

The Desert Experience

What makes the desert beautiful is that somewhere it hides a well.

(the author Antoine de Saint-Exupery)

A desert is a harsh and hostile place where life struggles to exist and people struggle to survive; I know because I lived in a desert region for seven years. Oases show there is always the potential for life in the desert, but otherwise it's a parched and barren wilderness that poses a constant threat to life.

Having said that, the desert (both in reality and symbol) was the birthplace of the People of God. He first led Abraham on a journey of faith and trust, leaving his homeland behind to journey in stages through the wilderness to Canaan. As the *Jerome Biblical Commentary* says: "An obscure Semite is called by God, and, through his response in faith, there begins the unfolding of God's plan which will reach its climax in the events of the Exodus and Sinai". And so, having ended up in slavery in Egypt, the events of the Exodus saw God's Chosen People under the leadership of Moses begin an epic forty-year journey, again through the wilderness, eventually arriving back in the promised land of Canaan, a journey that symbolised the renewed relationship of faith that God established with his people through the covenant he made with them on Mt Sinai. It was also out of the wilderness that John the Baptist mysteriously emerged, offering a baptism of repentance in preparation for the coming of the promised Messiah who would re-establish that covenant and call people to follow him in a renewed journey of faith.

In the early centuries of the Church, there was a new movement founded in the desert – in this case the desert of North Africa – by individuals choosing to escape the worldliness and temptations of urban life, and in some cases persecution also, and begin a spiritual quest for God in the wilderness. Among these "Desert Fathers" were the great saints Anthony, Athanasius, John Chrysostom and Augustine. The spirituality they developed became the foundation of the monastic movement – the word "monk" coming from the Greek for "solitary" or "alone". Originally the ascetic life of the hermit, it grew so much in popularity that, ironically, communities formed around these solitary individuals and monasticism was born – new branches on the Christian journey of faith.

From a spiritual point of view, what is it about the desert experience that is conducive to the discovery of God and the deepening of our faith relationship with him? "What did you go into the desert to see?" Jesus asks John the Baptist's disciples [Mt 11 v 7].

An initial answer has to do with what we have said about the desert as a wilderness, a barren empty place. To discover God, we have to empty ourselves. In prayer, especially, we have to rid ourselves of all the distractions that impinge on our communing with God. In order to listen to his voice we have to get rid of all the other voices and noises that make it difficult for us to hear. Only by creating a situation in which we can be completely alone with God can we hope to do this. That is “the desert”. Apart from prayer time, one of the best examples of this spiritual effort would be a retreat and, specifically, the thirty day Ignatian retreat.¹

I spent a year-and-a-half as a Jesuit novice and one of the first things we did in terms of our introduction to Ignatian spirituality (and as part of the process of testing our vocation) was to make the thirty-day retreat, and essential and central to that is the desert experience. For thirty days you talk to no one except God and your spiritual director. You watch no TV, listen to no radio, read no newspapers, and hear no news of the outside world. Over the course of the thirty days your director leads you through the spiritual journey of the “exercises” developed by St Ignatius.

As you might imagine it was extremely difficult to enter into that sort of isolation, but it was an important process designed to create a situation in which you could be alone with God and better able, therefore, to hear what he might be saying to you. It probably took the best part of the first week just to overcome all the usual temptations to distractions to which we are so addicted. For most of us it was the first time we hadn’t talked to anyone for a whole day, two days, a week, two weeks... Little by little you begin to fill your day with right things to do, things that made it possible to be quiet, to be alone with God, to pray and to meditate, to reflect and to listen. Most of us made it, a few didn’t. For me it was a tremendous spiritual experience that has stayed with me ever since teaching me, amongst other things that, contrary to expectations, there can be life - and growth - in “the desert”.

Part of the process of such a retreat is, in modern parlance, to “confront our demons” – which is why you are accompanied by a retreat director so there is a second set of eyes and ears to monitor each stage of the journey and each day’s experiences. In the language and imagery of the Scriptures, the desert can be a dangerous place where wild animals dwell and demons too. In the Old Testament it was seen as a fitting place to consign the offences committed against God. In Leviticus [Ch 16 v 10 & 20-22] the rite is described by which the people’s sins are placed on the head of a (scape) goat which is then driven out into the desert “for Azazel” who was thought to be, as the Jerusalem Bible

¹ Developed by St Ignatius of Loyola.

explains, “a demon living in the barren region where God does not exert his life-giving activity”.

