

Lent 1 St Andrews Alexandra Park 9 March 2025

'Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness'

Since one of things that we're encouraged to do during Lent is to pay some attention to prayer I'm going to attempt to say some things about that.

How do we pray in these troubled times? – I had a lot of sympathy with a priest friend of mine who said to me in a WhatsApp the other day in response to a call to a day of prayer about something "Days of Prayer make me nervous. Lots of people must suppose that God will react to such days with a change in divine policy, like a government responding to heavy

lobbying. Or a vending machine coughing up the goods when enough coins are slotted in".

Prayer very obviously doesn't work like that...so how might we pray in these challenging times? I think that the wilderness has a lot to offer here – and it's to the wilderness, to the desert with Jesus Christ that I invite you to journey this Lent.

The wilderness looms large in the history of the people of Israel – in the desert, in that barren, unpredictable and surprising place the people of God learnt the lesson and privilege of dependence on God. After the Exodus it was in the desert that Moses struggled with the Israelite people – it was where

they moaned and complained - it was where they were given the Law.

After his success against the prophets of Baal Elijah journeyed for 40 days in the desert – and it was in a cave that God spoke to him – not in noise, earthquake or thunder – but in a still small voice.

John the Baptist received his message in the desert – and then of course, Jesus himself prepares for his ministry with 40 days and nights in the desert – and throughout his ministry Luke in particular tells us that Jesus sought solitude in deserts and lonely places and instructed his disciples to do the same.

A little later on in Christian history it was in the desert that the monastic way of life began. Once Christianity became a socially acceptable religion, and particularly under Emperor Constantine in the 4th century, it can be argued that Christianity in many places gradually became rather flabby through its compromises with the state – and it was a dash to the desert that saw monasticism emerge as a protest against an easy acquiescence with the world. In the desert and at the margins of society these men and women sought God – a solitary way of life that has puzzled people down the ages. Some of them were distinctly odd – not least St Simon Stylites who spent many years sat on the top of a pillar. But they were, and remain, a challenge in what they say.

Throughout Christian spiritual writing the desert is a place of great importance. We might not literally go into a physical desert, but the *solitude* of the desert is possible – even *vital* in a world where the spiritual life of the Church is possibly going through one of its flabbier moments.

The wilderness, the desert (the Greek *eremos* can be translated either way) is initially a negative encounter – it's the place where illusions are smashed, the place of unmasking and facing one's true self – it's therefore a place of pain and upheaval. It's also the place of discovering that central solitude which exists at the core of each of us. If we want greater depth in our Christian lives we can't ignore the desert – we can't ignore the solitary dimension.

But much as we sometimes yearn for a deeper spiritual life, we can shy away from the necessary solitude.

There's a story of a priest who had been working 14 hours a day and was suffering from emotional and spiritual exhaustion who went to see a famous psychologist. The psychologist told the man that he should work for 8 hours a day, then go home and spend the evening on his own in his study for at least an hour. The priest agreed to follow the advice precisely. He worked 8 hours, then went home to his study - there he played some Chopin, read a novel by Herman Hesse. The following day he read some Thomas Mann and played Mozart. After a week he

returned to Jung complaining that he felt very little better. "But you don't understand," the psychologist replied having heard what he'd been up to, "I didn't want you to spend time with Hesse, Mann, Chopin and Mozart – I wanted you to be alone with yourself." The priest recoiled in horror, "Oh but I couldn't possibly do that." "But that," said the psychologist, "is the very self that you're inflicting on others for 14 hours a day."

In the solitude before God we have the important journey to make of knowing and loving ourselves.

Solitude before God is also about emptying – so much of our life is about filling time with rushing around –with doing, doing, doing –so much of our

prayer can be about speaking, speaking, speaking – when silence comes we can easily shy away from it – but the gift of silence before God is given to be welcomed and entered into. In the silence we listen to sounds deeper than words – in the silence we become aware of the desert – in the silence and the desert things of less importance are stripped away.

A Jewish writer – Simone Weill said that the solitude of the desert offers "the clearest and most merciless light in this world for seeing things as they really are."

I've always been fascinated by the early 20th century hermit Charles de Foucauld. Amongst other things, he's an interesting study in evangelism because he set up a religious order, and wrote a Rule of Life –

though no one ever joined him in the Saharan village in which he lived – he lived among the local people and was enormously respected, though he sought no converts. His death was the result of a local religious war of which he was no part. It was only after his death that converts appeared and some 20 years after his death an order started up built on his Rule of Life – and it's now a flourishing order of men and women.

Charles de Foucauld wrote some words from the desert that never fail to touch me very deeply – he wrote this:

If there is no inner life, however great may be the zeal, the high intention, the hard work, no fruit will come forth: it is like a spring that would give out sanctity to others but cannot,

having none to give; one can only give that which one has. It is in solitude, in that lonely life alone with God, in profound recollection of soul, in forgetfulness of all created things, that God gives himself to the soul that thus gives itself whole and entire to him.

That's why the desert and solitude are so important, and perhaps especially so now in an activist church and society that is in danger of losing sight of the need to wait in silence upon God. It's only out of the silence and the waiting in the drought of the desert that the authentic voice of God can properly be spoken and heard. It is in the silence of the desert that we can possibly for just a moment just be with the pain and the anguish and the struggle of the horror of our world.

To take the first step into the wilderness, into the desert we simply need to stop – sit down and be still – be still with Jesus who has gone there before us and is with us. 'Be still and know that I am God' as the psalmist puts it. It really is as simpleand perhaps as difficult as that. In a world that has gone mad around us there may be nothing more important for us to do.

It is there that we might encounter the one and only living God who is Fr Sn and HS to whom be honour and glory now and for ever. Amen.