

It sounds exhausting! But as I followed the interactions on this hermit forum I could see the same process taking place: the quiet repetitions of sane and balanced spirituality, the confident, gentle assertions of study and experience – it was like the drip of water on stone, and slowly it began to etch the surface, to reshape the unyielding, to gently reveal to them their own preparedness for change.



Too often, and especially in recent times, change can appear as a sudden and dramatic, even traumatic event, leaving us uncomprehending and incoherent with confusion and distress. But Jesus' touch in today's Gospel is gentle, intimate: he invites us to go to a quiet place with him away from the crowds, to grow and change in his care. "And his ears were opened... and he spoke clearly." Ephphatha. Be opened.

FIRST STEPS

Sometimes the signs of longed-for growth and of change in our own lives are barely discernible, and it is only in hindsight that we can look back and see how far we have come. Fear of not making progress can prevent us from taking the first small, tentative steps of conversion. As we begin this Season of Creation – this celebration of growth and change – we pray that the words of today's reading from Isaiah may begin their quiet work of conversion on us: that "the eyes of the blind shall be opened, the ears of the deaf unsealed... the lame shall leap like a deer and the tongues of the dumb sing for joy".

For more information on the Season of Creation: <https://seasonofcreation.org>

Mass text

ENTRANCE ANTIPHON

**You are just, O Lord, and your judgement is right;
treat your servant in accord with your merciful love.**

FIRST READING Isaiah 35:4-7

PSALM Psalm 145

RESPONSE My soul, give praise to the Lord.

Or **Alleluia!**

1. It is the Lord who keeps faith for ever, who is just to those who are oppressed. It is he who gives bread to the hungry, the Lord, who sets prisoners free. **R.**
2. It is the Lord who gives sight to the blind, who raises up those who are bowed down, the Lord, who loves the just, the Lord, who protects the stranger. **R.**

3. The Lord upholds the widow and orphan, but thwarts the path of the wicked. The Lord will reign for ever, Zion's God, from age to age. R.

SECOND READING James 2:1-5

GOSPEL ACCLAMATION

**Alleluia, alleluia!
Jesus proclaimed the Good News of the kingdom, and cured all kinds of sickness among the people.
Alleluia!**

GOSPEL Mark 7:31-37

COMMUNION ANTIPHON

Like the deer that yearns for running streams, so my soul is yearning for you, my God; my soul is thirsting for God, the living God.

Next Sunday's Readings:

Isaiah 50:5-9
James 2:14-18
Mark 8:27-35

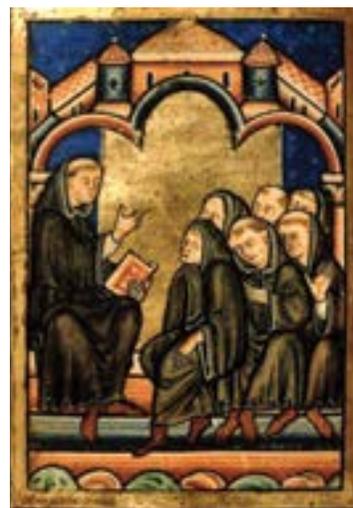
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GROWTH

Over the next few weeks, we will be celebrating the Season of Creation – a World Council of Churches initiative endorsed by Pope Francis and described as "a time to renew our relationship with our Creator and all creation through celebration, conversion, and commitment together". Twelfth-century illuminations and excerpts from the story of St Cuthbert's life, written by St Bede, will be used as exemplars and illustrations in this series. Cuthbert lived in Northumbria during the seventh century. His roots were in Celtic Christianity. He was a monk, hermit and bishop.

In today's Gospel, Jesus tells the deaf man, "Ephphatha... Be opened." We cannot flourish, we cannot grow without change. How to be open to change?



Odd as it may seem, there are a growing number of online forums for those interested in the way of hermitage, the eremitical life. They are populated by the sincere, the committed, the tourists and, of course, the kindly eccentric. It is perhaps characteristic of these groups that the eccentric people are often the most voluble; they seem to have a lot they need to say! One of these forums was recently joined by a mature and well-established diocesan hermit from Stillson in the USA, who was prepared to spend time carefully explaining and guiding the less experienced, and debunking some of the myths expounded by the most eccentric.

