CHAPTER I

Desert Fathers

Riches are a trap of the devil. [E114]

Pachomius and Palaemon

About the year 312 AD, Emperor Constantine, fearing that the forces at his disposal might be insufficient for his self-imposed task of ruling the entire Roman world, proclaimed what today would be called a recruitment drive. He went about the task in much the same way as the Royal Navy used to enlist men in the eighteenth century: press gangs were sent out to capture as many promising young men as they could find and bring them in for training. One such gang sailed way up the River Nile, then performed its perfidious task on the way downstream. One of the young men they shanghaied was named Pachomius, of whom nothing more is known than that he was about twenty years old and that he was the son of pagan parents. It is not difficult to imagine the discomfort in which he and his fellow victims of this oppression were brought down the Nile, but:

> As he was being carried off with others on board ship to foreign parts, they docked one evening in a certain port where the citizens, on seeing how strictly the raw recruits were being guarded, enquired what their situation was and, motivated by the commandments of Christ, took great pity on their miserable plight and brought them some refreshments. Pachomius was very surprised at what they were doing and asked who these men were who were so eager and willing to perform such humble acts of mercy. He was told they were Christians, who were in the habit of doing acts of kindness to everyone, but especially towards travellers. He learned also what it meant to be called a Christian. For he was told that they were godly people, followers of a genuine religion, who believed in the name of Jesus Christ the only begotten son of God, who were well disposed to all people, and hoped that God would reward them for all their good works in the life to come. Pachomius' heart was stirred on hearing this, and, illumined by the

> light of God, he felt a great attraction towards the Christian faith. [Life of Pachomius 4]

Those Christians made such an impression on the young Pachomius that, once he was able to leave the army (probably in 314), he resolved to become one of them. Accordingly, he had himself baptised; but, rather than living a normal civilian life, he then went off to embrace a solitary existence in the wilderness at a place called Chenoboskion, near his Theban home.

He must have realised very soon that living alone was no easy matter; that he needed a helping hand to do it successfully. Fortunately:

> He came to hear about a certain anchorite called Palaemon serving the Lord in a remote part of the desert. He sought him out in the hope of being able to live with him. He knocked on his door, asking to be let in. After a while the old man opened up to him. 'What do you want? Who are you looking for?' he asked. He was of a rather intimidating appearance because of the life of strict solitude he had been living for such a long time. 'God has sent me to you,' replied Pachomius, 'so that I may become a monk.' 'You would not be able to become a monk here. It is no light matter to entertain the idea of the chaste life of the true monk. There are many who have come in the past and have soon got wearied, strangers to the virtue of perseverance.' 'Not everybody is like that', said Pachomius, 'so I beg you, take me in; and, in the course of time, to make trial of my will and see what I shall be capable of.'

Pachomius continued to insist and, finally, he overcame the old man's resistance. He moved in with him and stayed there, sharing his austerities and obeying his every command, for some years, until … but that comes later. (See Chapter 14.)

There is nothing remarkable about Pachomius' decision to seek Christian baptism on his discharge from the army. Christianity had only recently been legalised and was now becoming fashionable; many people, no doubt for a variety of reasons, were seeking to align themselves with the new faith at that time. What is remarkable is that, having embraced Christianity, a very social religion ('Love your neighbour as yourself'), Pachomius headed for isolation and solitude. It is even more remarkable that he was one of many men and some women who were heading in the same direction. Reliable statistics are lacking, but there is no doubt that literally hundreds of people were looking for a new way of life (a solitary life), mainly in Egypt so far as we know, but in other countries too. It may be an anachronism on the part of the hagiographer to say that 'Palaemon was serving the Lord *in a remote part* of the desert' (he was writing sometime later), but there is no

reason to doubt Palaemon's statement that 'There are many who have come [to me] in the past', come, like Pachomius, seeking to be taught how to lead the solitary life so they could practise their faith in isolation, away from the disturbances of 'the world'. Increasing numbers of folk must have been in search of persons like Palaemon, capable of instructing them in how to live and pray alone. And not by any means of all of them 'soon got weary' or turned out to be 'strangers to the virtue of perseverance'. On the contrary, many persevered until the day when each one could set up his/her own solitary dwelling (or cell) in some remote spot where, in due course, like Palaemon, he/she might be sought out by others seeking to learn the theory and practice of living a solitary life for the glory of God. The most successful ones we know nothing of, for they were wholly successful in the quest for solitude. Constantly in search of greater solitude, such people penetrated further and further into the wilderness.

