

## **Carmel: Expressing Our Baptismal Call**

*Francis Kemsley, O.Carm.*

Every Easter we hear of the Gospel account of the discovery of the empty tomb of Jesus, we renew our baptism promises and witness the baptism of new members and the reception into full communion of others. This is the high point of the liturgical year. In recent years there has been a lot of debate about lay spirituality that places much emphasis upon our baptism. Can the image of entering the tomb of Christ have significance and be inspirational for this new millennium?

### **The origins of Carmel**

The Carmelite Order has its origins on Mt. Carmel in the Holy Land in the early thirteenth century. We do not know the names of the first hermits on Mt. Carmel that gathered around the spring of Elijah. We cannot be absolutely certain, but most of the community were probably lay men who had travelled with crusaders as pilgrims or were hermits already living in Palestine. They received a formula for living from the local patriarch, Albert of Jerusalem. The Rule begins with Christ and ends with Christ. The centre of the Rule is the command to “hear Mass” daily. There is an emphasis upon reflecting on and living the Word of God. In our Rule we are encouraged to listen, read, reflect and pray the scriptures. We are asked to pray in our cells. This is a reminder of the need for inner solitude, allowing God to speak to us in the silence of our hearts.

The Rule was inspired by the account of the first Christian community in Jerusalem described in the Acts of the Apostles (2:42). They gathered as a community celebrating the Eucharist, united in prayer and sustained by the teaching of Christ.

### **The Resurrection**

At our baptism we believe that we go into the tomb with Christ allowing our old nature to die so that we might rise with him. The Liturgy of the early Carmelites may help us today as they took their liturgical ceremonies from the Rite of the Holy Sepulchre. The Holy Sepulchre was important for them not because it was the site of the burial of Jesus but because it was the place of the Resurrection. There was a procession every Saturday night in honour of the Risen Christ and a unique celebration in honour of the Solemn Commemoration of the Resurrection on the last Sunday of the liturgical year. This always took place in November when the Church traditionally remembered the dead. Medieval Carmelites concluded their month of prayer for the dead with a solemn celebration of the Resurrection. When the Carmelites travelled to Europe in the 1230’s and 1240’s they found the spirituality based on the suffering Jesus upon the cross influenced by St. Francis and St. Bernard. The Carmelites changed their original striped cloak to a white one, which symbolised the Resurrection.

In our Rule we read that the Carmelite community is “to gather each morning to hear Mass”. This is an echo of the resurrection account in John’s Gospel: “On the first day of the week Mary of Magdala came to the tomb early in the morning while it was still dark” (John 21:1). Not surprisingly, Mary of Magdala was an

important figure as the first witness of the Resurrection and is celebrated in the medieval Carmelite calendar.

When a religious professes vows it is common for the paschal candle to be burning in the sanctuary. This is a reminder that our commitment to our vocation is a deepening of the baptism promise. I believe it was their baptism that gave a purpose to the early Carmelites who lived on Mt. Carmel. Their Rule reminded them that they were living “a life of allegiance to Jesus”. When they had to leave the Holy Land because of the political situation and travelled to Europe they were going into the unknown. Their hearts never really left Carmel as all our great figures returned in their prayer to the holy mountain where like Elijah they encountered God.

### **A pilgrim people**

What would become of their way of life now that they were no longer living around the Spring of Elijah? With papal approval there were changes made to their Rule so that they could become mendicant friars. Following in the footsteps of Jesus Christ they were now bringing Christ to the world.

The Church has frequently been called “a pilgrim people”. This is a reminder of the journey of forty years during which the chosen people set forth from Egypt to the promised land, from slavery to freedom, from darkness to light. Our baptism is the beginning and not the end of our journey. We are no longer individuals on a journey but part of a community of faith. At our baptism we received a new candle freshly lit from the Paschal Candle with the words “Receive the Light of Faith”. The light of Christ leads us on our spiritual journey.

There is much in Carmelite literature that speaks to us of pilgrimage and this can be food for our journey. Elijah walked for forty days to Horeb, the mountain of the Lord. There he encountered God not in the traditional ways of wind, earthquake and fire but with the sound of silence. After that Elijah set out refreshed and strengthened on a new commission from God (1Kings 19:9-18).

St. Teresa of Avila used the image of the Castle. She described a journey to the centre, passing through seven different dwellings in which we are stripped of our imperfections that separate us from God. When the pilgrim arrives in the seventh and final room they are in the centre of the Castle and there they meet the King. Prayer is the entrance to the Castle. By reflecting upon our brokenness, through our self-knowledge that is a fruit of authentic, we seek to allow God, who has called us, to be the centre of our lives.

Her contemporary, St. John of the Cross wrote in the Spiritual Canticle of the lover searching for the beloved. We must overcome our compulsions and order our desires in our looking for happiness and peace. The union of the Beloved with the lover is compared to that of marriage. When we find God we are released from our enslavement and given true freedom and happiness. Our spiritual relationship needs to be developed and sustained. John is often seen to be distant and remote but he uses poetry to describe the spiritual relationship that still speaks to us today. John described travelling through the desert and encountering God in the oasis. He wrote that the beloved leaves the oasis to meet us and travels with us. Thérèse also used this image.

