

The Theologian's Tale

There is a saying within the Orthodox Church regarding the monastic life that all that the monk or nun needs to learn to achieve holiness can be learned within the monastic cell. One can imagine what some of these things might be – qualities such as patience, inner stillness, stability and self-knowledge – the cultivation of them being supportive of the acquisition of 'Inner Prayer', - the 'Prayer of the Heart' as it is called, namely that prayer that according to the Eastern Orthodox Tradition equips the monastic for the struggle with the self, with God and with the powers of evil. Spiritually, this battle takes place within the heart, and the setting of the battle is often the monastic cell.

The American poet, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (1807-1882), is little read and even less studied these days. He is best known for his long poem *Hiawatha*, but in one of his less-known long poems, 'Tales of a Wayside Inn', a monastic cell provides the context of the tale told by a certain theologian who was one of the company gathered at that inn, and the tale told is of a monk who, within his cell, had 'a Blessed Vision of our Lord'.

I must add at this point that whilst the Eastern Orthodox Tradition regards the monastic cell as the training-ground and 'university' of the monk or nun, the same tradition warns against the great danger of delusion to which receiving or even seeking such visions can lead.

However, the vision in the poem is fictitious, and we can therefore focus on the reality of the truth that the fictitious monk learned from his experience in his fictitious cell.

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The story is as follows. Whilst the monk is alone in his cell, praying 'in deep contrition for his sins of indecision', both the cell and the monk within himself are illumined as he beholds a vision of the Lord, clothed as it were in light. But it is not a vision of Christ crucified, 'But as in the village street...halt and lame and blind he healed'..

The monk responds with wonder, worship and adoration as he thinks:

'Who am I, that thus thou deignest

To reveal thyself to me?

Who am I, that from the centre

Of thy glory thou shouldst enter

This poor cell, my guest to be?'

Soon, his adoration is interrupted by the toll of a bell, and this is the bell that calls him – the monastery's almoner - to his particular monastic duty – that of feeding the beggars and disabled who have arrived for their daily food. He is thrown into inner turmoil and wonders whether the Vision will remain if he leaves the cell -

'Deep distress and hesitation

Mingled with his adoration;_

Should he go, or should he stay?

Should he leave the poor to wait

Hungry at the convent gate,

Till the Vision passed away?'

It is at this point that an inner voice articulates to him clearly what to do

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– an inner voice that perhaps his time as a monk has enabled him to hear and discern:

*"Do thy duty; that is best;
Leave unto thy Lord the rest!"*

The monk gets up from his knees, gazes at the Blessed Vision and now, knowing what is his duty, makes his way – albeit it slowly – to the monastery gate to the heart-breaking sight of the desperate people that are waiting for him.

But even to the beggars, things seem different that day: the monastery itself seems 'like the gate of Paradise', and the food seems to them not to be just food, but itself something sacramental – a channel of Divine Grace.

Again, an inner voice speaks to him:

*"Whatsoever thing thou doest
To the least of mine and lowest,
That thou doest unto me!"*

But the spiritual battle is not over. Even this assurance gets challenged by a troubling thought which his conscience addresses to him:

*'...had the Vision
Come to him in beggar's clothing,
Come a mendicant imploring,
Would he then have knelt adoring,*

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*Or have listened with derision,
And have turned away with loathing?'*

But that is not how the Vision had in fact appeared to him, and whereas he had left his cell slowly, he now hurries back – the monastery itself appearing supernaturally bright and luminous. Reaching the threshold of his cell, and pausing, not knowing what to expect, the Vision had remained during his dutiful absence:

*'Through the long hour intervening
It had waited his return,
And he felt his bosom burn,
Comprehending all the meaning,
When the Blessed Vision said,
"Hadst thou stayed, I must have fled!"'*

A few days ago, an old friend of mine and I were reflecting on how we had enjoyed recent graduation ceremonies at Bangor, and we spoke of our days at our respective universities and thought of what goes into acquiring a university degree.

Like monks and nuns in their monastic cells, students undergo the struggle involved in patiently applying themselves, day-in and day-out, to that self-discipline and focus which their chosen subject demands of them.

Like the monk in 'The Theologian's Tale', aspects of these demands will have seemed tedious and unappealing. But each and every graduate has

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responded to the demands of a university course, and has thereby been able to hold on to the vision which brought them to the university and which urged them to reach Graduation Day, at which, walking on to a stage radiant with light (albeit not supernatural light), they received the reward of having done their duty and hopefully – like Longfellow's monk – have in the process, been vouchsafed profound insights and understanding that help equip them for their future. These are treasures that no-one can take away from them.

Congratulations to all our newly-graduated students.

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