Noxious 'thoughts' 4 – Sadness/despondency

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'Why are you cast down, O my soul; why so disquieted within me?'

You may recall, back in Lent, that our reflections focussed on words that open Mark's gospel – on Jesus' call to *repent*, to change our mind (way of thinking) and believe the good news'. We pondered *what* in our thinking needed changing. And began to explore that drawing on insights from the fourth century desert monk Evagrius Ponticus – a wise diagnostician of the soul. During his years of prayer and reflection, Evagrius discerned eight noxious 'thoughts' (*logismoi*) that disturb and poison our lives; eight neurotic patterns or habits of thinking that alienate us from ourselves, from each other, from creation, and from God. In Lent, I spoke about three of these (gluttony, lust and greed), and over the next month, I plan to touch on three more, three that (to my mind) have a particularly wintery feel – sadness, anger, and stagnation. Today, it's the thought of sadness.

'O my soul, why are you cast down, why so disquieted within me?' It's an experience that many relate to, but does it surprise you that Evagrius lists sadness as a sin? Does it seem harsh? Surely everyone is sad from time to time, and rightly so, for we all get hurt, all experience loss. Wouldn't it be abnormal never to be sad? 'Grief is a life issue that strikes at the very heart of being human', it said in one article I read (Tian Dayton, Huffington Post, *The Importance of Mourning Loss*), 'while we live in a body, pair and procreate we will love and we will lose'. The effect of such loss can be shocking and 'it needs a process of mourning or grieving to come to terms with'. 'When loss is not accompanied with some sort of process that allows us to both feel and express our feelings of despair, vulnerability, disorientation …, those emotions can go underground. But out of sight is not out of mind, they will

come back to haunt us if we do not somehow find a way to accommodate and accept the loss that has taken place.' Grief is a natural and necessary response to certain life events and it's unhealthy to repress it. So how could Evagrius speak of sadness as sin? Did he get it wrong?

Well, there's a need for nuance in this conversation. The word Evagrius used for sadness was *lupe,* and he had in mind, particularly, the temptation to indulge or wallow in despondency. To get a better sense, think of 'nostalgia' or 'bitter regret', Angela Tilby writes, the kind of sadness fuelled especially by a distorted *way of thinking* about the past.

Take the monk's own life, as an example. When Evagrius chose the solitary life of a monastic and entered the desert, he embraced a state of permanent loss – loss of family, of possessions and material comfort, loss of the possibility of worldly advancement. He walked away from these things, but did the thought of what life once was and could have been fully leave *him*?? Did a certain wistfulness *play on his mind* when life in the desert seemed bland? It must have to a degree, for he was clearly alert to this pattern, and the feelings that go with it. If nothing else, he saw it in other monks. 'Sadness tends to come up at times because of the deprivation of one's desires', he wrote (*The Praktikos*), and 'it takes the following form. Certain thoughts first drive the soul to the memory of house and parents, or else to that of one's former life. Now when these thoughts find that the soul offers no resistance but rather follows after them and pours itself out in pleasures that are still only mental in nature, they then seize her and drench her in sadness'.

So, the mechanism works like this. You're already feeling a bit flat, a bit 'blah', and so you start thinking about better days, back when life seemed easier, free-er, happier. The memories of the past are inevitably gilded, tinted a nice shade of rose, and you get ever more miserable, melancholic, over

what's no more. But in the process, the full truth of the past disappears, and what's left is the morbid indulgence of loss. So, says Evagrius, 'the miserable soul is now shrivelled up in her humiliation to the degree that she poured herself out on these thoughts.'

Now, Evagrius was writing to monks in a different era, but we too can pine nostalgically for a life that is no longer. The end is misery, Angela Tilby writes (p 146); the soul is 'diminished, shrivelled and humiliated by its loving but unwise recollection of the past', and this, I think, is what Evagrius is warning about – the dangers of getting trapped on the treadmill of maudlin reminiscence which takes us away from living now (including, perhaps, from doing the real work of grieving), as well as appreciating what is and still possible in the present.

