

A River Through the Desert

Week 1 The Desert

1 Reflection

The desert has profound significance in the Christian life. We are most readily drawn to think about the desert because of Jesus's temptations there which mark the beginning of his public ministry. But that significant moment evokes the much earlier foundational event of the Exodus of the Hebrew people who escaped the clutches of Pharaoh on a long journey towards the 'Promised Land'.



The desert blooming in spring

Those forty years wandering in the desert before crossing the Jordan into a new homeland, create a framework for understanding Jesus's own Moses-like role as a liberator of enslaved peoples, which in his role as God's Messiah, is to be the Saviour of all humanity.

The Hebrews wandered for forty years and Jesus endured forty days of temptation in the Judean desert before he was fully ready to serve God his Father in his role as Messiah. Historically, the desert took on great significance for the church because of the establishment of monasteries in the wildernesses of Egypt and Palestine from the fourth century. These in turn inspired the rather different monastic movements of the Medieval European church. This has left an indelible imprint on Christian life in our own times in the form of a pattern of regular daily prayer and of the study of scriptures, both of which were and still are, essential to monastic life. It is part of the purpose of the season of Lent to renew our life of prayer and thoughtful consideration of our discipleship as Christians.

Inevitably the desert can be a somewhat unappealing idea to us if we have little knowledge or experience of desert wildernesses. For Jesus then, and for those who live in the Holy Land today, the desert is just a normal feature of the landscape. I grew up living on the edge of a huge area of moorland in England, I loved then and still do when I return home now, to explore the moors. However, I was taught to respect the moor and not to underestimate its dangers. It's the same with the desert which is just ten miles from where I live now at St George's College in Jerusalem.

"Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He fasted for forty days and forty nights and afterwards he was famished." (Matthew 4:1-2).



The Judean desert

The Gospels tell us that after Jesus was baptized and received the divine affirmation (“This is my Son, the Beloved”), that he was drawn into an effort of endurance and temptation. Tradition has it that this occurred in the Judean desert between Jerusalem and the River Jordan. It is inhospitable, the climate is hot and there would have been wild and dangerous animals. But if you imagine this desert as endless miles of Saharan sand dunes, then you have the wrong image.

The picture above shows that here, the desert is rocky terrain not sandy and there are hills and ravines. Throughout this desert there are streams in the summer and rivers in the winter. There is shade, shelter and refreshment. Although the ground is arid and rocky, surprisingly, in the spring, grasses and flowers grow up as can be seen in first photo above. Despite this being desert, vegetation does grow so Jesus would not have been without the means to stave off death by thirst or starvation. But vitally this desert is a place of isolation, away from the distractions of people and the normal demands of everyday life. It is an opportunity to escape and contemplate the essence and purpose of life. The desert wilderness gave to Jesus then, as it gives to people now, the chance to strip away our preoccupations and to focus on the presence of God. It is an awe-inspiring landscape that draws our attention towards the eternal and the profound.

Part of the opportunity of Lent is to willingly allow ourselves to be taken into a metaphorical desert. It might seem to be a bleak prospect but when we know the reality of the desert, we need not be fearful of it. It is a way to detach ourselves from some of the trappings of our life which feel indispensable but actually we might find ourselves liberated to be without them.



A river flows in Wadi Qelt in spring

There are also unexpected pleasures in the desert, flowers, fruit, water, shade which are more precious because we might not have anticipated them. Likewise, time in a ‘spiritual desert’ should not simply be about what we do without, but rather what we might surprisingly find. The opportunity in Lent to find some ‘desert time’ is not simply about a time of deprivation; we can see it as a time of enrichment.

Jesus confronted the devil and resisted the temptations in his desert time, but I like to imagine that it gave to him far more than just that.

He discovered the strength to equip him for the demands which lay ahead. He benefitted from time away from the ordinary demands of everyday life and to think deeply about his calling which had just been made plain to him at the Jordan river. Likewise, the Hebrews wandered for forty years seemingly without purpose. However, they learned some vital lessons about how to serve and worship Yahweh and about their life in community whilst they were there and perhaps without that their arrival in the Promised Land would have been less fruitful.

In the Judean desert you can also be surprised to find a monastery nestled into a valley or hidden in the midst of an oasis. Monks still live here in these isolated communities. They commit themselves to a life in the desert not as a punishment but as a gift. These monasteries are not simply archaic remnants of a former time, they stand as a physical reminder to us that we are all called to a life of prayer and contemplation.

Alan Jones, sometime Dean of Grace Cathedral, San Francisco, wrote a wonderful book entitled *Soul Making; The Desert Way of Spirituality*. In it he said, "The desert is a place of the encounter with death. It is also the place where we know ourselves to be truly free. We do not go into the desert to wall up our heart. We go there in order to give it away to God and to the world."



St George Choziba Monastery in Wadi Qelt

Most people cannot find a desert to spend time in during Lent but there are other types of wilderness which may be accessible, or perhaps you could find a metaphorical desert of the heart. These might prove to be fruitful places to spend time contemplating the presence of God and God's all-redeeming love. May it be a place where you find a new sense of freedom.

2 **Watch the film:** Desert at: https://youtu.be/bl99-Sj7_jY
(YouTube)

3 **Bible reading:** Matthew 4:1-11

Read the passage once or twice and spend some considering the details of the story.

4 Questions

- 1 Does the idea of time in some kind of wilderness draw you or concern you? Why?
- 2 Is there an accessible place which could serve as a 'desert' to you? What do you, or could you, gain from spending time there?
- 3 In what ways might Jesus have been changed or strengthened by his testing in the desert? Could this be true for you and if so, how?
- 4 Is there a word or phrase that resonates for you in the quote from Alan Jones' Soul Making? As you ponder this, is there an invitation from God for you?
- 5 The reflection above mentions the surprises which can be found in the desert. Have you ever been surprised by time in solitude or in an isolated place?
- 6 You might like to do a drawing, write a poem or express yourself creatively in some other way to represent what the desert means to you.

You might like to spend some time in prayer.

You might like to reflect further on this session and write down anything you want to hold on to.

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