

## St. Paul the Hermit

The Episcopal Church of St. Paul in the Desert was named for Saint Paul the Hermit (228-341 A.D.), who was the first of the Desert Fathers. The only recorded information on his life and religious influence is from the original Latin account written by Saint Jerome in 375. Helen Waddell updated and amplified the story of the whole movement of the desert monks in a book, *The Desert Fathers*, first published in 1936.

Saint Paul, an early Christian, was born of wealthy parents in the ancient city of Thebes in Egypt. He had one sister, a few years his senior. Paul was well-versed in Greek and Latin, and he was gifted with a gentle spirit and was always devout. When he was the age of 16, both his parents died, leaving him great wealth. His sister was already married and her husband coveted Paul's wealth. Because of the persecutions conducted by the Emperors Decius and Valerius around 250 A.D., Paul fled the city to a remote hiding place. He knew his envious brother-in-law was trying to betray him, so he went deeper into the mountains.

There he found a large cave that became his permanent habitation, where he spent the rest of his life. There was an inner court that was shaded by an ancient and large palm tree and also a spring-fed stream of clear water. Paul slept on the ground, drank only water from the spring and his clothing he wove from fronds of the palm tree. Each day a raven brought him half a loaf of bread, which he acknowledged as a gift from God, a gift which continued throughout his life.

By the time Saint Paul reached the age of 113 years, Saint Antony, heading a community of monks in another part of the desert, was 90 years of age. Saint Antony claimed to have a vision at this time of Paul's nearness and immediately set out to visit him, travelling by foot, a journey of at least three days. Antony did not know where Paul was located but Saint Jerome stated that he met a centaur who showed him the way. Saint Antony found Saint Paul weak of limb and with shaggy white hair. They embraced and prayed. A raven flew in with a whole loaf of bread. When this occurred Paul said, "God has sent us our dinner." Each day for the previous 60 years the raven had brought him but half a loaf. They spent the night in prayer and meditation.

Saint Paul asked Saint Antony to return to the monastery and bring back a robe that had been the gift of Athanasius, the Great, an early Bishop, for he wished his body to be wrapped in this for burial. Saint Antony could not speak, but weeping, he saw Christ in Saint Paul and worshipped God in Saint Paul's heart. He set out on this mission, which was a three-day walk each way. On the third day of his return journey with the robe, he had a vision of a host of angels with companies of prophets and apostles and amid these was Saint Paul climbing the steps of heaven. He knew this meant that Saint Paul had died, and weeping, he hastened to reach the cave. There he found Saint Paul's lifeless body, kneeling in prayer, his arms outstretched and his face lifted to heaven. He wrapped the body in the robe Saint Paul had

requested and carried it outside, chanting the hymns and psalms of Christian tradition. He had no means of digging a grave and was really too weak for this physical effort.

Two lions came running across the desert with their manes flying. They knelt by the body of Saint Paul and roared lamentations. Then they went off and with their paws dug a grave. They then came to Saint Antony for his blessing. Saint Antony prayed: "Lord, without whom no leaf lights from the tree; nor a single sparrow falls upon the ground, give unto these even as thou knowest." The lions left and Antony laid Paul in the grave. As a memento, Antony took Paul's tunic woven from palms—and on the feast days of Easter and Pentecost, he always wore it.

Saint Paul and Saint Antony were the forerunners of a great religious movement of Christian men seeking a holy life in the desert. Though they contributed little to the philosophy of religion, they left much by their examples of kindness, selflessness, and humility.

It is not by some random process that a parish church is named for a particular saint. Although there are obvious correlations between Saint Paul the Hermit's environment and this desert community of Palm Springs—the beautiful palms, crystal springs, and the image of a desert oasis—they are superficial. Saint Paul the Hermit possessed certain spiritual qualities that certainly cry out to modern man.

Saint Paul left a life of gentility in order to defend his faith and pursue a ministry of meditation and waiting upon the Lord. We, no less than he, live in a wasteland unless God blesses our lives and endeavors. This parish church of Saint Paul in the Desert is set apart to be an oasis of God's grace in the midst of modern living. As Saint Paul shared his home and faith with Antony, we of this parish welcome resident and visitor alike. All that is fashionable may pass away, but the prayers of the devout, the daily witness of faithful people, and the sincerity of our worship will make firm our foundation.