

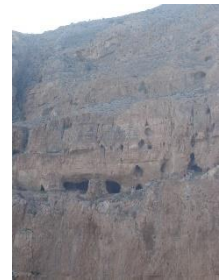
Journeys in the Desert: Resisting Temptation - Lent Course for 2020: Session 1

Two days after arriving in Jerusalem, it seemed the weather had broken. Threatening clouds masked the sun that had shone so brightly over the city the day before. But nothing happened: there was no storm – not even a slight shower. Gradually the realisation dawned: this cloud was not of rain but of dust. The wind was not from the western sea, but from the eastern desert, whipping up the sands and making the atmosphere thick with dust.



Jerusalem is a city effectively on the edge of the desert. You're not immediately aware of it because of the higher hills around, but within a few miles of leaving the city you notice just how little vegetation the soil can sustain. The road to Jericho plunges down, from the 2,500 foot heights of Jerusalem to 1,200 feet below sea level by the Dead Sea, and the terrain most of the way is the Judean Desert.

The place traditionally associated with Jesus' temptations is at the edge of this desert, at the top of a precipice looking over the Jordan Valley. Inevitably, there's a monastery built on it – indeed, built on what is said to be the stone Jesus sat on while he was tempted by Satan. There's a cable car up there today – but when we got there we found the monastery closed for a very long lunch! That was my first encounter with the Judean desert.



My second encounter was much more positive: an early morning desert Eucharist when the sun was low and the air cool. This is a rocky, hilly desert, not like the vast sand-dunes of the Sarah. It is very beautiful – with deep ravines cutting through the hillsides, and a sense of space and emptiness and silence (even if interrupted by the inevitable hawkers and vendors). We were asked to reflect on 'abundant emptiness.'



On this most recent visit to the Holy Land, our desert encounter came on the last day, and actually half the group didn't make it, either because they weren't well or because they were flying out that night and needed to pack. For myself, a churning stomach didn't make for an easy time. Dan, our guide, pointed out that pilgrimage is not meant to be easy. It's supposed to challenge us and push us beyond our comfort zones.

Our drop off was near where you could look down on the monastery of St George Koziba. We headed down, past the monastery and along the ravine called the Wadi Qelt, sometimes called the Valley of the Shadow of Death. Normally, I would have loved it: a deep canyon to follow, with various twists and turns, impressive rock formations and away from the crowds – just a few goats on improbable crags. What you wouldn't have wanted is to have to climb up the sides: there was no way out if confronted by an enemy or wild animal. My worries were more about being ill – the temptation to call a halt. But pilgrimage is not designed to be easy, nor is the desert. You go to be challenged, to be discomforted, to be exposed and vulnerable and even lost.





I say, 'You go...' Who's the 'you'? The Judean desert, along with those in Egypt and Syria, attracted vast numbers of Christians in the early centuries (roughly 4th to 7th centuries) to live out vocations as highly dedicated followers of Christ. In much smaller (but not insignificant numbers) monks have found their way back there today. The monasteries are

Greek Orthodox, and their monastic rules encouraging lives dedicated to prayer, penitence, self-examination and obedience – along with the manual work required to keep the monastery going. Dan, who himself has converted to Greek Orthodoxy, pointed out their sense of vocation to spiritual disciplines contrasts with many Catholic orders whose focus is more on social work, education or health care. Personally, I was encouraged to hear of a vocation that said 'prayer is enough'.

Dan was also interesting about the location of the monastery: it's challenging but not impossible. It's arid, but you do get annual rains. It's remote, but not so remote to stop visitors coming. When we were there it was too busy to get into St George's, as there were several coachloads of Romanians visiting. To get an idea of what these monasteries are like we went to Saint Gerasimos Monastery, close to the Jordan (pictured).



Now, back to the desert and Jesus' temptations: they are very much a testing of his vocation as Son of God. If you're Son of God, prove it to yourself by feeding yourself – you surely deserve to eat well; prove it to others by wowing the crowds with spectacle, they'll all come flocking in then;

prove it by making everyone worship you. Jesus sees off these encroaching thoughts with the words of Scripture – Deuteronomy, to be more precise – and no other resources (except the Holy Spirit within). In the desert, he's been away from all the other voices demanding his time and attention, and been able to focus on why he has come – what being Son of God really means.

For us, 'desert' can mean different things. Sometimes we talk of 'desert experiences' as the bad times in life, the ones when by force of circumstance we've felt isolated or alone, or we've been in emotional turmoil and can't find a way through, or we just can't find anything to enjoy. Many of us will recognise that, awful as they have been at the time, when we look back these experiences have been necessary, or they have given us space to grow. They may have challenged us way beyond what we would have chosen, but they have been really important in our becoming the people we are.

Then there is the desert experience that is chosen. This may be less dramatic – less awful – but significant by the very fact of being chosen. The experience of Lent can be like that. The choice to fast in Lent may be inspired by our Lord's decision to eat nothing. But fasting is about proving to ourselves we are in control of our bodily appetites; that they do not control us. It's only by denying ourselves some form of self-gratification that we can honestly say to ourselves we can manage without. How do we know otherwise we are not possessed by our possessions or controlled by the desire for more? The desert experience is about being honest with yourself.

Another form of desert (perhaps one that attracts me most) is the sense of solitude, quiet and peacefulness. It doesn't mean we have to spend 40 days without talking to anyone, but some time and space alone is an important discipline – if as Jesus did, we using that space to

ask God about our vocation. What is he calling us to at this time? I did a lot of pilgrim walking in my Sabbatical, partly to give me that space. I didn't get dramatic answers. The best I had was 'keep plodding on'! But making the space was really important. If we don't do so we will surely miss the still, small voice.

Monotheism was born in the desert. Abraham, Moses and Elijah all encountered God in the desert with an immediacy you don't get at home. Faith in the desert is much simpler: there's little to distract or confuse. The desert dust that greeted us in Jerusalem reminds us desert experiences may be unavoidable. The desert we choose is part of building resilience for the ones thrust upon us. But it's more than resilience: they are all part of becoming more fully the people God has made us to be. The best outcome of the desert is to discover, as Jesus did, a bit more about what it means to be beloved children of God.



A Prayer of Lament from North Africa

O Christ, you know how it feels to be led into the wilderness.

You who have known hunger and thirst,
Remember now the dry and desert places of our world.

In the wilderness of political strife,
Do a new thing, O Lord.

Among the disenfranchised and the disregarded,
Extend your invitation to belong with you, O King.

Where churches are being closed down,
Make a way for your people, dear Christ.

For Christians facing clashes with Muslim neighbours,
Cause waters of friendship to flow, dear Jesus.

May those who face instability and loss of homes
Find in you their safe and secure abode, our King.

Amid many goodbyes, connections made and then lost,
Be a cup of water to the grieving, our Spring of Life.

We lift to you, O Lamb of God, the dry and dusty nations of the Sahara.
United in longing, our hearts cry out to you,

That artesian wells of your Spirit might open up
And that the waters of Life would flood these parched places.

Make a way in the wilderness!
Give drink to your people!

We have waited so long for your Life to come.
Do a new thing, O Lord.