WILDERNESS AND PARADISE

for "Cistercian Studies"

by

Thomas Merton.

November 1966.

Archivist's note: This page intentionally added and left blank to line up Merton's comments on verso with associated content.

required

Or must we, while remaining monks, find ways of living un-monastically so as to disarm this criticism? Are we required to prove that we too are all "secular" at heart and that our monasticity is only to the ~~[illegible]~~ behavior – or conversatio morum – is really a turning to the world & not away from it?

This article will not pretend to solve the intricate question of the monk's relation to the modern world. Before that question can be solved the monk must have a definite idea of what he himself is supposed to be. If he begins by compromising himself he cannot avoid ambiguity & compromise in considering his relationship to the world.

question

Monastic theology is not merely a search for a few specious texts in Scripture & the Fathers which will excuse or justify the monastic vocation. It is rather a study & meditation of revealed truth which enables the monk to understand how he, in a most special way, can respond to the call to follow Christ in the wilderness.

specious

jhs

WILDERNESS AND PARADISE .

In recent years some curious theories have been proposed which, in order to emphasize the importance of an active turning to the world and a "secular Christianity", have felt it necessary at the same time to discredit monastic solitude. The "contemplative" life of the monk is then discovered to be "Greek rather than Christian". The struggle with temptation in the wilderness is seen as a curious relic of gnosticism or some other heresy. Solitude is declared essentially alien to the Christian message and life which are communal. In a word, the whole monastic idea becomes theologically suspect. How seriously should we take these theories? Should they induce us to adopt a purely defensive attitude toward our monastic vocation? [INSERT] ~~Do they demand some adaptation which would mean in fact quietly getting rid of the whole idea of separation from the world? Theologically, there is no ground for this.~~ Two recent studies by Protestants (*) show that the theme of a call into the wilderness, a vocation to recover the paradise life after suffering temptation with Christ in desert solitude, is but a variant of the fundamental themes of all Biblical theology: the pascha Christi, the call of the People of God out of Egypt, through the Red Sea into the Desert and to the Promised Land; the theme of the Cross and Resurrection; dying to sin and rising in Christ; the theme of the old and new man; the theme of the fallen world and the new creation. Not only is a Christian withdrawal to a #desert solitude" excusable, licit + even praiseworthy, but the whole theology of the Second Gospel is built upon the theme of Christ in the Desert. The study of Dr Ulrich Mauser is confined to the Biblical use

---

* Christ in the Wilderness, by Ulrich Mauser, Naperville, Ill. 1963
Wilderness and Paradise in Christian Thought, George H. Williams, New York, 1962.

---

of the Desert theme, especially in St Mark. Dr George Williams in his survey of Biblical, Patristic, Medieval and Radical Protestant thought, gives us a remarkably interesting picture of the "Paradise-Wilderness" motif running through the whole history of Christian spirituality and playing a most important part not only in monasticism but in Protestantism and particularly in the universities and seminaries founded by Protestants in the "wilderness" of the New World. Both these books are of considerable importance to monks, and we will attempt here to give a brief survey of their contents, assessing their implications for a monastic theology relevant to our own needs.

The Eremos, the desert wilderness "where evil and curse prevail", where nothing grows, where the very existence of man is constantly threatened, is also the place specially chosen by God to manifest Himself in His "mighty acts" of mercy and salvation. Obedience to a divine call bring into this dreadful wilderness those whom God has chosen to form as His own People. The consecration of Israel in the wilderness of Sinai is the story of God leading men on what appears to be a "march into the open gates of death" (Mauser). God places Israel in a seemingly impossible situation where, however, He reveals His Name to his chosen, and thus places them directly in communication with Him as a source of unfailing help. On the basis of this free relationship rests the Covenant of God with His People. Failure to trust Yaweh in the wilderness is not simply an act of weakness: it is disobedience and idolatry which, substituting the Golden Calf for the ineffable Name, seeks to shorten the time of suffering by resort to human expedients glossed over with religious excuses. Only a free act of grace can restore the violated covenant by reawakening in the People a true sense of the meaning of their desert vocation. They must recover their understanding that the Desert calling implies a complete and continual dependence on God alone. For Israel, the desert life was a life of utter dependence on a continued act of grace which implied also a recognition of man's own propensity to treachery and to sin. We know how the prophets urged Israel under her Kings and at the time of the Babylonian exile, to remember the desert, and to anticipate a new Exodus which would restore the authentic relationship of bridal love between Israel and her God in a "renewed wilderness time." We know that this theme was taken over in the Pauline writings.

