



A PLACE OF HOLINESS

Let's begin with a psalm that was written by King David of Israel, c3000 years ago:

Psalm 63

Why begin with this? Over Lent this year we're going to be looking at the 40 days and 40 nights Jesus spent in the wilderness, and thinking about what His experience in the desert has to teach us about our own – whatever those experiences may be.

Because we all go through them, at some point.

For some of us it may be a very physical experience – an illness or injury or some kind of setback in our health. For others, it may be a mental or emotional one – a break-up, bereavement, the loss of a job, or a period of depression. But it will always be a spiritual experience – because everything is, in some way. Now some of us can struggle with that, especially if we've had a brush with the prosperity Gospel or the name-it-and-claim-it, blab-it-and-grab-it brigade. We might think, "If I'm a Christian, then things should be easy. And if they're not, then perhaps I'm not." And we swallow the lie that Christianity is supposed to be a walk in the park, because we want it to be (and that's what Satan wants us to think, by the way).

But that's not what life is supposed to look like, according to the Bible. In fact, it takes guts (or some other colloquialism of your choice) to be a

Christian. And if you study the lives of the heroes of the faith, you will find that many of them went through some kind of desert experience:

- **Abram** (in the wilderness of Hebron).
- **Moses** (in the wilderness of Sinai).
- **David** (in the wilderness of Judah).

These deserts were more than just geographical places – they were spiritual. And Jesus' desert was no different.

All of which brings us to:

Mark 1:9-12

Think about this passage: Jesus has just been baptised, a real 'high point' in the life of any child of God; and straight away, He's being led by the Spirit into the wilderness (in fact, in Mark's Gospel it says He was 'driven', 'sent out', even 'propelled' into the wilderness). This is no accident: this is part of God's will for Him – and for us – because there are lessons in life that only the wilderness can teach us. As a certain African proverb goes, "Smooth seas do not make skilled sailors" (what a great saying!).

So, what does Jesus' desert experience have to teach us? There are several lessons I think, but today we're going to focus on 3 points in particular:

1) The Father Is There. We can often assume, "Things are going really badly at the moment, ergo, God must be angry with me about something." But Jesus' time in the wilderness turns that whole idea on its head. Where has Jesus just come from? Being baptised by John in the Jordan. And what happened there? He was anointed by the Spirit, and the Father spoke these words to Him: "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased." In whom I am *well pleased*? This whole set-up isn't a sign of God's anger, but of God's love for His boy. And just as the Father was there with Jesus, strengthening Him for the mission ahead, so He is with us – with all His sons and daughters.

2) The Son Is There. Jesus calls us all to follow Him. So, if Jesus entered the wilderness, if He had His desert experiences, I think it's safe to assume that we will, too. But we can also know that He is there, walking with us. Jesus promised: "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you" (Hebrews 13:5). And no matter how dark life gets, it is still possible to find the footprints of Jesus, and to follow. Jesus has been through the desert Himself; He is more than familiar with whatever it is we are experiencing at this moment; and He's come out the other side. And because of that, He is able to guide us through *our* difficult times. Jesus has basically got the best GPS there is.

3) The Spirit Is There. When we think of the Holy Spirit, what analogies come to mind? We might think air, fire, water, oil – or a dove. And we probably imagine a white domesticated dove, because that's what tradition has conditioned us to think. What's interesting is that the Greek word for 'dove' here, *peristera*, literally means a wild rock dove (i.e. a pigeon). Rock

doves started out on the cliffs of N Africa and W Asia: these are tough creatures, and the desert is their home. And that tough side to the Spirit can sometimes lead *us* into the desert, too – just as it did with Jesus. Jesus' experience reminds us that God is just as comfortable in the wilderness as He is in temples.

Putting it all together, then: if we are truly children of the Father, truly disciples of Jesus, truly led by the Spirit, we will at some point in our walk find ourselves in the wilderness – in a dark place, an empty place, a lonely place, a broken place, a confusing place. But also, a holy place.

All of which might sound a bit disturbing, or depressing – if what you're hoping for is an easy ride. But if you're living in the real world, this is more than an encouragement: this is a lifesaver. It's a reminder that God is in control; that He is able to use the hard times in our lives to mould and shape us into the people He wants us to be.

I.e. we need those desert experiences.

Even if we don't necessarily *like* them.

Highs & Lows

A final thought: in the film *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, Jim Carrey and Kate Winslet play a young couple who fall madly in love, but then things get difficult between them, they split up, and in an attempt to forget the hurts, they visit a doctor who has developed a way of erasing things from people's memories. They go through the procedure, forget who the other person is, and then they meet up again and ... well, I won't spoil it for you. But the premise of the movie is that life and relationships have their ups and downs, their pleasures and pains, and we need both the +s and -s to become all that we can be.

It's a cliché, but if you're going to stand on mountains ... you've got to be willing to walk through valleys.

Even so, when we find ourselves facing a wilderness, we may not feel like embracing it. In fact, our first inclination may be to run! So, how should we respond? Trust Him, and if we're able to, ask: "What is God seeking to teach me here? About Him? About me?"

Because even in the face of great evil (and Jesus came face-to-face with the greatest evil of all), even there we can hear the voice of God.

Even there.