

## *Desert walking*

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Sunday 13th February 2005, First Sunday in Lent

*Genesis 2.15-17; 3.1-7; Psalm 32; Romans 5.12-21; Matthew 4.1-11*

For those of you wondering why I'm in the pulpit yet again (yes, it is the third time in as many months), this time you can blame the Diocese. The Diocese has declared that this year's Season of Lent is to be a time of mission supporting the theme of "Confidence in Christ". In addition to putting a 'toolkit' of materials for this on its website, the diocese has also asked parishes to incorporate this theme as they can. So our rector has, maybe in a spirit of Lenten obedience, decided that we will support this, but of course that we will do it in our own St Philip's way.

As I understand it, Rob plans to have various speakers popping up during Lent to talk about personal aspects of their experience that have helped their faith. I think he's hoping these maybe different and possibly a little challenging, which is good, because in part that is what Lent is in part about — it's supposed to be a time of challenging and extension in preparation for the passion and Easter. I'm doing my not-so-little talk today partly because I am going to be away for much of Lent, but also because I found today's set of readings particularly pertinent to my theme — which I shall get to a bit later...

The dominant image in today's Gospel reading for the first Sunday in Lent is the desert. Straight after Jesus' baptism, the very next stage in his journey is that the Holy Spirit, which has just baptised him, either leads him into the desert or, in the case of Mark's Gospel, drives him there. We are specifically told that this is in order that he be tempted for forty days, and forty nights.

So, the desert is a key formative experience in Jesus' path, and therefore for ours. The desert is also, of course, a powerful image throughout the Old Testament. And the 40 days thing particularly reinforces this because it reminds us of the 40 years the Children of Israel spent lost in the wilderness when they left Egypt. Long periods in the wilderness are maybe meant to help undo the harm caused by a life lived in the land of slavery.

And talking of Egypt, it is also an historical fact that its desert was the place of one of the most important formative phases in the development of the Christian church. While some of you probably know something about the desert fathers, others may not, so it's interesting, at the beginning of Lent, to hear a potted version of their story.

The 'desert fathers' (and mothers) refers to one of the most impressive counter-culture movements in history. During the fourth century AD, that is about 300 years after the death and resurrection of Jesus, people from all over the Roman empire started moving into the Egyptian desert to find wisdom and meaning and a way to God. They were following the lead of St Antony. In the middle of the third century AD, at the age of 20 young Antony inherited a comfortable living on the family estate on the Nile river, but decided to give it all away and live an ascetic kind of life. He started off in a fairly conventional way for the time, by living in a house on the edge of town and talking to other ascetics. But he became progressively more radical, moving first into an old tomb for 15 years, where he reputedly had encounters with demons. He then decided that even this was too comfortable and he moved into a deserted fort in the desert where he became the first Christian 'super-hermit'. Perhaps even more weirdly, other people started setting up around him and begged him to come out and teach them. After many years he relented, and came out, to everyone's surprise, looking great. He then spent 7 years setting up the first monastic community, before 'retiring' to the inner desert in Egypt near the Red Sea and dying at the ripe old age of 105.

St Antony obviously struck a chord in a tired out Roman empire and perhaps an even more tired out, occupied Ancient Egypt. What followed was a time of radical experimentation in how to live a Christian life in pursuit of God. In Lower Egypt some people tried living as hermits who lived alone. In Upper Egypt there were monks and nuns tried out living in communities. And in other places some lived in groups of three or four, often as disciples of a master. Also, a number of visitors who were impressed by the life of the monks imitated their way of life as far as they could back home, and also provided a literature that explained and analysed this way of life for those outside it.

This environment produced some of the greatest saints and teachers of early Christianity and it is these people who are generally called the desert fathers. One of them was a fellow called John Cassian who, with a friend of his called Germanus, went, like many young people still seem to, to the East — to the Egyptian deserts which is where one went in those days — to look for the wisest people and the greatest spiritual masters of their time in the desert. St John Cassian (as he became) recorded the conversations he and Germanus had with these masters in what has become known as the Conferences of Cassian.

Cassian's writings were very influential. They were read in other places including later by young Italian called Benedict. St Benedict went on to found the first western monasteries and drew up the Benedictine rule. Thus western monasticism and everything in our church traditions that comes from it, draws heavily on, and explicitly points to, the desert experience.

