



## **Saints – Old and New**

### **Charles de Foucauld**

25 October 2015

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*Lamentations 3: 19–33 Matthew 25: 31–end*

*Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye have done it unto the one of the least of these my brothers, ye have done it unto me.*

That quotation from our second lesson this evening was the one of the core texts that inspired the life of Charles de Foucauld – the relatively modern saint that I have chosen to reflect briefly on tonight. I first came upon him a long time ago through the writings of one of his followers Carlo Carretto. I have a habit of writing my name and the date and place in my books when I buy them. My copy of Carlo Carretto's *Letters from the Desert* says 'Cambridge, October 1977' – I was probably needing some spiritual help as I began that year of finals. I returned to reading those Letters again not long ago – they are one of those pieces of spiritual writing, alongside the scriptures, that sustain me. Carretto begins the book by saying 'God's call is mysterious; it comes in the darkness of faith. It is so fine, so subtle, that it is only in the deepest silence within us that we can hear it.' This call in the end saw Carretto live as a hermit and solitary in the desert. Very few of us are called to do that – but we are all called.

Charles de Foucauld who founded the Order of which Carretto was a member, began life as something of a playboy and ended his life living as a hermit in the deserts of Morocco and Algiers and he ended up being killed by bandits. What fascinates me more than the playboy to priest, or the call to the desert, is Charles de Foucauld as a model for mission and evangelism – a model that might just be worth having in our knapsack alongside many other models that are around at the moment. I will endeavour to explain more.

There is always a danger of generalising or parodying to make a point, and I hope I can resist that, and apologies if I don't.

The prevailing model of mission and evangelism in the Church of England at the moment is certainly pretty clear: it is very much focussed on discipleship, growing new disciples. If you have the most wonderful pastoral skills and think God might be calling you to be a Bishop, forget it; pastoral models of ministry amongst Bishops is low on the list – it's even in danger of not being very high up the list for being a priest at the moment.

Undoubtedly numbers attending church are falling, and have been doing so for the past 60 years despite calls from Archbishops at various times. Numbers of all denominations are falling in the West, it is not just the Church of England – there are pockets of growth, numerically, but the overall picture is of decline – and the statisticians warn us that unless something radical is done we are heading for extinction. Go to Africa and things are different: I recently returned from a trip to Kigali in Rwanda and the church is growing numerically at a rapid rate.

Whatever the rhetoric, there seems, to me, to be high levels of anxiety around. Growth is the buzz word – growth, and particularly growth in numbers. ‘Go and make disciples of all nations,’ Matthew has Jesus say at the end of his gospel, and that remains a fundamental call. But if your congregation is not growing, and you haven't got strategies for growth in place that are measurable, then you get a black mark; and perhaps if the growth doesn't happen you might get closed down. There are some financial realities that have to be faced as well, there is not a bottomless pit of money to carry on paying for priests in the number of parishes that have had them in the past, nor are there the number of priests to go around. It is complex.

But what I pray to be in the midst of the complexity and potential anxiety of all of this, is someone who maintains a focus where it should be – and Charles de Foucauld gives me strength and hope. And that focus must be on God and on Jesus. De Foucauld believed his life's call was to love. He said, ‘Let's concern ourselves with those who lack everything, those to whom no one gives a thought. Let us be the friends of those who have no friends, their brother. The Love of God, the love of men, that is my whole life, that will be my whole life, I hope.’ He loved that passage from Matthew's gospel that we heard in our second lesson because it was about meeting Jesus in those very people that he spoke of there; he made no distinction between people because of their creed or colour – as much as he served them he served Jesus.

De Foucauld spent all his time in the desert amongst Muslims. In his autobiography he says, ‘I have been a priest for a year and I felt called straight away to go to the ‘lost sheep’, to the most abandoned, the most needy, so as to fulfil the commandment of love towards them... Knowing by experience that no people were more abandoned than the Muslims of Morocco and the Algerian Sahara, I requested and obtained permission to go to Beni Abbas, a little oasis on the edge of Morocco.’ He was welcomed by the local people who loved him: again, he says, ‘I want all the inhabitants to get used to looking on me as their brother, the universal brother... They are beginning to call the house ‘the fraternity’, and I find this very touching.’

However, by his own account Charles never converted a single soul to the Christian faith. He wrote a *Little Rule* for Brothers and he desperately longed to establish a religious community: he was sure that others would come and join him – but not a single person ever did. If he was to have had a visit from a present day Archdeacon and a review of his Mission Action Plan, his example of pioneer ministry would have been judged a complete and utter failure. It was only a considerable time after his death that his work bore fruit – that his rule was taken up, that his ministry was seen for what it was. There are now five religious congregations, associations, and spiritual institutes that are founded on his rule and are inspired by his life. His is a very real example of those words of Jesus: ‘Unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies it remains a single grain, but if it dies it yields a rich harvest’.

What De Foucauld modelled above all else was a life devoted to God and to Jesus – a life of faithfulness and focus. He was particularly devoted to Jesus present in the Eucharist, and his day began with hours of prayer before the Blessed Sacrament before he went to work serving Christ present in others. He wrote, 'The Eucharist is Jesus, it is all Jesus. When you love, you feel like spending the whole time with the one you love, or at least you want to look at him without ceasing. Prayer is nothing else. It is the familiar meeting with our Beloved. We look at him, we tell him we love him, we rejoice to be at his feet.'

Whatever strategies for mission and evangelism we may be called to engage with they will flounder unless they are rooted in that kind of prayer – which is both so very simple and yet so very demanding. And because most of us are not capital 'S' saints, we feebly struggle; that doesn't matter at all because through that we learn – as did De Foucauld – as did Carlo Carretto, we learn about the all-embracing love and grace of God, the inclusive love of God that De Foucauld recognised as he lived amongst Muslims in the desert.

De Foucauld wrote this prayer: it is a prayer I want to be able to say, but which a lot of the time in all honesty I think I perhaps only want to want to say – but that's never a bad start: De Foucauld prayed:

Father, I abandon myself into your hands,  
do with me what you will.  
Whatever you may do, I thank you.

I am ready for all, I accept all.  
let only your will be done in me,  
and in all your creatures.  
I wish no more than this, O Lord

Into your hands I commend my soul:  
I offer it to you with all the love of my heart,  
for I love you, Lord, and so need to give myself,  
to surrender myself into your hands, without reserve,  
and with boundless confidence,  
for you are my Father.  
Amen.

It is a prayer completely free of fear and anxiety, of panic for the present or the future: if the prayers of the Blessed Charles de Foucauld could edge us a little further along that road it might not stop the Church of England dying, but it will do the one thing that really matters, which is to draw us and all people ever closer to the one and only living God, who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.