



## St Isaac the Syrian (St Isaac of Nineveh)

*A little endurance in the face of small matters will hold back danger when serious ones come ...*

St Isaac the Syrian

St Isaac sought to find and teach the way to God through a Christian life in which worship, the sacraments and prayer, transform and uplift the whole person: body, heart and soul. This saint truly exemplifies the Syrian emphasis on including the body in the process of sanctification, so that matter is not disdained, but is lifted to the divine.

Although he was a religious solitary, writing for religious hermits, he was full of wisdom and common sense: e.g. the proverb above about the importance of watching the small steps which make up our journey.

The Maronite Synaxarion notes that the feast of St Isaac the Syrian is celebrated, in our Church, on 23 August, and states: "Saint Isaac was born (about 613) in the region of Qatar, on the Persian Gulf. In his time, the seventh century, Qatar was an important Christian centre, and gave the Church a number of distinguished writers, many of whom were mystics. Isaac adopted the monastic life, but was chosen by Patriarch George I to be bishop of Nineveh (today Mosul), in Mesopotamia, in the year 676. But after five months was (somehow) obliged to resign his See, and removed to Khuzistan, in Jabal Mattuth, and then to the nearby monastery of Rabban Sabour." It is not known when he died, but it was, perhaps, around 700. In some of the Orthodox Churches, his feast is celebrated on 28 January, with that of St Ephrem.

### Body, Heart and Mind

"Every prayer over which the body (*fagro*) does not share the toil, and over which the heart (*lebo*) does not feel suffering, you should consider to be

stillborn (*yaHTo*)." St Isaac means that if our prayer is purely intellectual, passing through the mind but making no impact on our feeling of ourselves and our hearts, it is without the possibility of progress in the spiritual life. That is why he describes it as being "still-born," it had potential but that potential will not lead anywhere. St Isaac understood that the mind may see a need for change, and may direct it, but the power to change comes from the body and the heart.

In another place, St Isaac observes that it is crucial to take a good reverent posture of the body when praying: a person's posture tells us much about their state and their attitude. St Isaac advises us to stand, to raise one's arms, or to even lie prostrate on the ground in order to prepare the body for prayer. It is not that God needs us to take humble and beseeching positions: rather, it is we who benefit from them. The point is to take a posture which is a sign of good intention and where we can best hold our attention: this is very difficult indeed when lying down on our backs, or hunched up.

St Isaac here bases himself on two facts: the Incarnation of the Lord as a human being, and the fact that we are still in our bodies. The Lord did not despise the human body – neither should we. We are not disembodied spirits, and so we should not pretend that "prayer of the heart suffices by itself ..." (Sebastian Brock, *The Syriac Fathers on Prayer and the Spiritual Life*, 276). It is true that what is born of the flesh is flesh and what is born of the spirit is spirit, as the Lord said (John 3:6). St Isaac's point is that the spirit can infuse the body, lift and transform it.

### The Syriac Approach to the Divine

It is no surprise to anyone acquainted with Syriac thought that St Isaac's approach to God is typological, that is only the divine world is true and real; this world is an image of the divine. We can move towards God because He appears to us as an image, a "true icon of the world beyond" (*yiqoneh šariro d.3olmo dal.hal*) (see Mary Hansbury, *Isaac the Syrian's Spiritual Works*, 8), and prayer is the best way of bringing the mind to "fellowship" (*neštawtaf*, from the same root as the word for Eucharistic Communion).

A premium is placed on work, stillness and meditation. There is no contradiction here, for if one can work with interior stillness, there is pure action, and we can then be busy in the world while maintaining purity of intention. The word used for "meditation" is often *renyo*, "thinking, paying attention", a thought which is a quiet gazing upon pure reality, without illusion. Another word for meditation is *hergo* (to let the mind dwell on God's plan for salvation, from the creation through to the Second Coming).

The cleansing of our thought and our seeing begins, says St Isaac, with a sense of wonder, *tehro*, in Syriac. What is wonder? In the Syriac tradition, it is not just seeing something as if for the first time, and with an emotion of surprise, it is also *the emotion of joy or ecstasy* which comes with that sight. In the solitary tradition, wonder is the divine energy which transforms our sight of the world and allows us to see that the miraculous is the real. Wonder takes us to the mystery behind the universe, and to the divine essence, and by lifting our spirits even improves our ordinary lives (Hansbury, 14-16).

By conforming our earthly life to the divine, we use the higher as a pattern for the lower; and so the body changes from being a servant of carnal and material intention to becoming a vessel of the divine. St Isaac writes: "By stillness of the body and ceasing from this world, solitaries imagine the true stillness and the withdrawal from nature which will occur at the end of the corporeal world. By means of the mind, they are united with the world of the spirit. By means of meditation they are involved in the expanse above. Thus, symbolically,

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they remain continually in the future reality" (Hansbury, 18-20).

There is an issue with Hansbury's translation here: the word which she has rendered as "symbolically" is no such thing – it is *dab.Tuf.so*, meaning "according to the type", or "the archetype". What St Isaac is saying is that *when we begin to see with the eyes of the heart that the earth is modelled on the archetype of heaven, then by looking to that eternal reality we share in it.*

But for the world to more truly reflect the divine model on which it has been created, we must cleanse it of what is evil and build up what is good: this is our labour, our work.

External order is therefore central to the holy life, since: "For thoughts to be at peace, it is necessary to show great care also for exterior things ... neglect (and) disorderliness of the body can stir up very vicious struggles" (Hansbury, 26). In keeping with the understanding of the significance of the Incarnation of the divine in the human, the lower must be put in order so that it can receive the divine. The human must be respected on its level, and not for its own sake, but for that of God who made and makes use of us and our bodies.

When St Isaac speaks of disciplining and mortifying the body, as he so often does, he does not mean to do so with some stern attitude of punishing the body for being flesh. He means, of course, not to identify with the body, not to worship it. For example, physical health is good, it is a great advantage to be physically healthy

when seeking spiritual, intellectual and emotional health: then, when they have been achieved, at least to some degree, one can withstand illness, even severe suffering, because one is now balanced in a higher state. If I seek physical health for the sake of my spiritual health, and never confuse one for the other, I shall walk safely. But if I start to pride myself on my appearance, my clear skin, or my physique, I am bowing before an idol.

One last thought from St Isaac: **Love is sweeter than life; but even sweeter than honey and a honeycomb is an insight concerning God out of which love is born.**

*This was written by a Maronite priest. Of your mercy, please pray for those souls in Purgatory who have no one else to pray for them, and also pray for that priest.*