Here endeth the history lesson. (I hope that wasn't too abstruse!) I have put some [follow ups](#) in the pewsheet (below the sermon) if you're interested in following up.

If nothing else, I hope this gives some feeling for how desert experiences have influenced Christian thinking and practice, and perhaps even ways of being, at all sorts of levels, and in many different ways.

Interesting, but "so what?" we may ask. For better or for worse, I doubt any of us are likely to give up everything to live in a cave in a real life desert any time soon. And I will be surprised if our Parish planning day next week results in radical experimentation in Christian living like the desert fathers, but who knows?

So, is there any way we might capture something of the desert experience in other ways? The answer is, I think, at least a partial "yes". It probably isn't possible in our comfortable suburban existences to replicate the harsh, silent physical environment, the lack of comfort, the privations, the close proximity to a few other people from whom you can't escape (which is maybe the hardest thing), the boredom and the sheer focus which living in a real-life outward desert would impose.

But we can perhaps find a desert-like experience by going inwards. There are probably a few ways of doing this, but one way that I have found helpful is one similar to that described by one of the desert fathers, Abbot Isaac in the 10th Conference of John Cassian. It's in the pew sheet. While the language is at first a bit unusual to our modern ears, I actually think it's quite a believable and practical kind of explanation. Remember, these were simple men, generally not particularly given to excessive mysticism or theology.

In essence, Abbot Isaac's advice to his young questioners is this — find a word or short phrase as a prayer, and learn to say it continually until it goes into your heart. This, along with some variations, forms the central practice which the church has historically called contemplative prayer. It is a kind of pure prayer practice that does not rely on thinking about what you want to say to God and then sending off your well designed missive. Rather, it takes Jesus at his word that when praying "your Father knows what you need before you ask him". It is also the Orthodox Church's authorised way of learning how to fulfil the injunction of St

Paul to “pray without ceasing” which Orthodox people do by saying the so-called ‘Jesus prayer’ which is “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner”. We have this in our liturgy as the *kyrie*, but the Eastern Churches make it a central and continuous form of contemplative prayer.

Drawing on this, my most important personal practice over the last couple of years has been learning how to pray in this way for half an hour each morning and evening. I sit with my back upright, my eyes closed and say, or much more accurately try to say, the word *maranatha* (said as four distinct syllables Ma — ra — na — tha) which is the one-word aramaic prayer that Paul uses to end his first letter to the Corinthians and Revelation — it means ‘come Lord’. I find that this simple practice of just trying to concentrate on saying a single prayer word for an entire half hour is like walking into a desert. Footstep after footstep trudging across the dunes.

It’s so obviously and radically simple that anyone can do it. You definitely don’t need any kind of cleverness at all, or even the idea of being ‘spiritual’ — in fact pretensions about such things tend to get in the way. But like anything that is truly simple, it is also radically difficult to do for any period of time and for this reason takes some dedication and persistence.

If this sounds to some of you like ‘meditation’ then yes in one sense it is, and that is why the trendy modern term for it seems to be ‘Christian meditation’. But contemplative prayer is not any kind of New Age relaxation therapy, although increased peace, and in fact an increased sense of all of the 11 fruits of the spirit Paul described like patience, kindness etc (see Galatians 5:22-23) will probably be a side benefit. But desert walking is mainly about learning the true meaning of simplicity and humility and how to pay attention.

Why might this be so? Well, the first paragraph from the quotation from Abbot Isaac gives a strong clue. He points out that one of the major problems all of us have with any attempt at genuinely concentrated or sustained prayer is distraction. Our minds (or at least mine) are not very good at staying still, focussed and attentive.

What saying the prayer word does is point this out. Not long after stepping out into the desert, you can be pretty certain that thoughts will start popping up trying to grab your attention. There will be sense distractions like noise — which suddenly seems to become much more noticeable. Then there is the inner chatter thing. My mind seems to abhor a vacuum and starts running commentaries, which can include all sorts of things, including things like — why am I doing this? When is it going to end?. There are memories of all sorts which can suddenly come up like a wind from nowhere. Or I suddenly find myself planning what I am going to do (like, I must remember to do X...). And then there are random fantasies and daydreams. I have no doubt that all these were among the devils and demons that the desert fathers, like Jesus, went into the desert to discover and to learn how to deal with.