I was reminded by her approach of the story of St Cuthbert who, when appointed prior of a rather lacklustre monastery, used to hold daily conferences with the monks in an effort to reform them. He would teach them patiently until the rebellious mutterings from the back of the room became too noisy, then he would simply up and leave and go about his business for the day. St Bede writes: "When he was fatigued by the bitter taunts of those who opposed him, he would rise from his seat with a placid look, and dismiss the meeting until the following day, when, as if he had suffered no repulse, he would use the same exhortations as before, until he converted them."

Season of Creation



Today we begin a new series for the Church's Season of Creation, which begins on 1 September each year. Rachel Denton is a diocesan hermit and has written these pieces from her urban hermitage, which is dedicated to St Cuthbert.

5 SEPTEMBER 2021

23RD SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

YEAR B

DIVINE OFFICE WEEK III

which underpins our continuing existence. The truth is that living in this way is not sustainable. Our penance – our engagement with reality – is to live within the bounds of what is sustainable, maybe considering the use of non-polluting transport, or getting involved in the work of an environmental group, or even exploring a vegetarian or vegan lifestyle. These are all healthy limitations which turn us around, make us repent, align us closer with the truth of our created humanity.



TAKING UP THE CROSS

In today's Gospel Jesus says that those who wish to follow him must take up their cross. At its most fundamental, that cross is the challenge, the vicissitudes and privations of just being human. Jesus invites us to fully embrace the truth of who we are.

St Cuthbert, the hermit patron of my hermitage, clearly didn't get the memo! He was quite keen on extreme asceticism. There is a story from St Bede about St Cuthbert: "he would go forth, down to the sea, until the water reached his neck and arms, and spend the night in praising God". Fortunately – as can be seen if you look closely at the bottom right of the picture – sea otters arrived to comfort and to warm his feet when he finally emerged. I pray we all have our own version of sea otters to comfort and encourage us as we turn to face our own truths.

For more information on the Season of Creation: <https://seasonofcreation.org>

Mass text

ENTRANCE ANTIPHON

Give peace, O Lord, to those who wait for you, that your prophets be found true. Hear the prayers of your servant, and of your people Israel.

FIRST READING Isaiah 50:5-9

PSALM Psalm 114

RESPONSE

I will walk in the presence of the Lord, in the land of the living.

Or **Alleluia!**

1. I love the Lord for he has heard the cry of my appeal; for he turned his ear to me in the day when I called him. **R.**
2. They surrounded me, the snares of death, with the anguish of the tomb; they caught me, sorrow and distress. I called on the Lord's name. O Lord my God, deliver me! **R.**
3. How gracious is the Lord, and just; our God has compassion. The Lord protects the simple hearts; I was helpless so he saved me. **R.**

4. He has kept my soul from death, my eyes from tears and my feet from stumbling. I will walk in the presence of the Lord in the land of the living. **R.**

SECOND READING James 2:14-18

GOSPEL ACCLAMATION

Alleluia, alleluia!
The only thing I can boast about is the cross of our Lord, through whom the world is crucified to me, and I to the world.
Alleluia!

GOSPEL Mark 8:27-35

COMMUNION ANTIPHON

How precious is your mercy, O God!
The children of men seek shelter in the shadow of your wings.

Next Sunday's Readings:
 Wisdom 2:12. 17-20
 James 3:16 – 4:3
 Mark 9:30-37

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PENANCE

The life of a diocesan hermit is governed by Canon 603. Among other things, this states that life in the hermitage is to be a life of "constant prayer and penance". Constant prayer is probably a familiar, if challenging, concept for most people, but constant penance? A dictionary definition of penance is "self-inflicted punishment". Constant self-punishment sounds frankly terrifying – and neither healthy nor sensible in the context of a lifelong commitment.

So how to live out "constant penance" safely and with integrity? The life of the hermitage is a simple life – much of the flummery and dissemblance of social living is withdrawn, so that what is most fundamental and foundational to our being human can emerge. When we shed some of those artifices, it can be a very joyful and freeing experience, but it can also be challenging and uncomfortable. The willingness to engage with that experience of reality is penance lived constantly.



The original Greek which is translated as "repentance" (from the Latin for which "penance" is derived) is *metanoia*, which means "turning around". Penance is the intentional act of turning around – not glancing back fearfully over the shoulder, but turning to face the headwind of truth with courage. Penance is to try to live without a barrier between ourselves and the truth.

I think the natural world sets an excellent example of this sort of penance. The penance in nature is necessarily constant and assiduous – a tree has no contrived defence against the elements but must bend as the wind blows, flourish with the sun and strain its roots deep for the source of water, responding to drought, sunlight, coldness and heat as they present themselves. A tree grows in its place, in the conditions in which it finds itself. It abides in the stark reality of its circumstance. So how might this penance, this "engaging with reality", manifest itself in this Season of Creation? How might it change our behaviour towards our world?