Dr Ulrich Mauser shows that this is the message of John the Baptist, at the opening of the Second Gospel. The fact that the Baptist preaches "in the wilderness" is of theological significance in Mark, for whom "the wilderness is a theme full of theological implications and not primarily a locality." John is in fact announcing what the Propehts announced before him: One who is to come from God will appear in the wilderness and initiate the final work of salvation. Israel must go out to meet this One in the wilderness in an act of sincere repentance which acknowledges her whole history as one of disobedience and infidelity. The Baptism of John is a sign of recognition that God's People is under judgement. Even Christ is baptized, thus showing His willingness to "endure God's judgement" andindeed to die for the sins of the people. Immediately after this, Jesus was led out to be tempted in the desert, for "Only Jesus fully realized what it meant to go out into the wilderness: it meant the determination to live under the judgement of God." His going out into the desert is then the necessary outcome of His

Baptism. For all the others, Baptism is simply a gesture of temporary repentance. They return to the cities. But Jesus goes on into the wilderness as the sign that His Baptism is fully serious, and that He is "the only true penitent whose return to the desert is (not merely a token gesture) but unfeigned." One might argue that Christ's stay in the Desert was itself only a temporary retreat, a pause for thought and recollection in preparation for his active mission. Not at all. "The forty days" says Dr Mauser, are not " a period passed forever once Christ starts his public xxxxxxx ministry," but as in the Case of Moses and Elias, the desert retreat "sounds the keynote of his whole mission." Mauser then traces the development of the wilderness theme throughout the whole Gospel of Mark. "Mountain" and "Sea" are variants of the "wilderness"in Mark. Invariably all stories of Jesus, in Mark, which have an "epiphany character" take place in the "wilderness", that is to say "on the mountain" or by or on the sea. The underlying concept of Mark is in fact the confrontation between Jesus and Satan in the wilderness, the overcoming of the powers of evil in the world by the struggle in the Desert. Hence the whole Gospel of Mark is, for Dr Mauser, a development of the struggle of Jesus and Satan in the Desert. To live in this state of struggle with the Adversary of God, and sustain their conflict in direct and complete dependence on God Himself, is the "wilderness life". Even if one lives this confrontation far from the actual desert, one is in fact living "in the wilderness" and "with Christ in the Desert". We see here the basic idea of all monastic theology firmly rooted in the Second Gospel.

What of "contemplation"? The Gospels do not use the expression "contemplative life". Of course the word does not appear. But the idea is expressed in other language. Christ is transfigured on the Mountain, i.e. in the wilderness. The Cloud, which would later have such a fruitful destiny in Christian mystical literature, is since Exodus a permanent feature of the Desert tradition: the "visible form of the governing, guiding yet hidden form of Yahweh's presence". The desert life is not only darkness and battle, it is also light and rest in the presence of the Lord who is our only help. "The epiphany of the glory of God is an indispensable element in the desert tradition." In fact, says Dr Mauser, the Transfiguration is the sign of the Father's approval of the obedience of Jesus in His desert vocation, His fidelity to "a life of persistence in the desert." This persistence will of course lead finally to death, because the Mountain of Calvary is the culmination of the Desert Vocation. "Jesus's determination to persist in the Desert... finds its conclusion in His decision to suffer and to die." Why? Because the very secret of life itself is that by renunciation one overcomes death and suffering (Mark 8:35) and

enters upon life everlasting. The disciples of Christ who are called in a very real sense to follow Him "in the wilderness" do not really understand the meaning of their calling. They are to a certain extent blind to the teaching of their Master and to the significance of His life. The real cause of this blindness is their incapacity to surrender totally to their own desert vocation. "The unwillingness to endure tribulation and persecution, the care for security in the world, in one word the unwillingness to suffer" -- [preventing the disciples from seeing and accepting all the implications of Christ's teaching in their own lives.] Even the apostolic mission of the followers of Jesus is marked with the sign of the wilderness. They are, in fact, called "on the Mountain" and this, for Dr Mauser, is the "indication of (the) basic condition of their mission." When they are sent out to preach in Mark 6:8 ff, the instructions given them are similar to those given to Israel at the beginning of the desert [journey]. In one word: the[y] are to be kept alive by nourishment from God, and they must not waste time and energy caring for themselves. The miraculous feeding of the multitudes in the wilderness in Mark 6 represents at once the [convocation of the new] Israel in the desert and the messianic and eschatological rest of God's People with their King in the Desert which has become His Kingdom and where He feeds them with His might in the new manna, the Eucharist.

From this brief resumé we can see at once that Dr Mauser has given us a monastic reading of Mark's Gospel which is more thorough and more solid than almost anything we have in monastic literature since the Fathers. As monks we owe him thanks for a treatise in Biblical Theology which sums up the whole meaning of our own vocation to follow Christ in the wilderness, in temptation, to the Cross, strengthened by His epiphany in "the Cloud" of contemplation, nourished by His Eucharist and by the hope of the "eschatological rest" with Him in the Paradise of the transformed and flowering desert which is His Kingdom.

The intricate relationship between the themes of Desert and Paradise is developed in a fascinating manner by Dr George Williams, [in] The Church of the martyrs saw the sand of the arena as the "desert" in which the martyrs overcame the adversary of God in their agonia. Then the monks went out into the actual desert as Christ had done and their monastic struggle with temptation became a "martyrdom" in witness to the faith, in obedience to Christ, in direct dependence on God for the grace without which one could not resist. This struggle was rewarded and the Church of martyrs and monks became also a "provisional paradise" in anticipation of the eternal Kingdom.

