

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

Let The Wilderness Exult

The word “desert” has a powerful feeling of fear in it. We would not wish to be lost in a desert, or marooned. We instinctively know that we need other people, and that is why I seldom find a great view really pleasing unless it contains some sign of human habitation. I like my seascape to include an island, or a coast, or at least a boat, and a wild waste of mountains becomes more comfortable if there is a whiff of smoke rising from a friendly chimney.

Citizens of the Desert

The Greek for desert is “hemeros” which gives us our word “hermit”. This word has become something of a term of abuse, used to insult rude and self-obsessed people who make no effort to belong to others. There are such hermits, but the holy sort are very different. They seek out the desert, not to cut their links with humanity but to enter into it most deeply. The first thing I would expect if I fled into the desert would be to feel loneliness, to long for another face, a voice in my ears. But then, what do the voices I hear all day actually *communicate* to me? Much of it is empty noise, if I’m honest, and of the real communication that is offered to me, I hear only a fragment, for I am half-deaf with busyness and daily anxieties; God’s Word itself can be like something overheard in the next room. And how carefully do I look into the eyes of others who enter my world now? Would not a few weeks in the desert make these human beings infinitely more precious to me than they are now?

Weary Hands, Faint Hearts

For many of us the desert is a personal one, made out of the weariness and routine in which we live. The scriptural model for this condition must be *slavery*; the spirit of a slave in our resting and our rising, our coming in and our going out, living because we must live, working because we must eat, and gradually eroding our humanity until we have “hardly a word to throw at a dog”. Now it’s an extraordinary fact that when God liberates slaves, his path for them lies *into the desert*. Not to a Promised Land around the corner, instant wealth, plenty, and rest, but a frightening desert where...where *what?* The People of God are convulsed with questions: *What is God doing with us? Blame Moses - why has he brought us into this place - where will our next meal come from? Should we turn back? Perhaps we were imprisoned, but at least they fed us....*the windy prospect of dependence on a promise terrifies the

enslaved mind, used only to second-guessing its oppressor’s intentions, and always assuming the worst.

I Always Love To Think The Worst

God’s promise does not say that the desert will go away, but that it will become a place of joy and flourishing, that it will prove to have a Way in it, that will lead to where weakness and subjection will yield to abundant life; and the signs of life will be the very things I most missed when I first came into this desert: *my eyes will be opened, my ears unsealed* - surely so that I can listen to a voice, and see a face; the survivors of the desert are above all a *community*: “They will come to Zion shouting for joy, everlasting joy on their faces: joy and gladness will go with them, and sorrow and lament be ended.” A lovely paradox, that God leads us into the desert to make us a community, to fit us to share the City of Peace! The wretched despairs of the people who were still spiritually enslaved pale into nothing.

A Holy Desert?

The desert is deep in our heart; our lethal busyness never lets us go there. That is the most fearful place for us. Give us noise, work, other people, but not *aloneness*. The Advent message today is calling us to pay our desert hearts a visit, to find the Way in that wilderness, and to test the promise God makes through Isaiah: that our way to joy is there. Thus John in his prison hears good news from the Christ. *Fr Philip*