There is an increasing awareness that some of the perks of modern living are delusional: the excessive fuel we burn, the unnecessary food we waste, the unbiodegradable plastics we pollute with; all of these are distortions of the ecological balance

Season of Creation



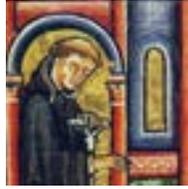
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24TH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

YEAR B

DIVINE OFFICE WEEK IV



of the pandemic, as transport options became more limited, many of us found ourselves walking more frequently around our local areas, our cities and towns. The splendour of buildings and monuments, the grime and tatter of urban life, the wonder of safe movement across a crowded space: all can speak to us of our human condition, of our relationship with our Creator God, of our participation in the community of Christ's body. And pondering these things prayerfully can move us to deeper understanding, or even to action.

There is a wooded area close to my hermitage. It is often littered – a source of some irritation until I began to look more closely. Much of the litter was dropped by youngsters walking between an overcrowded, impoverished housing estate and the local school. The estate itself is often littered because the regular refuse services are not sufficient to service such large families in so many small houses. So these youngsters have grown up in a culture where litter is so normal that it is effectively invisible to them. With that understanding, it was possible to be more empathetic, and even to do something (litter picking) to make this little zone of their day litter-free.

WONDER AND FASCINATION

Jesus tells us in today's Gospel to welcome the children; to welcome the ones who look with wonder and fascination at the world they encounter and ponder each day. It is a gift they can share with us, and no less sacred than the words of scripture which we ponder so deeply.

For more information on the Season of Creation: <https://seasonofcreation.org>

Mass text

ENTRANCE ANTIPHON

I am the salvation of the people, says the Lord. Should they cry to me in any distress, I will hear them, and I will be their Lord for ever.

FIRST READING Wisdom 2:12. 17-20

PSALM Psalm 53

RESPONSE **The Lord upholds my life.**

- O God, save me by your name; by your power, uphold my cause. O God, hear my prayer; listen to the words of my mouth. R.**
- For proud men have risen against me, ruthless men seek my life. They have no regard for God. R.**
- But I have God for my help. The Lord upholds my life. I will sacrifice to you with willing heart and praise your name for it is good. R.**

SECOND READING James 3:16 – 4:3

GOSPEL ACCLAMATION

Alleluia, alleluia! Through the Good News God called us to share the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. Alleluia!

GOSPEL Mark 9:30-37

COMMUNION ANTIPHON

I am the Good Shepherd, says the Lord; I know my sheep, and mine know me.

Next Sunday's Readings:
Numbers 11:25-29
James 5:1-6
Mark 9:38-43, 45, 47-48

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AMBULATIO



Lectio Divina – divine reading – is the name given to the practice of sitting prayerfully with scriptural phrases and letting them wash over us, permeate our thinking, speak to us in a deeply personal way.

There is much written about *Lectio*, but God speaks to us in many ways, not just through words. During the Covid-19 lockdown when I found myself too restless to sit quietly, I was fortunate to be able to walk in my garden instead. *Ambulatio Divina*, divine walking if you like, is practised in the same repetitive way as *Lectio*: repeated steps,

a repeated short path, back and forth, engaging all the senses as the smells, sights, sounds, touch of this microcosm of God's creation are attended upon. Occasionally (as in the phrases of *Lectio*), my focus might be reeled in by a glister, a rustle, a leaf of extraordinary, polished, sculptural form; a wind-blown rose losing its petals; a pigeon flying off from the birdbath, and the wonder when she finally has the courage to wait there and let me pass. God speaks to us through the gifts of creation.

St Bede tells this story of St Cuthbert: "One day some ravens were seen tearing the straw from the roof. Cuthbert told them to leave the monk's property alone: 'In the name of Jesus Christ, depart forthwith!' he shouted. They flew off shamefacedly almost before he had finished speaking. Three days later one of them returned, and stood before him with feathers outspread and head bowed low to its feet, humbly asking pardon. When Cuthbert realised what it meant, he gave permission for them all to return. Back they came with a fitting gift – a lump of pig's lard. The birds stayed on the island many years to set men a good example of reform."

St Bede adds wryly: "Let no one think it ridiculous to learn a lesson in virtue from birds!"