Those are the people whom we call the Desert Fathers. They were the pioneers of Christian monasticism (or monachism), the first Christian monks. The term *monk* must not under any circumstances be taken at anything like its modern face value. Monk, monasticism and monachism ('living alone') all derive from the Greek word *monos*, meaning alone, single. In Syriac there is only one word, *īḥīdāyā*, for both *monk* and *solitary* – and this was entirely appropriate for the Desert Fathers. It is important to stress this because the early history of monachism was at first largely dictated by the quest for solitude. Monasticism did rather quickly become a matter of 'brothers dwelling together in unity' [Ps 132/133.1] and eventually of addressing 'the world' (the Friars), but, in the beginning, it was not so. The first monks were hermits (from *eremos*, desert) and anchorites (from *anachorein*, to withdraw or retreat from the world of folk and activity). They were monks in that they dwelt *alone* in almost total isolation from the world and from each other. Even today it is tacitly assumed that the ultimate goal of the monk is to be alone. After the coenobites, 'the second type [of monks] is that of anchorites or hermits … Well trained among a band of brothers for single combat in the desert … they are ready, with God's help, to fight the vices of body and mind with hand and arm alone' [*Rule of St Benedict* 1.3–5].

Motivation

One may well ask: why did so many 'renounce the world' in that era that began with the cessation of persecution and ended with the explosion of Islam? What provoked the phenomenal rise of Christian monachism

that saw considerable numbers of men and some women abandoning 'the world' for the fastnesses of, first, the Egyptian, then of the Palestinian, the Syrian and other deserts? Before he died in 373, Athanasius of Alexandria could write: 'The desert became a city of monks who, having abandoned their own, reproduced the heavenly way of life', 'and now the desert is filled with monks' [*VA* 14.7, 41.4, cf. 8.2].

What then motivated so many people to abandon home and family for a solitary life of penury? It is surely not insignificant that the rise of monachism more or less coincided with the legalisation of Christianity in the Roman Empire. That would have led to a large increase in the number of people openly professing the Christian faith. Most of the neophytes would have remained in their homes with their families and continued to enjoy such comforts as were at their disposal. Why then was a significant minority among them motivated to abandon all that, in order to embrace a life of spiritual discipline?

We have a very precise answer to this question in Antony's case. Visiting the local church shortly after his parents' death, he was already thinking about how the Apostles abandoned their normal way of life to follow Jesus and how the early Christians sold their goods and laid the proceeds at the Apostles' feet to feed the poor [Mt 4.20, 19.27; Acts 4.34–35]. Then he heard the Gospel being read where Jesus tells a rich man, 'If you want to be perfect, go, sell all you have and give to the poor then come and follow me' [Mt 19.21] and 'Take no thought for the morrow' etc. [Mt 6.34; *VA* 2, 3]. John Cassian says that Lk 24.26, 'Except a man hate …' etc. was also read in his hearing [*Conf* 3.4.2], but there is nothing of this in *VA*. Antony was so inspired by what he is said to have heard that he promptly divested himself of all his possessions (including his home) and espoused the solitary life: ostensibly because he 'would be perfect'.

At least that is what Athanasius says, providing a very appropriate explanation of Antony's renunciation of 'the world', but it is not impossible that Athanasius fitted the Scripture to the event. For never again (at least in the early days) do we read of those words of Jesus inspiring a person to embrace the monastic life. In fact, those words hardly ever recur in the apothegms and they are never again said to occasion a vocation [cf. 46 / 14.32; 392 / 6.6; 566 / 15.117, etc.]. Babylas the actor is said to have been prompted to renounce the world by hearing the text: 'Repent for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand' [Mt 3.2] and even that is exceptional. In fact, very rarely indeed is any spiritual reason given why a person chose to withdraw from the world. In most cases, except where there is a physical cause (such as to escape, e.g. from a persecution or a lover), it is simply

stated that this or that person took the necessary steps to isolate him- or herself from society with no reason given.

How Can I Be Saved?

There may be doubt as to *why* a person withdrew from the world: there is no doubt what he or she hoped to gain by withdrawing. This is clearly revealed in many apothegms, the majority of which are set in the form of question and answer: a clear indication of their didactic purpose. Over and over again a neophyte or a junior monk approaches an elder (i.e. senior monk, who is addressed as abba, 'father') and asks a question. The question is often no more than a simple request for 'a word': 'Say something to me', meaning: 'Give me a phrase on which I can meditate.' Sometimes a specific question is asked concerning some aspect of the monastic life, e.g. 'Why am I continually discouraged?' or 'What am I to do under this burden that oppresses me?' [92 / 21.8; Poemen 145]. But in very many cases the question asked concerns one's personal salvation: 'How can I/we be saved?' or 'What should one do to be saved?' [91 / 21.6]. Amoun of Nitria knew very well what people were coming into the desert for: 'If they were many who came there *wanting to be saved*, he would assemble the entire brotherhood' [*HME* 20.10]. But the spirit had to be willing: 'We have it within ourselves to be saved, *if we want to be*,' one elder commented [226 / 10.148, last line].