These themes are quite familiar to anyone who has read the monastic Fathers. But what is particularly interesting about Dr Williams's book is the way in which he traces the development of the wilderness-paradise theme through the medieval universities (with their traditional autonomy from outside control) to Protestant sectarians who sought refuge in the "desert" and "paradise" of the New World and who there built seminaries and colleges as "gardens in the wilderness". Dr Williams sums up his thesis in these words: "Many major and minor movements in Christian history have been in substantial degree the history of the interpenetrations of the biblical and post-biblical meanings of wilderness and paradise in the experience of God's ongoing Israel."

Besides exploring into the Wilderness-Paradise theme in the Bible, especially in the Propetic writings, Dr Williams gives special attention to Qumran and to Christian monasticism. Qumran was an "apocalyptic community that imitated the ancient sojourn in the wilderness of Sinai," seeking to prepare the way for a Priestly and a Royal Messiah (two Messiahs in fact) by a paradisic covenant and communal life. The aim of Qumran is summed up in a phrase that has most fruitful implications for monastic theology: "the purity of paradise truth recovered within the fellowship of a disciplined wilderness encampment sustained by the Spirit". Williams traces the themes of Desert and Paradise through Christian monasticism, shows the gradual interiorization in the mystical literature of the Middle Ages, -- especially the Victorines -- demonstrates that it persisted in the spirituality of the Mendicants and in the Universities, and quotes many texts from radical Protestantism which have the authentic ring of ancient monasticism, except that they apply to sectarian communities rather than to conventual families living under monastic vows. These texts incidentally offer much food for thought to anyone interested in ecumenical dialogue with Protestant visitors to our American monasteries. They show how completely a theme which is fundamental to monastic theology was taken over in the theology of radical Protestantism in the seventeenth century and hence entered into the formation of the Christian ideal of North American culture that grew up out of the Puritan colonies of New England. These words of John Eliot, a seventeenth century New England puritan, might equally well have come from one of the Trappist founders of the Abbey of Gethsemani. "When the enjoyment of Christ in his pure Ordinances is better to the soul than all worldly comforts, then these things (the hardships of the wilderness) are but light afflictions." Roger Williams is said to have practically "made an incantation of the word wilderness." Kentucky, we know, is still haunted by the thought of

This judgement may admittedly reflect a personal preference. The two books discussed here certainly show that even a monastic life in an industrial setting can also find a theological basis in the Bible & monastic tradition provided it is in fact a true "wilderness life" in the spirit of the theology of the apostolate in the Gospel of St Mark.

←

that "wilderness road" through the Appalachian Mountains, over which the settlers came from Maryland and Virginia-- including those Catholics who gathered around Bardstown where the first Cathedral west of the Alleghanies was dedicated in 1816.

In conclusion, one very important aspect of Dr Williams's book must not be passed over in silence. He is acutely aware, as too few Americans still are, of the criminal wastefulness with which commercial interests in the last two centuries have ravaged and despoiled the "paradise-wilderness" of the North American mountains, forests and plains. The struggle to protect the natural beauties and resources of this country has not ended, and is by no means to be regarded as an eccentricity of sentimental souls, bird watchers and flower gardeners. The disastrous dust storms of the thirties in the South Western dust bowl finally brought home more or less to everyone that conservation of soil and natural resources was an absolute necessity. Yet this does not prevent wastefulness, stupidity, greed and sheer destructive carelessness from going on today. So Dr Williams says, in words that monks above all should be ready to understand and appreciate:

"Ours is the age of the bulldozer as much as it is the age of the atomic bomb. For good or ill, we need no longer conform to the contours of the earth. The only wilderness that will be left is what we determine shall remain untouched and that other wilderness in the heart of man that only God can touch." Anyone who reads the book will find this theme developed with its theological and religious implications. Meanwhile, we might reasonably draw at least one obvious lesson from it. If the monk is a man whose whole life is built around a deeply religious appreciation of his call to wilderness and paradise, and thereby to a special kind of kinship with God's creatures in the new creation, and if technological society is constantly encroaching upon and destroying the remaining "wildernesses" which it nevertheless needs in order to remain human, then we might suggest that the monk, of all people, should be concerned with staying in the "wilderness" and helping to keep it a true "wilderness and paradise" in order to share it with those who need to come out from the cities and remember what it is like to be under trees and to climb mountains. Surely there are enough people in the cities already without monks adding to their number when they would seem to be destined by God, in our time, to be not only dwellers in the wilderness but also its protectors. **

** It would be interesting to develop this idea. Obviously, a forest ranger or fire guard in the vast forests of North America offers a natural opportunity for the hermit life today, and some with the hermit vocation have adopted it.