Think of the misery caused to God's people in the wilderness when they recall their life in Egypt. For hundreds of years, they pleaded for freedom from their oppression at the hand of Pharaoh. God heard their cry and led them out – through sea and desert. But out in the wilderness, when life got difficult, they whined nostalgically and bitterly: 'If only we'd died by the LORD's hand in Egypt!' they moan. '*There we sat around pots of meat and ate all the food we wanted, but you have brought us out into this desert to starve this entire assembly to death*' (Exodus 16.3). Like I said, the memories are gilded. It wasn't the hardship or oppression they called to mind; it was the food!! '*We remember the fish we used to eat in Egypt for nothing, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions and the garlic,* [it sounds like a French village market] *but now our strength is dried up, and there's nothing at all [nothing] but this manna to look at'* (Numbers 11.15). It's a classic case of idealising the past. It's a pattern we too can fall into, (and perhaps especially as we get older; *and* in winter, when it's misty, cold and dark, and seemingly

unchanging). This way of thinking lies at the root of Evagrius' thought of 'sadness'. It's a distortion, he maintains, a way of thinking that disconnects us from reality. It's toxic, alienating.

There's a social dimension to this as well. 'Nostalgia is at the roots of discontent, which can spread out from personal misery to political fascism and terrorism', Angela Tilby writes, and it seems to me that we are seeing this nostalgia, which feeds misery and grievance, being exploited for political gain in the present era. Where there is a grievance, it is all too easy to use highly selective memories to build identities based on opposition and hatred. Remember the good old days, and then 'they' came and took our jobs, changed our culture, disrupted our 'way of life'. It's a disturbing trend, and it ends inevitably in violence. So, this is a social issue as well as a personal one.

Well, I wonder if you recognise this tendency – gilding the past, groaning about the present? Is it something you struggle with?

Just to be clear, I want to say again that there is a need and a place for sadness, for naming and grieving loss, a process that takes courage and time. *This* is important if we are to live well amidst the tumult of life's chances and changes. But as Katherine May points out in her book, 'Wintering', there are 'self-punishing' ways to be sad, and 'self-salving' ways to be sad. She writes of the importance of 'the active acceptance of sadness', of the practice of 'allowing ourselves to feel it as a need', for in so doing, we heal, and move forward. This is true, and the bible is full of encouragement to do this – to name, to feel, to lament our losses. Two thirds of the Psalms, the prayer book of the people, are songs of lament. There's the whole of Lamentations, there's Jeremiah, Job and plenty more. Friends, there *is* a place in our lives for the whole-hearted expression of grief. It is necessary, vital, and I would say faithful, to honour our sadness for the people and experiences of life that we

have loved and lost. It's important not to repress this pain, as so many of us were taught. St Irenaeus said that what we do not take into ourselves and transform, is not healed – and this includes our sadness. It's important to undergo and incorporate it.

At the same time, there's a self-punishing, self-indulgent way of thinking about these things that makes us miserable and chronically negative, that gnaws at the heart like a moth eating holes in a jumper (Cassian), that sucks the oxygen out of life, and ultimately honours nothing. This is thought of sadness from which we're called to repent. And if only we will let go of, turn from this habit of mind, we will find ourselves freer to honour and celebrate the loves and losses of the past, and live more fully and faithfully in the present.

While I was working on this reflection last week, a friend sent a poem by Jeff Foster (from Steve Biddulph's book, *Fully Human*) which touched poignantly on this theme.

You will lose everything.
Your money, your power, your fame, your success, perhaps even your memories.
Your looks will go.
Loved ones will die.
Your body will eventually fall apart.
Everything that seems permanent is impermanent and will be smashed.
Experience will gradually, or not so gradually, strip away everything that it can strip away.
Waking up means facing this reality with open eyes and no longer turning away.

But right now, we stand on sacred and holy ground, for that which will be lost <u>has</u> not yet been lost, and realising this is the key to unspeakable joy.
Whoever or whatever is in your life right now has not yet been taken away from you.
This may sound trivial, obvious, like nothing, but really knowing it is the key to everything, the why and how and wherefore of existence.
Impermanence has already rendered everything and everyone around you so deeply holy and significant and worthy of your heartbreaking gratitude.

Loss has already transfigured your life into an altar.

Jeff Foster

References

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