It is not always clear who asks whom [e.g. Euprepius 7 / 10.24; 91 / 11.50; Ares 1 / 14.3; 143/ 6.20], but this is by no means always the case [Antony 19 / 16.1]. Even if it is usually a relatively junior monk who poses the question, salvation is by no means a matter of concern only for juniors, nor is the question of how salvation is to be attained asked once only: it was clearly an ongoing concern in monastic circles. Three fathers (not brothers, hence senior monks) are reported to have been in the habit of visiting Antony once a year to question him concerning their 'thoughts' (*logismoi* – the other great topic of monastic discourse; see Chapter 4) and about *salvation of the soul* [Antony 27 / 17.5]. Nearly all the fourth-century fathers are said to have been asked and to have responded to the question of how one is to be saved [e.g. Ares 1 / 14.3; Macarius the Egyptian 23 / 10.47, 747, 764]. On one occasion no less a person than Poemen is said to have approached Macarius 'with many tears', begging him: 'Say a something to me: tell me how can I be saved?' [Macarius the Egyptian 25].

There are many similar passages where the question is stated as clearly as that; there are several more where the question is implied by an answer that terminates in a phrase such as '… so that our soul might be saved' or

'… and thus you will be able to be saved' [Antony 33 / 3.1]. Here is one particularly striking such answer: 'If God were to take into account our inattention in prayer and psalm-singing, we could not be saved' [Theodore of Enaton 3 / 11.35]. Thus, whether explicit or implied, the question of salvation arises with remarkable frequency in the apothegms.

A very considerable amount of monastic time and effort appears to have been devoted to debating and answering the question of how one might be saved. When Antony had serious visitors, he would sit up all night long talking to them about the attainment of salvation [*HL* 21, 8–9]. When Macarius the Egyptian visited him, they would work away braiding rope out of palm-fronds, all the time 'speaking of what is advantageous to the soul' [Macarius the Egyptian 4 / 7.14]. This is hardly surprising, for Antony was of the opinion that 'The monk should think of *nothing other* than the salvation of his soul' [630]. One elder, when asked to explain the meaning of 'every careless word' [Mt 12.36], said: 'Every word uttered on a material subject is chatter and only that which is said concerning the salvation of the soul is not chatter' [555]. Another monk says in his prayer: 'Lord … you have brought me into the *order of this salvation*. Save me Lord for "I am thy servant and the son of thy handmaiden" as you will' [403 / 11.116, 12.28, cit. Ps 115.7 / 116.16]. Even the demons knew of the monks' concern with the question of salvation for, on one occasion, a demon disguised as a monk said, as he was setting out to visit a brother: 'I shall go to that man of God and discuss with him what might be conducive to the salvation of our soul' [7.31]. In that way he hoped to persuade the brother that he was a monk and no demon.

From one point of view the monks' concern about how they were to be saved is only what might be expected of those who were taking their religion seriously. Most people would agree that, in the Christian tradition, the goal for which the faithful aim, worldling and monastic alike – indeed the whole object of the Christian endeavour – is precisely to attain salvation. It is the will of God that 'all should be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth' [1 Tim 2.4] and it was to make salvation accessible for all that the Incarnation took place: 'Christ Jesus came into the world *to save sinners*' [1 Tim 1.15]. 'It was for you, O man, that Christ was born; it was for this that the Son of God came: that you might be saved' [81]. Monks, in common with all Christians, were right to be concerned about their eternal salvation.

Saved from What?

There are some clear indications that a monk was *not* enquiring directly about his eternal salvation when he posed the question: 'What shall I do

to be saved?' – indications that he might well have had something else in mind. For example, when the jailor at Philippi discovered that Paul and Silas had not (as he feared) escaped, he asked them: 'Sirs, what must I do to be saved?' [Acts 16.30] – substantially the same question that is asked (sometimes *verbatim*) over and over again in the apothegms. The answer given by Paul and Silas is formal: 'Believe in the Lord Jesus and you shall be saved, you and yours' [Acts 16.31]. Yet, for all its clarity and precision, *not once* is that answer cited (or even obliquely referred to) when a question similar to the jailor's is answered in the apothegms. Scriptural quotations abound, but this is *never* one of them.

