

My attention is irresistibly drawn back to a sentence in today's first reading, from the Acts of the Apostles. The reading itself is actually about the institution of the order of deacons, which was formed in order to help the Apostles in practical matters. The words that grab my attention and interest are these: "It would not be right for us to neglect the word of God so as to give out food (...)"

And my mind immediately goes back many years to my seminary days. Sometimes students were asked to help, if they could, with projects about the house – like giving a hand to clean the chapel or tidy up the garden. But... whenever such help was needed, there were always some students who suddenly realised they had to say their rosary or Morning Prayer or prepare the sacristy for Mass. As you can imagine, such piety was not popular.

In his 2nd Letter, St James says:

"What good is it, dear brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but don't show it by your actions? Can that kind of faith save anyone? Suppose you see a brother or sister who has no food or clothing, and you say, 'Good-bye and have a good day; stay warm and eat well'— but then you don't give that person any food or clothing. What good does that do?

"So you see, faith by itself isn't enough. Unless it produces good deeds, it is dead and useless".

In other words: devoting oneself to prayer and the word of God is an eye-blinkingly necessary thing, but if it bears no

practical fruit, it means nothing. Prayer and action cannot be separated, like theory and practice: one without the other is meaningless. They are two aspects of the same reality.

This is what Martin Luther had such trouble with. Whatever he did, it wasn't good enough for his father, he just couldn't please him – Luther's father was by all accounts a demanding, exacting man. Centuries later Freud said that a man who doesn't get on with his father will never get on with God – and this was precisely the case with Luther. Whatever he did, God would never be pleased with him, so he decided he didn't have to do anything at all, because Jesus did it all for him. Faith alone was necessary for salvation. As soon as he had come to this conclusion, his constipation was relieved. What greater sign could he have that he was right? I'm not quite sure how he got around the 2nd Letter of St James.

Among the many stories told about the life of St Thomas Aquinas, is this one:

An angel came in a vision to St Thomas who, deep in prayer, fell into a mystical ecstasy. After a short time, there came a knocking at the door; St Thomas, enjoying every moment of his ecstasy, ignored it. Then it came again. And again. Finally, St Thomas said to the angel: 'I know who it is. It is a beggar, hungry, waiting food. I'm sorry, but I must go and give him some.' Afterwards, the angel said: 'If you had not left me, I would have left you.' In other words, feeding the beggar came first.

It was St Thomas Aquinas who said: 'As a person is, so will he do.' If there is prayer and reverence for God's Word within, it will find outward expression in practical compassion.

St Basil of Caesarea is regarded as one of the founding fathers of monasticism in the east – but he was not a man for hiding away from the world; in addition to his work as a theologian, Basil was known for his care of the poor and underprivileged. In the early centuries of the Church, many men – and women – fled into the desert and lived as hermits, dwelling in caves, fasting and praying. They did this to escape the temptations of 'the world, the flesh and the devil.' But: what was the first thing they encountered when they entered their inhospitable hiding places? The world, the flesh and the devil – because they carried them within themselves. St Anthony was the most well-known of these desert fathers. In the early 16th century, Hieronymus Bosch painted a triptych called 'The Temptations of St Anthony' – and looking at that very disturbing picture, you get a good idea what kind of world, flesh and devil St Anthony brought with him into the desert.

St Basil once visited a group of desert hermits, living in a loose community in caves and hills. They told him how many hours they prayed, how often they fasted, how little sleep they allowed themselves; and St Basil said: 'Yes, but whose feet do you wash?'

Prayer and practical compassion are always found together; they reflect each other and are held in each other – like the

black and white of the yin-yang symbol – because they express love of God and love of neighbour, which Jesus said was the whole meaning of the law and the prophets. St Catherine of Siena likened them to footprints in the sand: you never get just a single print – always two, side by side, one following the other. She was a great mystic, but she spent much of her time nursing plague victims.

This gives me a measure of comfort, because I quite often look up at the distant mountain peak of silent contemplation – which so many of the great saints would lose themselves in – and I know I'm never going to be able to scale that height. What I have instead is frequently a reluctance to start praying, a wandering mind, endless distractions, tiredness, tedium. But I know two things: first, even just gazing at that mountain peak will help me to know that beneath the passing flux there is an abiding stillness: the flux is my life and the stillness is my being; second, I can always go out and, metaphorically speaking, wash someone's feet.