At this point it is worth pondering our Old Testament and Gospel readings. These provide some useful insights via two quite different stories about how temptation works and what the consequences are.

Down the centuries poor Eve has come in for a lot of bad press from mainly male theologians as the root cause of all humanity’s woes. But rather than criticise her, I find her story profoundly sad.

Why did Eve take the fruit? We might first notice that the serpent really was particularly subtle and devious. It pressed quite a few of her buttons which, from our external perspective, look obvious. The serpent appealed to her proto-vanity and maybe envy (“why shouldn’t you be able to know good and evil like God — he is just keeping it from you — go on, you deserve it...”) and she hears what she wants to hear. It also told one well placed lie (that she

wouldn't die), which Eve did not, and probably could not, detect. And then once the serpent has planted all these ideas in her head she saw the object of temptation, saw it as being very desirable and bingo, gave in. Thinking about this, I don't think Eve's basic problem was disobedience as such (although obedience would have saved her), but rather a kind of heedlessness and naivety. Eve clearly had no idea how her own mind worked, nor where she was vulnerable, which left her a sitting duck. So maybe one way of looking at this story is that the real cause of Original Sin is heedlessness and an inability to see how our dispositions are sucking us in because they seem oh so reasonable at the time. Eve has never had any experience of something in her Garden lying to her, so she has no real idea that such things are possible. And don't we all have this tendency to believe that our own thoughts are right, just because it's us who is thinking them? We only find out the consequences later and boy do we feel naked then.

Eve's experience also points out that fighting temptation is not just a simple matter of exercising will power. No, temptation is a complex process wherein the weakest points of our dispositions are subtly worked on simultaneously. And it is because I do not know how my mind really works that I get sucked in. Over and over again. Even though I have been given some helpful guiding rules, and even though I have experienced pain before. Poor Eve. Poor me.

The Gospel story provides almost the polar contrast. In Jesus' case, Satan gets to try on his big temptations after a long period in the wilderness (which sort of confirms that learning how to deal with these things does take time and practice to mature). Jesus' temptations are sort of dual layered. At one level there is the temptations to have his physical needs met, to be seen as special, and for power over our world. These are all deep and fundamental urges in humans programmed and hard-wired into our survival mechanisms from when we were babies. But at another level Jesus gets his own special temptation. And that is a temptation to use his status as God's son to magically have his own urges met. This is one reason why this story is so powerful and credible, it's because it recognises that as the layers get pulled off both the general and the intensely personal ways of our inner workings become revealed.

But Jesus' response to this is a complete contrast to Eve's — it's a model of complete understanding and mindfulness. He does not make the mistake of angrily trying to destroy Satan, or even fight him directly. You can't make temptation go away simply by exercising your will, or at least not for long. Jesus certainly doesn't rage against his temptation. Nor does he not pretend it doesn't exist — if anything he probably saw particularly acutely and acknowledged the power that these temptations really were exerting over him. But he was no longer a puppet to his desires or his immediate reactions to them. Because he has come to sense how his mind works, and because he knows his Scripture, he found a way of recognising the situation and dealing with it constructively. And in so doing he ends up being entertained by angels. And could move on to teach others, and follow a path which ultimately led to the Cross.

I have not, at least not to my knowledge, been entertained by angels yet — although if the aim of prayer is elevated experiences, then I suspect one is doomed from the beginning. But as I have started to learn new things about how I really work, how distracted I am, I have, I think, become more humble, kind and patient, and have learned a new way of listening for something that is more interesting than the talk of the world, that is, to listen for the Word of God. The Cloud of Unknowing which is another little book on contemplative prayer written by an anonymous English monk in the 14th Century, and which recommends exactly the same method of prayer I described earlier, says that "in itself, humility is nothing else but a true knowledge and awareness of oneself as one really is. For surely whoever truly saw and

felt himself as he is, would truly be humble.” In the last paragraph in the pew sheet Abba Isaac describes the aim in prayer as a ‘grand poverty’ which is a lovely phrase. That is what desert walking teaches us, among other things.

