

REFLECTION: “The Essential Desert”
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Port Hills Uniting Parish

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Luke is short on detail. So, when he tells us that Jesus was led by the Spirit from the Jordan, into the desert for forty days and forty nights much is left to our imagination. He says that he prayed and fasted and not much else.

So, let’s take a stab at it. This isn’t a holiday break. It is not a short, enjoyable retreat from “normal” life.

In a harsh wilderness place, where during the day it is seriously hot, and nights are cold, and he has no protection from wild creatures he goes:

Without food
Without shelter
Without air conditioning
Without cellphone
Without a bed
Without a work routine
Without You tube
Without a change of clothes
Without a nice warm shower
Without Wi-Fi
Without a morning coffee
Without any means of transport (except his legs and feet)
Without a morning paper
Without a radio or television
Without a golf course
Without domestic animals
Without a doctor
Without a dentist
Without human company

(pause)

It’s a long time to go without. It’s exactly the period from today to Good Friday. The silence would have been profound.

(long pause)

These days they'd probably make a movie about it, or turn it into a reality TV show.

(pause)

In terms of mainstream western life it is "extreme". I can just hear the talkback hosts that infect our airways calling Jesus a "nutjob", a "total idiot" and worse.

In a consumerist culture this kind of behaviour is simply bizarre. We have all been affected by this culture. Even indoctrinated. Many see it as the Promised Land. That this is what life is all about.

(pause)

So, could Jesus have carried out his mission without the desert?

I doubt it. I doubt it, very much.
It was essential to his mission.
It was integral to his mission.
It was not an optional extra.
It was not a cheap stunt.
It was not grandstanding.

Whether it was precisely forty days and forty nights we don't know. We do know that it was a profoundly symbolic action, yet more, much more. What do I mean it was a symbolic action?

Well, it was designed intentionally by Jesus to follow in the footsteps of his forbears. It was designed to reawaken his people to their origins, to remind them of the forty years that they lived in the desert. That their identity and mission was forged in the desert. That the desert is a place where the liberated discover what their liberation means, and how it shapes their identity as a people. As their faith journey had begun in the desert, so would his.

So, there is an intended connection and continuity with the past,

and the desert story and tradition of his people.

It is interesting that the Deuteronomy reading that instructs the importance of establishing a tradition of thanksgiving in the Promised Land completely ignores the desert years. It calls for a bringing of first fruits of crops in gratitude for their deliverance from Egypt and slavery, and the gifting of the new land but it makes it sound like they simply went from the old life to the new.

I think we do something similar. When we anticipate change we only look for easy options. We are on auto-pilot for what is going to be comfortable and convenient and at minimum cost to us. The desert is something we constantly try to avoid.

This of course is the other reason why Jesus began his ministry and mission in the desert. Without a desert intensive deep change is impossible. Before he could call people into the Kingdom of God he needed this time of letting go and testing. The depth, resolve and focus needed for his mission could only be found in the desert.

When he finally returned from the desert his whole life orientation had changed profoundly, and he was now ready to set his people free.

From the narrative we know that in the desert Jesus learnt to live without three things, he was liberated from three things, that block our pathway to living in the Kingdom of God:

Materialistic values, power over all other people and living things, and theologies that emphasize gods who are compliant to our requirements.

I think it is critical that we don't see the desert just as something Jesus did. Throughout his mission, and that means now as much as then, he asks us to follow him. Following him includes the desert. Without it our faith will be seriously lacking. It will be weak, timid and shallow, and we will still be hitched to those things which enslave us.

So, can the church be missional without the desert? No, I don't think it can! We have followed Jesus to the river, and we baptise with water. Why don't we follow Jesus into the desert, and baptise with the Spirit?

Without virtually everything in the desert, except water, all Jesus had was the Spirit.

If we embrace the desert, we will also discover the profound presence of the Spirit. The Spirit will lead us to where we need to be.

I think the challenge to us as a parish. The challenge to the churches in the east. The challenge to the Presbyterian Church, and the Methodist church, and many others, is to not be 'desert deserters'.

Without the desert we cannot be transformational in the world, we cannot live or call others to live the Kingdom of God. Without the desert we will remain heavily conformed to the world as it is.

If we look at the world today we see the shocking cost of shunning the desert. The paradox is that without the desert it leads to desert.

Because we are unwilling to be diminished by the desert, all of life is being diminished. The planet is being diminished. We now live in times of mass extinctions. The bio-diversity of the earth is being stripped at an alarming rate. The growth of deserts is happening at an alarming rate. Our unwillingness to deal with climate change is turning more and more of the planet into deserts both on the land and in the oceans.

The lives of billions are being diminished by unjust economic systems, insatiable corporations, and the sense of entitlement of the rich.

There is a new book making waves in the world. It holds no punches. It is called "The Uninhabitable World". I haven't read it yet but have read reviews. It makes readers very uncomfortable. Like the desert! The writer David Wallace Wells says that inaction on climate change will turn the earth "into hell". A desert! He isn't a doom merchant. But he is a realist. We are seriously running out of time. Huge change is needed and very quickly. The time for complacency is well and truly over. And believe you me we have been wilfully complacent. It now needs to be all hands to the pump.

This is why, it was so uplifting this week interviewing the three school students who are organising the Schools for the Climate strike this coming Friday in Christchurch. I strongly support them! They mean business, and if politicians continue to patronize and insult them they will only grow in determination.

They are fired up!

This is exactly how Jesus sounded after he came out of the desert. It was urgent. It was truthful. It was courageous.

It is in the desert that we can learn to live differently with the support and guidance of the Spirit. It is in the desert that we can become real people of hope and faith. People who are truly free. It is from the desert that we can offer a Jesus kind of leadership.

The classic Lenten question is always “what are you giving up for Lent?” It is a desert kind of question, but is often fobbed off with humour, or taken too literally.

The thing is we are all being asked by the Spirit what are we willing to relinquish? What are we willing to make space for? What are we willing to give up? In an ongoing way. Not just for six weeks but for always. So that deep change, transformation can happen.

These are desert questions, and they don't go away. If we ignore them, they just become more and more persistent and intense. And if they don't, it means we have cut ourselves off from God.

For me, what I'm wrestling with this Lent, is how to overcome the fear that holds me back from taking bolder public actions for planet Earth and the Kingdom of God.

I'd like to finish with a prayer written in recent weeks by a Catholic priest friend of mine, Peter Healy. It is a desert prayer. It's called “Prayer in a Time of Mass Extinction”

Body of God,
Splendour of the Divine,
in a world diminished,
we are diminished.
Wake us up, contain us,
infuse us with a new belonging,
expand our narrow vision,
deliver us again by your life-giving grace.
Encourage us as we draw down our harms,
for only in your commonwealth is their life.

May your Good Spirit, re-enchant us,
let everything be held sacred again,
refound us in your Kingdom of simplicity and love. Amen