

Being in the Desert



It may seem strange to be thinking about being in a desert when we are at present experiencing floods. Yet, in a way, both floods and deserts (not at the same time!) can force us to examine what is most important in our lives. For instance, what do you take when asked to evacuate from flood waters, or as we had to do about 2 years ago, from the threat of bushfire? Even when you are able to flee in your car, there is only so much you can carry.

After making sure your household and neighbours are accounted for, and food, clothing, medicines and sleeping bags are packed, you may think of your pets. I wanted to take my fowls, but thought that 7 hens might not be welcome in the church's youth hall. In the end I left them home with plenty of food, water and shelter, and hoped they would be safe.

Deserts are places where what is not essential has been removed, or it just does not exist. Sometimes deserts are bare uninhabited sandy or rocky places,

and at other times they can describe how people feel, and what they are experiencing in their lives.

We might ask ourselves, “Is being in a desert like those moments when I feel alone, lost, empty and depressed?” Perhaps, but it is more than that. From my own experience, I have found the desert is not just daunting, but also a place with amazing possibilities that are not available elsewhere. Perhaps this was the reason why Jesus often went alone into the desert and up mountains, and why these events were recorded in our gospels.

We have extensive deserts in Australia, but the photograph in this leaflet is of the Negeb desert, in southern Palestine. At the beginning of Jesus’ ministry, he spent time in a desert praying and fasting, while he was discerning what sort of ministry God wanted him to undertake (Luke 4:1-13). For Jesus, it was a time of listening to God and wrestling with temptations. We reflect each Lent on what this time meant for Jesus, and also what it can teach us.

The desert is an open place where we can expand, breathe deeply and see clearly in every direction. This seeing is not just a physical seeing, but also a spiritual one which enables us to see God, and hear God speaking to us. On the other hand, all our vulnerability and weaknesses are exposed in such a place. We cannot hide behind busyness or be distracted by the things around us. It is where we too, like Jesus, may have to face temptations, but we are not left alone, for God’s Spirit is with us.

In a solitary barren place, we have an opportunity to stop and become more aware of nature, rejoice in its beauty and how it works. With few clouds and no tall trees, each evening we can lose ourselves in, and give thanks for, the amazing beauty of a sunset. At other times we might delight to be still, and rest in God’s love.

When we slow down our lives, the disasters in our world, and the people trying to cope with pain and grief can enter our minds and be held by us and surrounded by God’s healing love. At these times, we are also more likely to notice and interact with others we meet each day. We could smile at someone who looks stressed, and silently pray for him or her, placing them in God’s care. We may also give thanks for a Butcherbird singing on the veranda outside our window (as is happening as I write!), or a hen wanting to be picked up and then

laying her head on our chest.

The loneliness we experience in a desert, helps us to focus on things we often overlook or avoid. It can take courage to enter a desert and confront one's inner self and God, yet it is an opportunity to discover with God, what is important in our lives. We shall find it is not personal success, but rather God's love for us, and our responding love for God.

We may then live out our calling as members of Christ's body, to share God's all-encompassing caring love with others. But, who or what are these 'others'? Can they include predators and bullies as well as victims, such as refugees fleeing from Ukraine, or those evacuating their flooded homes? Do they include nature suffering from pollution and rising temperatures? What is God asking of us to do today?

In Lent we might choose a time each week or each day, to be alone with God in prayer, outside in nature or inside in a certain place in our house. There we can be open to hear God speaking to us. If we should be interrupted, can we accept the interruption and look for God present in it?

The desert was a place where Jesus learnt how God wanted him to express and live out his ministry. In the book of Exodus, the desert was the place where the people of Israel were changed by God from a group of slaves to a community of God's people, and were given the Ten Commandments to direct their lives. For us also, as individuals and a church community, deserts of all types are places where we find God's love and guidance, and can learn how we might both reveal and discern that love in God's world.

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