Second, although the expressions 'to be saved' and 'to have eternal life' are used more or less synonymously in the Christian Scriptures, the second of these terms is almost completely unknown in the apothegms [595 / 16.18 is a rare exception].

Third, it has to be borne in mind that many of the people asking the question 'How can I be saved?' had already renounced the world. In other words, they had already surmounted the obstacle that proved too much for the young man who approached Christ asking what he must do to inherit eternal life [Mt 19.16–22; Mk 10.17–22; Lk 18.18–23]. The surrender of one's earthly goods and connections, one's home and family, is not a sacrifice that is made (other than in very odd circumstances) without a considerable degree of commitment to the one who requires it. For this reason, it can be reasonably concluded that most of those asking what they could do to be saved already had their feet firmly on the golden ladder to the heavenly city.

Fourth, the monk is sometimes defined as 'one who is concerning himself with his own salvation' [*HL* 23 / 5.54 (*bis*); 135 / 3.38; 528 / 15.131; 70 / 10.178]. Indeed, there are many passages where the terms 'saving one's soul' and 'living the ascetic life' are used as though they were synonymous and interchangeable, as in some nineteenth-century Russian novels,[1] e.g. 'As he was rushing off to the city, a brother asked an elder for a prayer. The elder said to him: "Do not be in a hurry to get to the city, but rather to flee from the city *and be saved*." ' The robbers whom Abba Moses arrests embrace the monastic life with the words: 'Why should we reject salvation?' ' "What a fine thing is the order of monks" [one monk] said and,

[1] The verb used, e.g., in Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov* 1.2, 1.4, 6 (twice), 8, 1.3, 7, 11, 2.6.2(c), etc. is спасаться, *lit.* 'to save oneself', always with a monastic meaning; cf. the charming story of the youth who told his mother he wanted to save his soul and, eventually, shut himself away to sit working out his own salvation [135 / 3.38].

the Lord being in favour of my salvation, I went off and became a monk' [130; *HL* 19.4; 191 / 5.44]. Somewhat enigmatic is the case in which a father who prays for a prostitute to be saved is said to have succeeded, in that she proceeds to enter a monastery [Serapion 1 / 17.34]. The clearest statement is probably that which was given to a brother who asked an elder: 'How am I to be saved?' He was given a demonstration in which the elder tied himself up in his own robe [*leviton*], saying: 'This is how the monk must be: stripped of the material aspects of this world and crucified in warfare [with the demons]' [143 / 6.20], which, being interpreted, is: you are to be saved by becoming one of us, namely a monk.

Yet there are plenty of stories making it very clear that espousing the monastic life by no means guarantees entry into the Kingdom of Heaven. Quite the contrary, for monks are frequently and categorically warned that their eternal salvation is by no means assured [e.g. *VA* 66; *HL* 21.16–17] and that many secular persons may well enter the eternal abode ahead of them, e.g. Abba Silvanus' warning: 'I was snatched away to the judgement and I saw many of our kind going off to punishment and many worldlings going into the Kingdom' [Silvanus 2 / 3.33; see also 489 / 20.21; cf. Antony 24 / 18.1]. Fully aware of this, one father remarked: 'It were a shame for a monk to leave all his possessions and go into exile for the sake of God, then afterwards to go to damnation' [110 / 21.30].

The Means and the End

From these considerations, it can be concluded there is no necessary connection between salvation in the usual sense of the word ('The saving of the soul; the deliverance from sin, and admission to eternal bliss, wrought for man by the atonement of Christ,' *OED*) and its apparently esoteric meaning in the dialectic of the early monks. This apparent duality of perception is addressed by John Cassian in the first of his *Conferences*, 'The goal and end of the monk.' In an attempt to state it rationally, Cassian says that everybody has what later fathers would call 'the hope of glory' [cf. Col 1.27; Eph 1.11], meaning salvation in the commonly accepted sense of the word: attainable (through faith in Christ) in the world to come. This Cassian designates the hoped-for τέλος / *finis* or end of every human life. Then he goes on to speak of the σκοπός / *destinatio*, the 'goal' which is the destiny of those who have embraced the monastic life, meaning something to be aimed at in this *present* life. Just as a farmer hoping to enjoy an abundant harvest at the end of the year (says Cassian) diligently performs all those tasks which long experience has taught him are likely

to be conducive to a good crop, in that same way must the monk apply himself to the matter of attaining salvation. This is the monk's travelling to the desired end. If this be less than clear (as Cassian sometimes is), the matter is more simply expressed in the heading of a *Gerontikon of Sinai* in which it is asserted that the contents of that book exist 'for the imitation, zeal and instruction of those who (1) wish to live correctly the heavenly [i.e. monastic] way of life and (2) desire to enter the Kingdom of Heaven'. The ultimate goal is to enter the Kingdom of Heaven; the immediate goal is, simply put, to be a successful monk: to live the monastic life correctly, neither despairing of success and returning to 'the world' nor falling into the slough of uncaring, lack of zeal and lukewarm faith.