In the gospel we hear of Our Lord’s forty days in the wilderness. Like the scapegoat, he is without sin but he was to bear the sins of the people. He enters into the wilderness (“where he was with the wild beasts” as St Marks tells us [1 v 13]) and it is there he encounters the devil and his temptations, but Jesus doesn’t weaken and emerges the victor. The lesson is a very important one for us: that we too can confront our “demons” and the devil’s temptations and be victorious over both with God’s help. Jesus has shown us that it is possible and he did it not through his divinity, but in the humanity which we share with him.

There is, of course, a parallel between Our Lord’s forty days in the wilderness and the forty days of the season of Lent which is meant to be something of a desert experience for us in which we too can confront our “demons”. The call of Lent is to a time of penance and self-denial in reparation for our sins as we prepare for Our Lord’s ultimate victory over sin and death in the events of Holy Week and Easter, a victory we can also share with him or, rather, which he shares with us. We make Lent something of a desert experience to the extent to which we reduce the comforts of life, deny ourselves the luxuries, making each day of Lent a little more “barren” than usual - the purpose being to invite God into those emptied spaces, discovering day by day throughout Lent - through prayer and other spiritual activities - more of the presence of God with us and his life in us.

In this effort things are comparatively easy for us these days, to the point that we often struggle to make Lent as meaningful a time as it should be. In the early centuries of the Church, the original two or three days of fasting was expanded to include the entire forty-days of Lent when only one meal a day was allowed and meat and fish were forbidden – not just on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday but for all forty days of Lent. I think we have to admire the efforts of Muslims² during their holy month of Ramadan when they are required to fast from food and drink (including water) from sunrise to sunset, a month and an observance intended to lead devotees through a process of spiritual cleansing – much the same as Lent is meant to be for us. And yet how we struggle in our minimal efforts at self-denial which, in the scheme of things, demand far less of us than if we had to actually fast from all but one meal every day of Lent as used to be the case.

Ultimately we have to ask ourselves why we are doing what we have elected to do during Lent and whether they are achieving their purpose? Do they help us to deny “self”, to empty ourselves desert-like, and then, with those spaces cleared, does that make it possible for us to open ourselves up more to God so

² Islam being another world religion that emerged from the desert.

allowing him to occupy the place he should have in our life? And, of course, Lent isn't just a quick-fix in preparation for Easter. Prayer, self-denial and almsgiving – which the Church especially advocates during Lent – should be a constant part of our lives as Christians. Whatever we decide to do to make Lent significant and to improve the quality of our relationship with God should surely be important to us all the time. But it's like the parable of the seeds and the weeds: it's a constant effort to keep the ground clear so the crop grows and the weeds don't. That's where the desert experience comes in.

In the desert *nothing* grows – only that which we choose to water and nurture. I used to have a photo that I took in a friend's back garden in my desert days. Like many others, they had a lush green lawn but only because they watered it and tended it regularly. When you opened the garden gate, on the other side there was nothing but sand and stones; where the grass (and the watering and nurturing) stopped, the desert immediately began.

The “desert experience” isn't about experiencing the desert, but experiencing God. Whether actually or figuratively, I wouldn't recommend the desert on a permanent basis because it can be a very hostile place and surviving its hardships is hard work. But, in the spiritual sense, every once in a while it's good to get the sand between our toes, to journey into the wilderness – even though it's a barren place where St Mark's “wild beasts” may dwell – and to confront our “demons”, even *the* demon, just to know we can... with God's help. God is in the desert. It's an open space so it's easy to find him (unless we are the ones hiding) and it's a silent place so it's easy to hear him (unless we are the ones making a noise). As Saint-Exupery said in the quote we opened with: “What makes the desert beautiful is that somewhere it hides a well”. God is that well and, finding him, we draw life-giving water from him so as to nurture the life – his life - that is within us.

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