

## Easter I – St Silouan

Exodus 14 vv 10-31 p71, Exodus 15 vv 10&21 p73, Acts 2 vv 14-32 p1093, John 20 vv 19-31 p1089

A member of our Orthodox congregation recently gave me a book about St Silouan. Silouan was born to a peasant family in Russia in 1866, served as a soldier for a period and then travelled to Mt Athos in Greece, where he became a monk for the rest of his life, dying in 1938. Silouan is revered by the Orthodox on account of the intensity of his relationship of love with God.

It is a long book and a fascinating one. Much of it I found hard to relate to. His life was so very different from mine – peasant, soldier, monk – and his Orthodox faith, while of course believing in and worshipping the same God as we do, is expressed in a very different way from our English Anglicanism. Personally, I wouldn't seek for myself that emotional intensity in my relationship even with God, but then I'm not called to be a monk – not as far as I know, anyway. There is much in the book I don't understand, a problem perhaps made a little worse by my having to read it in translation. Some of it I don't agree with. I did, however, find it fascinating and illuminating. I'm glad I persevered to the end. You are welcome to borrow the book if you like. Here are some of the insights I gained from reading Silouan's biography and selected works. I hope I do not misrepresent him.

It is only by the Holy Spirit that we can know God. "There is," says Silouan, "a major distinction between merely believing that God exists, seeing him in nature or in the Scriptures, and knowing the Lord by the Holy Spirit."

This knowledge of God which is imparted by the Holy Spirit is available to all human beings who are open to God's love. "Not everyone," says the saint, "can be an emperor or a prince; not everyone can be a patriarch or an abbot, or a leader; but in every walk of life we can love God and be pleasing to him, and only this is important."

If we know God by the Holy Spirit, we dwell in Christ and Christ dwells in us. By the grace of the Holy Spirit working in our hearts, we grow into the likeness of Christ, and that likeness is love. The closer we are to Jesus in this life, the more we love – love God and love our fellow human beings. Finally, by God's grace, in the Kingdom of heaven, we shall know Him as He is and, on that day, we shall be made like Him.

The real test of love is this. Do we love our enemies as Christ commanded us to do? Remember. *God commendeth his love toward us, in that Christ died for us while we were yet sinners.*

It follows from this that we pray for the conversion of the world. God does not desire the death of a sinner. If we love our fellow human beings as God loves them, we long for them to know the forgiveness of their sins and the joy of eternal life. If God wills that all should be saved and God is all powerful, how can it be that some people never come to love Him? The answer is that He respects our freedom to reject God and His love. But still He longs for human beings to turn to Him, to renounce evil and to live by faith in Him. Thus, we too, loving our fellow human beings as God loves them, pray that all may come to know Him.

Silouan teaches that it is not so much the words which we may use in prayer that count – we may indeed pray silently – but that we worship in spirit and in truth. When we pray, he says, we must focus on God and not allow ourselves to be distracted by other considerations – something I find very hard to achieve. My mind is more like a butterfly than a laser, but Silouan is generally right, I'm sure. The exception perhaps is on those occasions we are praying for someone or something and it comes to us that we could be part of the answer to our prayers – maybe by visiting a lonely person or giving some money to charity or offering ourselves to take on some role in the church or carry out some important task which nobody else seems to want to undertake.

Silouan takes the view that we are wasting our time following the news in the papers and other media and that we should concentrate on prayer alone. That may be so for a particular monastic vocation, but I do not believe that it is generally valid. As Christian people, I believe that we ought to live in the world in ways which advance the Kingdom of God: doing our work to the best of our ability; caring for our families, friends and neighbours; being active members of our community; involved in local and national affairs; and, topically, using our vote in accordance with our Christian values.

The staretz, as they call spiritual guides like Silouan, teaches that we should glorify God for His work in Creation, treating the natural world with reverence and respect, avoiding as far as possible, harming any living thing. He does not, however, approve of us loving cats and dogs or other animals as pets. He insists that we should only love God and our fellow human beings made in God's image. I can see his point, but I don't agree with him!

