

Sermon on Sunday 26 February 2023

by Rev. Alan Stewart

Readings: 1 Kings 19. 3-12 & Matthew 4. 1-11

A Springtime in the Desert

Covering a third of the earth's land surface and laying claim to more each day, deserts are places of extremes; intense heat by day, intolerable cold at night. Starved of water, battered by sandstorms, scorched by a punishing sun, and yet despite everything, these wildernesses manage somehow to sustain life.

For the human being, the desert can be a place of disorientation, thirst and occasional madness. Here, time loses meaning, and identities are lost and found.

These solitary wastes are ironically often places of encounter; encounter with self and encounter with God. They are, as perhaps you'll know, the birthplace of many of the world's great religions. From these wastes, great leaders have emerged such as the Law-giver, the Baptist, the Prophet and the Christ.

Christ, we're told, was led by the Spirit into the desert and there he chose to deny himself many of the things that matter, in order to find out what really matters. Here, he would discover who he really was and what direction his life should take. And here, unsurprisingly, he encounters his own demons, voices hell-bent on undermining his security and diverting his destiny.

We don't, of course, have to physically go into a desert to

experience one. There are times in all our lives when we find ourselves voluntarily or involuntarily in a desert of some kind. Some we choose and some choose us. Some last hours, some for what seem like a lifetime. Some are places of self-imposed solitude, and others of heart-breaking loneliness.

During Lent, we are invited to follow Jesus voluntarily into the desert in order to discover more of our own identity and destiny. And in order to do so, we would usually either add to or subtract something from our lives.

In recent months, I've been listening a lot to the music of the Australian singer/songwriter Nick Cave. Seven years ago, Nick and his wife were plunged into an unimaginable desert called grief when their 15-yr-old son Arthur fell from a clifftop to his death. In a recent interview for *Newsnight*, Nick spoke powerfully of the before and after of this tragedy. Before Arthur's death he said he was 'an incomplete or unformed human being' with 'a narrow view of the world'. After this, the unthinkable, he said that he became an 'actual person'. That is, I think, an extraordinary thing to say. What I think he means is that great love and great suffering always deepen us, make us more human, more real, more empathetic, more compassionate, more fiercely alive.

He goes on to say that the death of his son 'deepened his faith'. These involuntary and sometimes intolerable deserts can do one of two things. Either we give up believing in a good God, or we allow ourselves to fall deeper in faith, trusting that the everlasting arms are there whether we feel them or not.

So, a question; what deserts have you known personally?

Deserts of grief, loneliness, depression, disorientation, anxiety...
what deserts have you known or know?

And how might they have deepened you?

Have they made you more or less an 'actual person'? Did they
deepen or destroy your faith?

And what voices currently or periodically taunt you?

The voice of cynicism ('Why bother?'), or the voice of fear
(('What if?')), or the voice of judgement, perhaps ('Who do you
think you are?').

When his inner voices tried everything they could to undermine
his identity and divert his destiny, in his most desperate
moment, Jesus held on to two things; his Father's voice and the
scriptures he'd learnt as a boy.

You see, just before he walked into the desert, he had stepped
out of a river at his baptism, and he'd heard words that would
carry him through this desert and those future deserts of
Gethsemane and Golgotha. Words of the Father: 'This is my
Beloved; with you I am so pleased'.

So, when those voices said, 'Prove that love, jump and see if He
catches you', Jesus didn't need proof. And when they tried other
tactics, he responded with scripture, with truth he'd memorised
years before.

Most mornings, I sit for a while with the words of Morning Prayer from the Northumbria Community. Every day, there's a different set of short readings from the Bible.

I don't know how this works, except to say by God's grace, but in my darkest deserts almost invariably, there is a line in the reading of that day that speaks life and perspective and comfort and grace to me. Invariably.

In Lent, we choose to travel inwards with Christ to a deserted place where we can hear ourselves and hear our God. The beautiful, hopeful truth is that there is life in this and every desert. Lent is God's springtime in the desert. Here, we deepen, we grow, we become more of that 'actual person' we were always created to be.

In that same interview, Nick Cave talked about the difference between religion and spirituality. 'Religion,' he said, 'asks something of us', spirituality usually doesn't.

In this time of Lent, our religion asks something of us.

Will we perhaps subtract; deny ourselves something, creating a space within us to listen to the hungers in our lives which sometimes only surface when we shed the distractions that too often pacify them?

Or will we add, adopt a new rhythm, a new discipline perhaps, in the hope that it might change our priorities, deepen our compassion, widen our perspective?

If you don't already, can I encourage you to devote a short time each day to listen and pray. I'd recommend the Northumbrian office, which you can find easily on your phone. Just google 'Northumbria Community Morning Prayer'. And I'll stick my neck out and I'll say that this; like the angels that attended Jesus after his assault in the desert, these words will feed you, will sustain you through the deserts of now and strengthen you for the deserts of tomorrow.

So, may we each walk bravely into this desert called Lent, knowing that a Springtime awaits us. And may we daily know the voice of the Father who speaks now those same words to you and to me; 'You are the Beloved. With you, I am so pleased'.

