Into The Desert

Last week we set out on our Lenten journey and I offered some thoughts about Lent as the season of mercy: God’s mercy to us, and our mercy to the world. This week we continue our Lenten focus as we turn our thoughts to the desert. The forty days of Lent remind us of the forty days Jesus spent in the wilderness, fasting, and also the forty years of the Israelites’ wandering in the desert as they fled Egypt and set off in search of the Promised Land. So the desert looms large in our Lenten thinking, reflection and prayer.

Lent invites us into a spiritual journey, a time of inward-looking and soul searching, a time of letting go and allowing God to lead us into a new future. It is a desert time. That wonderful and powerful story in our Tradition of the Israelites’ leaving of Egypt and their desert wandering is the paradigm for our own desert time. It is a perfect Lenten story to ponder, for Lent is an invitation to leave what we know and enter the wilderness of our own inner life, the possibilities for growth and change, that unmapped territory.

In our Christian spiritual tradition the desert or the wilderness is where we encounter God, where God comes to meet us. If we look back to the first few centuries of the development of the Christian communities, we see there, in the early fourth century, the beginnings of this strong desert tradition and spirituality, in the communities of desert mothers and fathers, the amma and abba of the desert, as they were called. We have many stories which have survived and been passed down to us and much wisdom and spiritual guidance have come out of this tradition. These men and women fled the cities and the decadence and distraction they found there to pursue a life of prayer, austerity and soul-searching in the desert. They were hardy characters and their wisdom, emerging from the struggles of their own inner journeys and the hard-won triumph over the demons and temptations that emerge in such a setting, provides a no-nonsense, down-to-earth guide to an authentic Christian spirituality. Here is a story of one of the desert monks: Abba Isidore the priest said, “If you fast regularly, do not be inflated with pride, but if you think highly of yourself because of it, then you had better eat meat. It is better for a man to eat meat than to be inflated with pride and to glorify himself.” Wonderful wisdom! It cuts right through our human foibles and piety and gets straight to the heart of what matters. Desert wisdom indeed.

The word ‘wilderness’ translates the Hebrew word midbar: tracts of land used for pastorage of flocks and herds, uninhabited land. The word conveys the sense of a land that is still wide open space, unsurveyed, unmapped, undomesticated. A land that is still relatively free of human control. In the tradition of ancient Israel which we have inherited, the wilderness represents the mystery of God.
The desert invites us into expanding horizons. The desert does not give us our preferences, rather it leads us to recognize the utter transcendence of God and God’s ‘agenda’, often in spite of what we desire. But equally important, the desert opens to us the nearness of God. The desert enables us to become attuned to the present. In both a literal and spiritual sense the desert is a place where old certainties no longer hold. The desert experience is about allowing the Spirit to blow where it will. It has always been understood to be an essential aspect of our Christian spiritual tradition and it is where we are invited to go in the forty days of Lent.

Let’s have a look at the story of the Israelites’ departure from Egypt and their wilderness wandering and see what it says to us. It all began with the cry of a suffering, oppressed people, the Hebrews, enslaved by the Pharaoh. God heard their cry and came to them. Then the Lord said, ‘I have seen the misery of my people … I have heard their cry. I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them’ (Exodus 3:7). Moses was out tending the flock of his father-in-law when God was revealed to him and called him. What happened in that encounter with God? Moses was told to remove his sandals for he was on holy ground. God told him he was to go to the Pharaoh and ask that the Hebrews be set free. But Moses argued with God. God promised his presence to Moses and he did assure him that he would have the support of his brother Aaron, but Moses was reluctant to respond to this call and he raised all sorts of objections: O my Lord, I have never been eloquent, neither in the past, nor even now that you have spoken to your servant: but I am slow of speech and slow of tongue (Exodus 4:10). And he begged God to send someone else. Five times God answered him: Now go, and I will be with your mouth and teach you what to speak … You shall speak to him and put the words in his mouth: and I will be with your mouth and with his mouth, and will teach you what you shall do (Exodus 4: 11-12, 15).
The Hebrews had a relatively good existence in Egypt. They were well fed and safe, but they were slaves, they were oppressed. What God was offering was the deepest desire of these people, freedom, but it would require courage, letting go and a struggle with the Pharaoh. And in addition, what lay ahead was unfamiliar and unknown. What would they discover in the wilderness? Would they be safe? Would they in fact make it? But to realize that deep dream and longing for freedom, and God’s offer of a much better life, they would have to face all that. The unknown future they faced was God’s future. And there’s the difficulty Moses faced, and we face - because we do like to be in control of what’s ahead!