God's revelations to us through creation are not limited to the delights and drama of the natural world. During the early days

Season of Creation



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19 SEPTEMBER 2021

25TH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

YEAR B

DIVINE OFFICE WEEK I



study, of recreation and tranquillity. It is perhaps easier to see their beauty now than in their original inception. But their value to us is not just as a pretty addendum to the work which was their original intent; they too have served a purpose, they have carried us along to this moment of our own. We cannot always see the endgame of our endeavours, and perhaps that is a good thing. The unexpected stranger-angel is often well disguised.

Closer by my urban hermitage, another canal path runs alongside the commercial warehouses and workshops of the city. These industrial landscapes are not to everyone's taste, but there is an undeniable form and dignity in their stark architecture, their massive utilitarian girders, their begrimed and blackening sheds. There is beauty here, too, if we can see it.

SECRET GRACE

Appreciating the secret grace of these spaces does not belittle the grief and the heartache with which they are often protested. Not every project is a prudent or compassionate use of resources, and we need to guard against wielding our creative arm for vain or nefarious or selfish purposes. But even the worst things we do may have hidden within them a grace note of redemption: the least auspicious of projects and schemes, no matter how flawed at their inception, might eventually deliver to us an angel.

For more information on the Season of Creation: <https://seasonofcreation.org>

Mass text

ENTRANCE ANTIPHON

All that you have done to us, O Lord,
you have done with true judgement,
for we have sinned against you
and not obeyed your commandments.
But give glory to your name
and deal with us according to the bounty
of your mercy.

FIRST READING Numbers 11:25-29

PSALM Psalm 18

RESPONSE The precepts of the Lord gladden
the heart.

1. The law of the Lord is perfect,
it revives the soul.
The rule of the Lord is to be trusted,
it gives wisdom to the simple. **R.**
2. The fear of the Lord is holy,
abiding for ever.
The decrees of the Lord are truth
and all of them just. **R.**
3. So in them your servant finds instruction;
great reward is in their keeping.
But who can detect all his errors?
From hidden faults acquit me. **R.**

4. From presumption restrain your servant
and let it not rule me.
Then shall I be blameless,
clean from grave sin. **R.**

SECOND READING James 5:1-6

GOSPEL ACCLAMATION

Alleluia, alleluia!
Your word is truth, O Lord,
consecrate us in the truth.
Alleluia!

GOSPEL Mark 9:38-43. 45. 47-48

COMMUNION ANTIPHON

Remember your word to your servant,
O Lord,
by which you have given me hope.
This is my comfort when I am brought low.

Next Sunday's Readings:

Genesis 2:18-24
Hebrews 2:9-11
Mark 10:2-16

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ANGELS



A few years ago I spent my exercise for a couple of summers walking the CuckooWay—a long-distance footpath in England from Gainsborough to Chesterfield, following the towpath of the 240-year-old Chesterfield Canal. The path derives its name from the “cuckoos” or narrow boats which used the waterway for transport of goods and materials. The canal stopped functioning commercially in the 1950s and has since been reclaimed by nature, with renovation work in recent years to make it more accessible for recreation. At the same time as I was walking, the national

media were consumed with a very heated debate about the possibility of a massive infrastructure project, likely to improve transport links, but also to cut vast swathes through the British countryside.

It was an interesting juxtaposition. Down by the canal all was calm and tranquil, nature was flourishing, people were relaxed and quietly enjoying themselves; in parts it was wondrously beautiful. Just one hundred years ago it would have been busy, noisy, and polluted with coal and oil fumes: a melee of commerce and industry. One hundred years before that it would have been a building site – a place of confusion, mud, danger and disruption. The parallels with the construction project currently under consideration were quite striking.

I was reminded of the story of St Cuthbert and the angel. St Bede tells us that one day in winter, Cuthbert welcomed a young stranger to the monastery. Cuthbert warmed the young man and helped him to wash and tidy himself after his journeying, then left to go and fetch him some warm bread from the oven next door: “When he came back the youth had vanished. At the door there was a wonderfully fragrant odour coming from three loaves, unusually white and fine. Trembling, Cuthbert said to himself, ‘Now I know that it was an angel!’.”

We treasure the building sites of yesteryear – the excavations of Roman forts, the ruins of medieval castles, the industrial heritage of our canals and mills, our beautiful churches and cathedrals built throughout the ages. These once noisy, dirty, brutal or chaotic places have often become oases of relaxation and quiet

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26 SEPTEMBER 2021

26TH SUNDAY IN
ORDINARY TIME

YEAR B

DIVINE OFFICE WEEK II