

A Reflection from Revd Ali for the First Sunday of Lent ~ 21st February 2021

Today is the first Sunday of Lent. In our Gospel reading, Mark breathlessly takes us through Jesus' baptism. Then his time alone in the wilderness before starting his earthly ministry, by proclaiming the Good News that the kingdom of God had come near.

The church has given us this time of Lent to try and capture something of Jesus' desert experience. A time for us all to consciously take time out from our normal routines and spend some quality time with God. Fortunately, we aren't asked to leave our homes and families to spend that time in isolation in a hostile environment. But, with the pandemic and the current national lockdown, some of us will have felt that perhaps we have had an extended Lenten season already. So maybe this year, it is important to have a 'gentle' Lent.

When I think about Jesus' time in the desert, I think of how I share this story using the technique of Godly Play. To tell the story I use my 'desert bag', a large piece of fabric that contains sand. I lay my desert bag on the floor and spread the sand describing the characteristics of the desert. The story starts something like this. "The desert is a dangerous place. You only go there if you have to." Moving the sand invites us to imagine the scorched landscapes Jesus encountered in the desert. Extremes of temperature, fierce heat during the day, freezing temperatures at night. The wind whipping the sand up and changing the scenery. The lack of food and water. "The desert is a dangerous place. You only go there if you have to."

Unlike the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, Mark doesn't give us any details about Jesus' experience in the desert. He doesn't describe Jesus' specific temptations or how Jesus responds to them. Mark just gives us those two sentences:

"And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the desert. He was in the desert forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him."

One of the incredible things about Godly Play storytelling is the 'wondering' afterwards, an opportunity to think and talk about what happens in the story. Mark's skeletal account of Jesus' time in the desert gives us the opportunity to wonder what it was like. How did Jesus spend his time? Was he tempted all day and night or was it just on isolated occasions? Did he walk for miles, or stay in one place? Did he sleep? What was the silence like? As the time passed did he ever wonder why he was there, question his sanity or fear for his life? Mark leaves all these questions unanswered. All he tells us is that Jesus didn't choose to go into the desert, the Holy Spirit drove him there. "The desert is a dangerous place. You only go there if you have to."

In our lives, we may all experience the desert place. There may be times when our desert place is because of ill health, bereavement, relationship or work problems or the current pandemic. Sometimes, completely unbidden, the desert just seems to appear. It can feel as if we have been pushed into the desert place by God, and we may rail against God. But I don't believe that we are led into the desert place by God just to suffer. That would imagine God as vindictive or cruel - I believe that sometimes our journeys with God just include those dark and dangerous places. Not because God wants us to experience pain and hardship, but just because sometimes the world, and life is like that. Through all, God is with us and God can take the darkness and the desolation of the desert and transform it through the healing, resurrection love we experience through Jesus Christ.

Sometimes the desert journey lasts a long time. I can't imagine what it is like to spend 40 days alone, hungry and thirsty, wrestling with temptation like Jesus did. But there have been times in my life where I have struggled with seemingly endless days pain and sleep deprived nights. That particular desert place was exhausting and a place where reality was questionable. But I was not alone in that desert. Alongside Pete and medical professionals, God was with me and eventually transformed that desert into a place of peace.

It can be really hard when we live in an instant win/quick fix society to spend any length of time in the desert. We can tire and despair easily, asking why our situation doesn't change, why our prayers aren't answered. At those times we are easy prey to the temptation to make ourselves feel better, with a temporary fix of food, alcohol, sex or shopping. We might ask that really hard question of why we need the desert and all its temptations. Why did Jesus need his desert experience? Nadia Bolz Weber, in her book *Pastrix*, suggests that temptation in the desert is always about identity — about *who* we are and *whose* we are, she writes:

“Identity. It's always God's first move. Before we do anything wrong and before we do anything right, God has named and claimed us as God's own. But almost immediately, other things try to tell us who we are and to whom we belong: capitalism, the weight-loss industrial complex, our parents, kids at school—they all have a go at telling us who we are. But only God can do that. Everything else is temptation. Maybe demons are defined as anything other than God that tries to tell us who we are. And maybe, just moments after Jesus' baptism, when the devil says to him, “If you are the Son of God...” he does so because he knows that Jesus is vulnerable to temptation precisely to the degree that he is insecure about his identity and mistrusts his relationship with God. So if God's first move is to give us our identity, then the devil's first move is to throw that identity into question. Identity is like the tip of a spool of thread, which when pulled, can unwind the whole thing.”

When John baptized him, Jesus heard the truth that he was the Son of God. He was God's beloved. But then immediately he is driven into the desert to face all the temptation that the devil threw at him. Did Jesus question the reality of that voice at his baptism? Did he ask himself if it was his Father's voice or his own mind playing tricks on him? Jesus had to inhabit, through his trials and temptations, through that lonely desert experience, the truth of his identity. To accept and believe to his core that he was God's beloved Son. It was then that was able to go forward from the desert to begin his ministry.

So maybe, we too, need those desert times to learn what it really means to be God's beloved. The struggle of the desert place is one where our true identity as a child of God is honed. The harvest of pain and suffering can be faith and peace because God is always with us. God has named and claimed us as God's own. In the desert the love of God is strong as steel, as immovable as mountains, but we have to open ourselves up to, and accept the truth of God's love. “The desert is a dangerous place. You only go there if you have to.”

This week, we began the desert journey of Lent with our service on Ash Wednesday, acknowledging that one day this life will be over and the next part of our journey with God will begin. We are invited into the Lent desert, on a journey of reflection and self-discipline to help us to discover our true identity as God's beloved.

Accepting and trusting that truth, will give courage and comfort when the desert places come into view. It will guard us from temptation and will empower us to share the great good news of the life, death and resurrection of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

Amen