John is often remembered for his description of the dark night. There may be times of darkness when we feel completely abandoned by everyone. This may be due to unemployment, unexpected illness or the sudden death of a loved one. However, the dark night, the little way and desert remind us that, no matter how bad things feel, we are not alone in our pain and suffering as God comes to support and comfort us.

St. Thérèse of Lisieux is famous for her little way. This simple way has helped thousands of people on their spiritual journey. She saw herself as a little one in the sight of God whose love was unconditional. Carmel means “the garden of the Lord” and Thérèse saw her prayer like a flower in the oasis in the desert. Our faith reminds us that God never deserts us because God loves us like a child.

John, Teresa, and Thérèse all wrote about spiritual pilgrimage perhaps because they came from a spiritual tradition that placed the image of a journey at the heart of its story; the early Carmelites had to leave their original home to go into the unknown. We do not know what those early Carmelites felt when they sailed from Haifa and looked upon Mount Carmel for the last time. However, in their prayer and contemplation they returned to Carmel. As they were asked in their Rule to place their chapel in the centre of their cells, so they travelled to the centre to meet and encounter God.

### **Water of life**

When we think of baptism we often remember the importance of water. St Teresa often reflected upon the image of water. She wrote about troughs and aqueducts. For her, water expressed the awareness of the presence of God in the Spirit. She was fascinated by the story of Samaritan woman at the Well of Jacob (John 4: 1-42). Jesus offered the woman at the well “living water”, which was not ordinary water that would merely quench her thirst for a short period but rather eternal life, a permanent relationship with God that would last forever. Jesus led the woman gradually to recognise Him as the Messiah; so he leads us step by step. The Samaritan woman became the most unlikely of disciples. Once she received Jesus into her heart she wanted to share that gift with everyone she met. The woman at the well became an instrument of God; once she let the “living water” into her life there was no stopping it.

### **Mary**

Since the time of the first Carmelite hermits on Carmel there has been a special devotion to Mary. The Chapel built in the centre of the cells was dedicated to her. Mary is important today not simply because she was the mother of Jesus but also because she was his first disciple. She is the Woman of Faith in John’s Gospel. For us today she is a figure who pondered and reflected upon what God was asking of her. Mary reminds us of the need to find God and reflect upon what he is asking of us today.

St. Thérèse said that for her Mary was more Mother than Queen. Thérèse reflected upon her relationship with her mother who died when Thérèse was young. Since the Reformation Mary has been venerated as the Queen of Carmel. Thérèse returned to an earlier understanding of Mary as the Mother of Carmel. Since the Middle Ages Mary has also been called our Sister. An early title of the Order was Brothers of the Blessed Virgin of Mt. Carmel. She shares our humanity and leads us along our pilgrim path like an older sister. Where she has travelled we hope to go.

## **Responsible Christians**

We are asked to take ownership of our faith and be responsible Christians. When we welcome Jesus Christ into our lives we receive all that comes with him, which includes the Gospel of Peace, Love and Justice.

I feel the story of the Prophet Elijah is still a source of inspiration for us today. He was a great prophet but also he had his times of darkness when he told God that he had had enough (1 Kings 19:3-8). His faith in God led him to challenge the priests of Baal on Carmel (1 Kings 18:17-40) and Ahab over the murder of Naboth in order to gain his vineyard (1 Kings 21: 1-24) Elijah was compassionate to the poor and the lowly as he comforted the widow of Zarephath (1 Kings 17:7-24). If Elijah lived today would he be a paid up member of Pax Christi? Would he demonstrate at Government Offices about unjust political policies? Would he challenge religious intolerance? Would he visit the sick, those in prison and those on the margins of society? Elijah is for us today a figure of prayer but also of action.

## **Clothed with new life**

At our baptism we received a white garment. This is a reminder of our new life in Jesus in the light of his Resurrection. As Elijah went up to the skies in his chariot of fire his cloak fell upon his successor Elisha. The wearing of the scapular has been a common devotion. Last year the Carmelite Family marked the seven hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the traditional date of the giving of the Scapular by Mary to St. Simon Stock. We do not know much about this early Carmelite. He is thought to have been one of the early Priors General of the Order who had inspired the Order during the period of change from being hermits from Mt. Carmel to being mendicant friars dwelling in Europe. The scapular is now a popular devotion that has helped many people. The prayer of those who wear the scapular is to follow Mary as she followed Our Lord. Fr. Malachy Lynch, the first prior of the restored shrine at Aylesford in Kent, preached the simple message about the scapular. He suggested that every morning we pray "Use me today".

Our baptism may have taken place a long time ago but its consequences remain with us for the rest of our lives. We begin our Christian journey at our baptism. We become more conscious of Christ in our lives and he supports and sustains us. The first Carmelites were fully aware of this. They would remember the end of their Rule that read "Our Lord, at his second coming, will reward anyone who does more than he is obliged to do." Through our baptism we share the mission of the Church to bring Jesus to the waiting world. Carmel reminds us that we are all pilgrims and we are following a well-trodden and old way. We are not alone on that journey.