

The desert isn't about the absence of God; it's about depending on God.

Lent 5C 6-3-2025 – Isaiah 43 .16-21

On one of Richard Fidler's conversation programmes, he talked with Andrew Harper; a cameleer who took people into the desert for a month at a time. Andrew described how, at the end of each journey, as they walked back into Birdsville his fellow travellers would become sad. Andrew talked about the sadness of 'leaving my best self back there in the desert'; of *his* longing to be back there in the silence and the clarity of what's truly important in life. He described our life in civilisation as a place where we just can't get that sort of clarity.

This Lent, we've been reading scriptures that have taken *us* into the desert. This Lent has directed our focus at the three aspects of desert spirituality for us. There's the literal desert that covers much of this Land and shapes what we think is our national consciousness. Then there are metaphorical deserts. The dry times of apathy and loneliness inside us which threaten to consume our life away. And then there are desiccating, enervating setbacks in our community and family life; things like selfishness and indifference.

Our lectionary this Lent has given us weekly Bible stories about people in the desert. Those people have shown us how, when you find ourselves in a desert, you can find a place where you learn to depend on God. One insightful friend told me, *the desert isn't about the absence of God; it's about depending on God*. That's what we saw first this Lent. We went with Jesus after his baptism as he was led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted for forty days. In the face of

temptation, Jesus' response of utter loyalty to God showed us how to stop depending on the transient supports of our everyday life, and instead, depend on God who is faithful.

The next week, we joined Sarai and Abram who'd returned to the Promised Land from Egypt. They felt confronted by their advancing age and the prospect of dying childless and forgotten. God's response to their prayer happens to be the reason you and I are gathered here today. *The desert isn't about the absence of God; it's about depending on God.* Two weeks ago, we read in Ps 63 how young David was driven into the Judean desert by Saul's jealousy; the king's soldiers were ordered to kill David. But there in the desert, he was revealed to us and to himself as the amazing person God had known he was all along.

And last week, it was the Prodigal Son strutting off to his new life in a foreign land. He left his parents in a desert of grief and his brother in the dry place of righteous indignation – never mind the spiritual wasteland he sold himself into.

But amidst his tragedy, Jesus' parable revealed the beautiful nature of God's love and grace. That loving grace was the only hope for that family, for their village, and it is our hope too. And it's there for each to discover in our own private deserts.

These private deserts are part of everyone's life journeys; places where there seems to be no nourishment or hope; where grief, unforgiveness or disappointment control us. This Lent surprises us as we discover God's healing love in such dry places. Each desert story has been about the transforming renewal of whole communities; and ultimately about making Earth the place that it should and can be.

The challenge is huge and counter-intuitive. Thinking of dry places on a community-wide scale, many of us will remember the

millennium drought. Talk was all about dredging the Murray mouth as we frantically tried to keep the river and the lakes alive. Talk was also about the selfish disregard people from this or that state showed their fellow Australians. It was a bitter time – the water more bitter by the day; the constant to and fro of bitter accusation and angry refusal to turn from the desert of blind selfishness tore at the soul of our national community.

But back to our scriptures. After the past four weeks of temptation, doubt, fear, foolishness, grief and anger, today's passage from Isaiah 43 is a wonderful refreshment. God is doing much more than just breaking a drought. *Thus says the Lord, I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert ... to give drink to my chosen people, the people whom I formed for myself so that they might declare my praise.* We mustn't miss the fact that the people *still* have to cross the desert. But God is with us; making a way, giving us water to drink, sustaining and helping us do what God's people are always called to do; to offer that water to the world.

Our call is to leave the comfort and security of the familiar and head into the desert, because the desert is the native habitat of our souls; where we can truly be present to God. From there, our praises arise from lived experience as we become instruments of God's desire to quench the thirst of all the families of Earth.

We don't have much more time in this year's Lenten desert. As we prepare for the season of Hope, let's savour every moment of the clarity we know here in the desert. Those people Andrew the cameleer led back into Birdsville all feeling the letdown of leaving the desert; they'd given the desert a try, and something really important happened. It's worth us giving it a try too! *The desert isn't about the absence of God; it's about depending on God.*

Amen