There is an anecdote concerning Antony in the earliest extant stratum of the apothegms where it is clearly Antony's *immediate*, not his ultimate, salvation that is in question:

> Once when the holy Abba Antony was residing in the desert he was overcome by *accidie* and a cloud of black thoughts. He said to God: 'Lord, *I want to be saved* but my thoughts will not leave me alone. What am I to do in my affliction? How can I be saved?' Going outside [his cell] a little way Antony saw somebody similar to himself sitting working, then standing up to pray, sitting down again to work at rope-making, then standing to pray once more. It was an angel of the Lord sent to correct Antony and to encourage him. He heard the angel saying: 'Act like this and you shall be saved.' He was greatly cheered and encouraged on hearing this and by doing [as he was told] he was saved. [Antony 1 / 7.1]

Other Meanings of 'Saved'

Although Antony asks more or less the same question as the jailor at Philippi, he is not using the same frame of reference. But then neither are the verb *to save* and its cognates always used in the jailor's sense throughout the Scriptures. In fact, often (indeed always in the Old Testament) they have a meaning *other* than the *OED* definition [see above]. Such words occur with greater frequency in Psalms than in any other book of the canon and, coincidentally, Psalms is the second most frequently cited book (after the First Gospel) in the apothegmatic literature. This is hardly surprising because, whereas some monks knew amazingly large tracts of Scripture by heart [e.g. 150 / 4.70; 222 / 10.135], even more could recite the entire Psalter, while every monk would know at least some of the Psalms, e.g. the twelve psalms said each morning and the twelve at sundown. Indeed, it was in the words of the Psalmist that the monk usually prayed.

This means that the verb *to save* and its cognates were frequently on his lips and in his mind.

Such words are used in a variety of ways in Psalms, but the most frequently occurring meaning is that of rescue from enemies (physical or spiritual) which oppress the Psalmist, obvious examples being: 'Save me O God for the waters are come in, even unto my soul' and 'Deliver me from the wicked doers and save me from the bloodthirsty men' [Ps 68/69.1; 58/59.2]. The Desert Fathers believed themselves to be assailed by a host of enemies, external (demons) and internal (temptations), which sought to drive them from their chosen path and way of life and to distance them from 'the God of our salvation'. The words of the Psalmist were appropriate for the anchorite in many ways that are not always easy to appreciate today. Indeed, the best way to gain an understanding of the monks' mentality is to study their prayer book: the Psalter.

In the New Testament too (especially in the Gospels), the verb *to save* is used not always in the sense of conferring eternal life, but rather to mean 'making whole', e.g. the many times when Christ, having accomplished a healing, says to the patient: 'Your faith has made you whole / has saved you' [Mt 9.22, etc.]. Jairus asks Jesus to lay hands on his daughter 'so she may be saved and live' [Mk 5.23]. When, in the passage cited above, Antony says he wants to be saved, he is using the word in both senses, the Psalmist's and the Evangelist's. He is asking both to be *rescued from* and to be *cured of* the affliction of *accidie*. In this way, he prays to be delivered from the wreck of his monastic endeavour that the attack of *accidie* might well entail if it continued too long: cf. the apothegm in which a monk thanks God for having prevented him from an irrevocable fall [52].

Antony's case is unusual in that it is one of only two occasions (in the extant literature) on which the question 'How am I to be saved?' is addressed directly to the Deity. In the other case it is not by a monk, but by a worldling that the question is asked, or rather by whom a prayer is uttered in which the question is implied. While the future Abba Arsenius [354–445; see *ODB* 187–188] was still serving as a senior minister in the government of the Emperor Theodosius I (possibly as tutor to Arcadius and Honorius), he prayed: 'Lord, lead me in such a way that I might be saved.' The reply was explicit: 'Flee from men and you shall be saved' [Arsenius 1 / 2.3], whereupon he left all and became a distinguished monk with John Colobus at Scêtê. What was Arsenius praying to be saved *from*? Presumably not from the wrath to come, since he was a man of faith prepared to take the ultimate step of renunciation. Saved, then, presumably, from 'the world' [1 Jn 2.15–17, 4.4–5, etc.], saved from secular society