

THE GRACE OF THE DESERT

In all our journeying with Christ the initiative belongs to God. The Spirit will lead us where we need to go.

It is hard to appreciate or accept this when after romping in green pastures we find ourselves in the dark valley of the desert. With no pasture land in sight, and no evidence of water, quiet or otherwise, we can stagger along echoing Thomas' complaint, "Lord, we do not know where you are going, so how can we know the way!"

The assumption is that we are lost. Outwardly everything may be fine. You can still preach, and counsel, and pray with people, and God seems to bless your endeavours. But within, there is a dry restlessness, a weary boredom and not uncommonly, a depressive fear that you may have failed God. Since not even prayer seems to connect anymore, confusion and fear suggest that despite the plea of Psalm 51, God has cast me from his presence and taken his Spirit from me.

Reactions to this common experience really amount to temptations. There is the temptation to pretend that everything is fine, to carry on as usual in the hope that some good solid work and a bit more sleep and exercise will fix whatever is wrong with you. But pretending only increases the strain.

William Cowper in his doleful hymn, "O for a closer walk with God", pines for "the blessedness I knew when first I saw the Lord". The temptation here is to return to the beginning. The illusory hope is that if I do all the things I used to do, then the streams will flow again and I will feel better. But the old songs, the old scriptures and the old prayer patterns may only increase the weariness.

Another temptation is to go right on foraging around for some new experiences that will startle the deadness out of us. Every stone in the desert could be bread if only you can find the right formula to transform them.

Less active is the temptation to despair and poor me lets the disciplines of prayer, scripture and sharing oneself in community slacken right off. There is sometimes a hidden touch of bargaining with God, "I'll come back again if you give me satisfaction and make it worth my while".

What then is going on? You want to pray but you cannot. Boredom, dissatisfaction and frustration taint everything. The light and warmth and fervour we once enjoyed seem to have gone out.

Obviously enough, sin, weakness, and laziness can be a straight path into the desert. Even physical or emotional stress can take their toll. In all these cases, confession, repentance and prayers for help and healing are all appropriate and often transforming. But what I am speaking of here is quite different.

What I am trying to describe is the desert the Spirit himself has led us into. And the sure sign that it is the Spirit, is the even vague realisation that it is God alone who can fulfil us. Despite



everything, we find it is him we want. We echo the Psalmist: “whom have I in heaven but you? And being with you, I desire nothing on earth” (73:25)

What then is going on is that God himself is giving us opportunity to clarify and purify our choice for him. In other words, the desert is both normal and necessary. If we would move beyond beginnings, we can expect the desert, and bless it, whether we are there for a mere forty days or a more thorough forty months.

The desert is a place of grace and transformation that has a blessedness and beauty of its own. While we may be stripped of pleasant feelings, and all feelings of satisfaction, God has not deserted us. We learn to trust him rather than our feelings about him. We cannot feel God anyway. That would destroy us. At best we feel our own selves as we respond to evidences of his presence. But our feelings and the faithful presence of God are not in the end equitable. We need to learn that.

It will be clear then that running back to the beginning or whipping up some new experience is inappropriate. What is appropriate or rather necessary, is faith, faithfulness and love. Hold fast to your faith that the initiative is God's. It is he who has brought you to the desert and he will not abandon you to die there. He cares enough to lead you through. The way may be hard and painful as it is the place of stripping. But continue to choose him in all things and abandon yourself utterly to his grace. You will experience the blessedness of the poor in spirit.

And be faithful. Pray, for that is always a choice for God, a strengthening of the will toward him. Read the scriptures even if outwardly they do not seem to touch you. The work of grace is often deeper than thought or feeling.

And love. Above all, this discipline must not be neglected. Love is a choice, a choice of God's way, a choice of God. Here we learn to love with the love that God himself has for others. God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit and it is ours to continue to cooperate with that love. In so doing, the poverty of our own love is plainly revealed. But also revealed is the sufficiency of God's love. While the way may continue to be hard and our corner of the community of faith not the easiest to live with, if we have no love we have gained nothing.

Throughout our journey we may have a variety of religious experiences. In themselves they are nothing. They are not God. They are only us. While valid and valuable in their own way, they are only tastes of what our long-dormant spiritual faculties are capable of doing and perceiving when awakened by the Holy Spirit. From beginning to end the only test of holiness, the only authentic sign of our being in Christ, is love. To teach us that, most of our experience will dry up.

In the desert then, thoughts, experiences, imagination and even words may dry up but paradoxically, our desire for God and God alone, intensifies. Though he seems absent, we cannot live without him. Though we feel nothing much at all, we find ourselves utterly dependent upon him.

The desert then is a fruitful place. If God has a mind to send us there, then there are no detours or short cuts. We will be there for as long as his good providence deems necessary. If we do not run away or abandon him we will taste the fruit of insights that no amount of study can produce.

Above all, a sojourn in the desert teaches us of a goodness, faithfulness and love that surpasses knowledge: that even in poverty we may be filled with the fullness of God.