If we want to learn from the wisdom of the desert we need to go there ourselves. Jesus spent 40 days and 40 nights in the desert. If you haven’t thought of a Lenten practice yet, you might want to think about giving this a go between now and Easter. If you do it in a disciplined way this should be long enough to decide whether this is a Every day try doing this ruthlessly simple but hard thing of trying to concentrate on a single prayer word for at least 20 minutes at a time every morning and evening. If you do, I bet if nothing else by Good Friday you’ll have a lot more sympathy for those apostles in the Garden of Gethsemane who found, when asked by Jesus because his life depended on it, that they could not stay awake and pray with him even for an hour.

I actually think that recovering the contemplative dimension to life is one of the things our society, with its obsession with surface forms and sensual experience, needs. Outside St Patrick’s Catholic Cathedral in Melbourne there is a water course ‘pilgrim’s walk’ which is worth a look. At the fountain at the bottom is the following short poem by the Australian poet James McAuley which seems apt:

Incarnate Word, in whom all nature lives, cast flame upon the earth:  
raise up contemplatives among us, men who walk within the fire of ceaseless prayer  
impetuous desire.

Set pools of silence in this thirsty land”

— (James McAuley 1917, 1976 © Copyright Norma McAuley)

Amen to that.

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### **These extra notes were available in the pewsheets**

From an interview with Abbot Isaac (one of the greatest desert fathers), as reported in the 10th Conference of John Cassian, responding to a question about how to pray

“...I am on fire with innumerable and various wanderings of soul and shiftiness of heart, and cannot collect my scattered thoughts, nor can I even pour forth my prayer without interruption and images of vain figures, and the recollection of conversations and actions, and I feel myself tied down by such dryness and barrenness that I feel I cannot give birth to any offspring in the shape of spiritual ideas: In order that it may be vouchsafed to me to be set free from this wretched state of mind, from which I cannot extricate myself by any number of sighs and groans, I must full surely cry out: “O God, make speed to save me: O Lord, make haste to help me.”...

We must then ceaselessly and continuously pour forth the prayer of this verse, in adversity that we may be delivered, in prosperity that we may be preserved and not puffed up...

Whatever work you are doing, or office you are holding, or journey you are going, do not cease to chant this. When you are going to bed, or eating, and in the last necessities of nature, think on this. This thought in your heart may be to you a saving formula, and not only keep you unharmed by all attacks of devils, but also purify you from all faults and earthly stains, and lead you to that invisible and celestial contemplation, and carry you on to that ineffable glow of prayer, of which so few have any experience. Let sleep come upon you still considering this verse, till having been moulded by the constant use of it, you grow accustomed to repeat it even in your sleep. When you wake let it be the first thing to come into your mind, let it anticipate all your waking thoughts, let it when you rise from your bed

send you down on your knees, and thence send you forth to all your work and business, and let it follow you about all day long

...this is the formula which the mind should unceasingly cling to until, strengthened by the constant use of it and by continual meditation, it casts off and rejects the rich and full material of all manner of thoughts and restricts itself to the poverty of this one verse, and so arrives with ready ease at that beatitude of the gospel, which holds the first place among the other beatitudes: for He says 'Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.' And so one who becomes grandly poor by a poverty of this sort will fulfil this saying of the prophet: 'The poor and needy shall praise the name of the Lord'."

### **Jesus, on how to pray**

"...whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him." (Matthew 6:6-8)

### **St Paul, on prayer**

"...for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words." (Romans 8:26)

"Pray without ceasing." (Thessalonians 5:17) (Unfortunately, Paul doesn't say how...)

### **Further Exploration on contemplative prayer and the desert fathers**

- The World Community for Christian Meditation website : <http://www.wccm.org> (the newsletters from Laurence Freeman are always interesting.)
- The Australian site for the WCCM is at <http://www.christianmeditationaustralia.org/>)
- The Mercy site maybe of interest to more Evangelical types  
<http://www.themercysite.milestonenet.co.uk>
- This site has some useful desert fathers material:  
<http://www.balamandmonastery.org.lb/fathers/indexdesert.htm>

### **Books**

- Benedicta Ward, *The desert fathers — sayings of the early Christian monks*.
- James Cowan, *Journey to the Inner Mountain* — interesting history of St Antony and the desert fathers, including a sustained encounter with a latter day Australian St Antony in the deserts of Egypt.
- Rowan Williams. *Silence and Honey Cakes* — the Archbishop of Canterbury's (as usual interesting) thoughts about the Desert Fathers
- John Main. *Word into Silence*
- Anon. *The Cloud of Unknowing*