Monks like Silouan pursue very disciplined lives, spending much time in communal or private prayer, denying themselves many of the pleasures and comforts of the flesh which most of us consider to be harmless. This self-denial is intended to have the effect of opening the way to a deeper experience of God, a more complete repentance for sin, an undistracted, unconditional passion for the living God. There are also dangers. Practitioners may find themselves fighting demons – whether imaginary or real. Paradoxically, they may become proud of their self-denial, glorying in their mortification of their own flesh. They may come to believe that they have earned their spiritual experiences, that they deserve the blessings God bestows upon them. They forget St Paul's teaching: *But God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world is crucified unto me, and I unto the world.* It is all of God. Every good gift, every spiritual gift we possess *cometh down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no shadow of turning.* Pride – especially spiritual pride – is the original sin. It was pride that led Lucifer to proclaim, *I will ascend into heaven, I will exalt my throne above the stars of God: I will sit also upon the mount of the congregation, in the sides of the north: I will ascend above the heights of the clouds; I will be like the most High,* leading to his being cast into hell. It was pride which led to Adam and Eve thinking that they could defy God and eat the forbidden fruit, with the result that they were cast out of Eden, forced to work hard for their living, ultimately to return to the dust of which we are made.

It is in this context that Silouan had a terrible experience of temptation to evil and received these words from God which meant so much to him but which puzzle many of his students.

God said to Silouan, *Keep thy mind in hell, and despair not.* We are assured in the psalms that God is with us even in hell. Christ descended into hell and preached to the spirits imprisoned there. There is nowhere, nowhere so terrible, that we are out of reach of the love of God. Our God does not forsake us, Jesus having been through the very worst on our behalf.

I also think that what is meant by keeping one's mind in hell is that, if we are rational, we realise that we are sinful people who cannot of ourselves deserve to be in the Presence of God and are therefore justly doomed to the pains of hell, but that our hearts know, because the Holy Spirit reveals it to us, that the wonderful truth is that our sins are forgiven when we come to God through Christ in faith with repentance and that therefore Christ dwells in us and we in Him eternally – here on earth and in the hereafter – so that we may know the joy which He came to bring to us in all its fulness. By keeping in our minds in hell, we understand what God has saved us from and therefore our hearts rejoice in Him.

We can be too complacent about sin and its consequences. If you ask anyone, no matter how much money he has, what it would mean to be rich, he will nearly always choose an income larger than his own. We very seldom think of ourselves as rich. The rich are people who are better off than we are. And it is the same with sin. Sinners, we think, are people who are worse than we are. We don't tend to see ourselves as sinners anymore than we see ourselves as rich. *The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, God, I thank thee, that I am not as other men are, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this publican. I fast twice in the week, I give tithes of all that I possess.* It isn't difficult for respectable church going people like me to think like that Pharisee. But it was actually the publican, the tax collector, who had the grace to perceive how we really stand with God. *And the publican, standing afar off, would not lift up so much as his eyes unto heaven, but smote upon his breast, saying, God be merciful to me a sinner.* So what was the verdict of Jesus? *I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other: for every one that exalteth himself shall be abased; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted.*

*Keep thy mind in hell, and despair not.* Take sin seriously. Understand the consequences of sin. But don't despair. *He descended into hell; The third day he rose again from the dead: He ascended into heaven, And sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty.* He descended to the lowest level in order to raise us with Himself to the very highest level, not because we deserve it, but simply because He loves us. So take sin seriously. Repent thoroughly and live by faith in God. *For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them.*

To give Silouan the last word, *The spirit of the man who has learned to know God by the Holy Spirit burns day and night with love of God, and his soul can form no earthly attachment. The soul that has not known the sweetness of the Holy Spirit rejoices in worldly vanity and praise, or in riches or power, but the Lord is the only desire of the soul that has come to know the Lord through the Holy Spirit and with her, riches and worldly fame count for naught.*