

Desert Spirituality

What are some of the key attributes of desert spirituality?

1. The heart of the desert teaching is expressed in this answer given by Abba Pimenion: A certain brother asked Abba Pimenion, saying, “What is faith?” And the old man said, “To live ever in loving kindness and in humbleness, and to do good to one’s neighbour.” It is expressed equally well in the answer of Abba Poeman: Some old men came to see Abba Poeman and said to him, “When we see brothers who are dozing in the assembly, shall we rouse them so that they will be watchful?” He said to them, “For my part when I see a brother who is dozing, I put his head on my knees and let him rest.”
2. The spirituality of the desert is also characterised by a profound reluctance to judge others. A story about Abba Moses, who had been a robber, says: There was a brother who had committed a fault. So they called a meeting and invited Abba Moses. He refused to go. The priest sent someone to say to him, “They’re all waiting for you.” So Moses got up and set off; he took a leaky jug and filled it with water and took it with him. The others came out to meet him and said, “What is this, father?” The old man said to them, “My faults run out behind me and I cannot see them, yet here I am coming to sit in judgement on the mistakes of somebody else.” When they heard this, they called off the meeting.
3. Compassion, humility, gentleness, and a reluctance to judge sit at the heart of the tradition. Yet perhaps what most clearly expresses the heart of desert spirituality is the pervasive sense of God’s immediate presence. For the desert contemplatives, all of creation is theophany – God appearing. It is said that one of the wise men of that time went to find the holy Abba Anthony and asked him, “Father, how can you be happy when you are deprived of the consolation that books can give?” Antony replied, “My philosopher friend, my book is the nature of creatures; and this book is always in front of me when I want to read the words of God.”

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4. As for prayer, they saw it not as an occasional activity, but something that permeates every aspect of life. Rather than something that you do, prayer is seen as something that you are, a way of being. It is said of some elders that their lives became “a single flame of fire,” a single prayer of light, of love.

In the Christian tradition, the sunflower—especially in the desert—has come to symbolise resilience and inner growth. Its turning toward the sun mirrors the soul’s longing for God, and the way a life can slowly orient itself to divine love and truth.

That something so vivid and full of life can grow in such a harsh and dry place speaks to the heart of the contemplative journey: that in the very places we feel most empty or uncertain, new life can begin to take root and quietly flourish.

Isaiah compares the blossoming of awareness to a bursting forth of life in the desert. The Prophet’s song tells of how the wilderness will bloom and burst into flower. And how a highway will be found there, called the Holy Way. Remarkable things happen in the desert. The desert is a womb of grace, bearing the most extraordinary gift for those who can wait patiently.