Moses was not let off the hook and nor are we. We are also asked to leave a seemingly safe attachment to what is familiar and move into a seemingly unknown future. What we are asked to do is make a life-giving commitment to the mystery of God’s future for us. This is our ongoing journey as Christians, and this is what our forty days of Lent are about.

Does anything in the story touch a chord in you? Let’s go back over these key moments and let them speak to us.

First, the cry of the people. To cry out is a deeply human reality. What brought God near was that cry: *I have seen their misery, I have heard their cry*. What is my cry? Do I cry out to God? What is the ‘misery’ that causes me to cry out? Do I hold it in? Do I ignore it? Do I bury it under distractions? Lent invites us to get in touch with what is life-suppressing in us.

Moses was called to listen to God and co-operate with God. And so are we. As we saw, it began for Moses with a theophany, God appearing in the form of the burning bush and telling him to take off his shoes. Whatever happened in that moment, Moses became aware that he was in the presence of holiness, something ‘other’. He came face to face with the call of God which presented to him the offer of a richer, deeper life. In spite of his protestations he had to respond in openness and trust. And so do we. If we are serious about our lives in response to God’s presence in our midst then we must be prepared to ‘take off our sandals’ and embrace the call, the challenge. As Abba Cronius said: “If the soul is vigilant and withdraws from all distraction and abandons its own will, then the Spirit of God invades it and it can conceive because it is free to do so”.

These moments of encounter when we are privileged to ‘see God’ are awe-filled. They are holy. The forty days of Lent are an invitation to become sensitive to where God might be breaking into our awareness. The holy ground in our own lives may be in both familiar and unfamiliar places. But wherever and whenever that awareness comes, it is God’s presence
and invitation to a richer life and our receptivity, our openness to this, that constitute the holiness.

Moses, removing his sandals and becoming aware that he was on holy ground, leads us to ask: Where is the ‘holy ground’ of my life? What places and experiences have been made holy for me and by what events? And how are these places and events revelations of God for me? Through what particular circumstances is God revealed to me? Have I ever felt myself called by God in any particular way? Do I have objections or resistances to my call and what are they?

Our journeys of faith can sometimes be marked by moments that can be revelatory of God in an extraordinary way and can therefore be life-changing for that very reason. Moses resisted and struggled with God. This is a typical human reaction. We want what is rich and meaningful, we want to live fully, we know there are areas of our lives that are in need of change and healing, but sometimes we would rather not because it means leaving what is familiar. All too often, and this is one of the great human tragedies I think, we settle for a partly-lived life because it’s comfortable. But Lent is meant to be uncomfortable! It is that great reminder of Jesus’ words: I have come so that you may have life in its fullness! (John 10:10). The choice is an ancient one; it was put to the Israelites a long time ago: I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses ... choose life (Deuteronomy 30:19).

So let’s not be afraid to enter the desert of Lent. As Abba Doulas reminds us, God is everywhere: Abba Doulas, the disciple of Abba Bessarion said, “One day when we were walking beside the sea I was thirsty and I said to Abba Bessarion, ‘Father, I am very thirsty’. He said a prayer and said to me, ‘Drink some of the sea water’. The water proved sweet when I drank some. I even poured some into a leather bottle for fear of being thirsty later on. Seeing this, the old man asked me why I was taking some. I said to him, ‘Forgive me, it is for fear of being thirsty later on’. Then the old man said, ‘God is here, God is everywhere’”. Yes, God is everywhere and the desert reminds us of that. Just like Moses, who had to go where he would rather not have gone, we are asked to trust and venture out. As we do that and allow ourselves to envision possibilities for growth hitherto outside of our known and familiar patterns, we in effect give God a chance to lead us into a new future, God’s future.

Is there a ‘call of God’ that I would prefer not to face just at the moment? Can I see these moments for what they are or am I blind to them? The wilderness can be frightening, but it
is an essential part of our inner spiritual landscape, and in its wildness and unfamiliarity offers life in a way that clinging to old ways and familiar patterns can never do.

I will lure her and bring her into the wilderness and speak tenderly to her
(Hosea 2: 14).

A reminder and an invitation:

Every Friday morning at 8:00am we have a Liturgy - a Communion Service - in our school chapel. This is prepared and led by our Year 12 Extraordinary Ministers of the Eucharist. During the remaining weeks of Lent we will be focusing on the Stations of the Cross.

Please encourage your daughter to attend. This Liturgy finishes in time for period 1.

And this is a warm invitation to parents / families to join us too if you are able to.

Ms Kerry McCullough
Dean of Mission