spiritual life* is all



about *that* – the shift in our sense of perspective from our own small horizon to that within which God beholds everything which is.

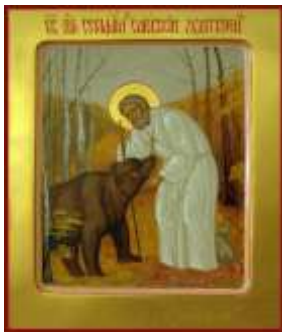
I have learnt the value of *pilgrimage* – of passage through the wide-open spaces – to recognise the *hospitality* of the creation in which we are



placed, and our *fellowship with all other creatures*. This has helped me begin to perceive things from the perspective of the creation as a whole instead of simply from my own point of view. This does not make me feel small and insignificant, but,

rather, part of a vast and amazing whole. It is a *correction of perspective* which is distorted in the culture around us, which meditates less and less on the Scriptures and opens itself less and less to the inspiration of God.

Along the way I have discovered the friendship of the saints. Sometimes these have come to me like the angels (the *messengers from God*) in Psalm 91. St Seraphim, who spent time in *solitude*, with only the animals for



companionship, has accompanied me in spirit. ‘*The true aim of the Christian life,*’ he says, ‘*is the acquisition of the Holy Spirit*’; he goes on: ‘*There is only one condition lacking – a firm resolve: Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever*’. Seraphim helps me keep focus on the *Living Presence of God*, and to *keep resolve*. St Martin, converted

to the *life of the Gospel* by an encounter with a beggar who asked help of him, has inspired in me a commitment to *simplicity of life*, a willingness to recognize God in those who are often overlooked or despised.



It remains a work in progress within me: it is a work in progress within us all. The Scriptures, especially in the *Sermon on the Mount* and the *Psalms*, invite us to consider *what work* is progressing within us, what work we have chosen to nurture within ourselves. They offer a pattern of life – of simplicity, quietness of heart, environmental responsibility, of openness of spirit towards all things, of gentle hope; of communion with everything else which lives. A glimpse of this was offered to me while I spent time in retreat, and it is a vision which I seek to see more clearly as I journey on.

St Seraphim is shown with the bear which befriended him in the Siberian wilderness; the tomb is that of St Martin in Tours in France.