**A Month of Wilderness**

# **Background**

Wilderness plays a hugely important part of the development of Judaism and Christianity. Abram’s prosperous father Terah left Ur near the delta of the Euphrates in the north of the Persian Gulf with his extended family, travelling across the fertile crescent to Haran near the modern Turkish border (Gen 11 v31). Abram then moved on to a nomadic existence in the land of Canaan (bordering the eastern Mediterranean) with Sarai and his extended family, in what he interpreted as a call and promise from God. When crops and grazing failed, the tribe moved to Goshen in the fertile Nile delta under Jacob and Joseph. Enslaved by the Egyptians and held together by the religious practices they had developed in their wanderings, their escape when disasters stuck the ecosystem of the Nile valley and their flight from Egypt were deeply religious experience for them. Turning south to the Sinai desert to avoid the militarisation of the route back to Caanan, their religion was codified under Moses and their monotheistic faith in the One God was confirmed. Wilderness experiences formed the faith of the people of God, which we shall consider in week 1.

Returning to the wilderness to find and deepen faith became part of the religious consciousness of the Hebrew nation, both in that period of about 400 years between the Old and New Testament times, and at the time of Jesus (week 2). It was natural then, following the destruction in Jerusalem in AD 70 and subsequent persecution, that early Christians would look to a wilderness life to enable and strengthen their faith in the living God. The wisdom of desert Fathers and Mothers became sought after (week 3). To this day, we seek that same enabling, strengthening and wisdom in our observance of the season of Lent (week 4).

# **Week 1 Journey of Promise or Defeat?**

From the many gods (polytheism) of Ur, Egypt, Assyria and Babylon, the children of Israel formed their faith in the One God through their experiences in the wilderness. This faith they affirmed on entering their Promised Land (Deuteronomy 6 v4-8) and came to pray it twice each day in the formula known as the *Shema* *(“*Hear, O Israel: the LORD is our God, the LORD is One*”).* Read the Deuteronomy passage: could its strength of faith be seen as the hard-won culmination of the wilderness experience of the children of Israel? Note ‘***our*** God’ in the Shema; relationship was at the core of their belief in God. They felt that they were God’s chosen people to the exclusion of others. Think about how this is expressed today in Israel and in the Church.

The children of Israel spent a generation wandering in the wilderness. Their journey was slow but fruitful in many ways. Often we can seem to be making little progress on our own journey in life, only to find when we look back that these times have been fruitful and God has been with us all the time. Are there times in your life when this has been true for you? How did you recognise God’s Presence in those times?

While the return to Caanan had only been glimpsed by Moses at Mount Nebo, the warrior leadership of Joshua gained them entry into the Promised Land. The subsequent leadership of many of ‘the Judges’ helped establish a militarised Kingdom under David and Solomon, centred on Jerusalem, their Holy City. In another session, contrast the militarism and polytheism in the cities of their journey with their own peaceable nomadic wanderings in the wilderness. Where might they have felt closer to God? Where might you have felt closer to God?

Then came the invasion of two massively superior war machines. Assyria conquered the northern Kingdom (Israel) in 722BC (the ‘lost tribes’). Babylon enslaved the southern Kingdom in 597 and 586BC. Both defeats were interpreted religiously as punishment for flirting with other gods or abandoning God’s ways for ‘heathen’ practices. Do you think that their interpretation valid? Is God, for you, a God who punishes deviation from unswerving faith? Or does God uphold relationship and compassion whatever human circumstances befall?

Particularly impactful was the deportation to Babylon, not far from the ancestral home of Terah and Abram in the city of Ur. The people’s wanderings had come full circle and despair was keenly felt: ‘by the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Zion’(Ps. 137 v1). In a session, consider the verses of Psalm 137. How do they make you feel? How do you view the revenge motive in the final verses?

It was during this period in Exile that hope returned. Their greatest prophets proclaimed that their God had not been defeated. A hoped-for Saviour, the Messiah, the ‘Suffering Servant’ would bring freedom and restoration of Israel’s fortunes (Isaiah c40-c55). Read Isaiah 40 v1-11. How would this have been received by those in Exile in Babylon? How does it speak to you today?

Israel spent two generations in Babylon; many rose to comfortable positions of influence in the city (eg as teachers). Only the most religious were willing to return to the privations and hard labour of rebuilding Jerusalem under Ezra and Nehemiah. The desire of these two leaders was to reassert their own tribal identity, heritage and faith by rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem, and by gathering and writing down their history and theology for generations to come. Perhaps inevitably, they incorporated into the insights of the One God gained in the wilderness, some of the myths current in the cosmopolitan Babylon of that time. Their completed written work, the Tanakh, comprised the Torah (the Pentateuch), the Nevi'im (the Former and Latter prophets), and the Ketuvim (the Writings). In a rearranged form, this is what we call the Old Testament.

Think of Churchill’s famous phrase “History is written by the victors”, implying that the victors always portray themselves in the best light. Do you think that this bias is shown in what you know of the Old Testament? Think about how the return from Exile might influence your own view of the Old Testament and of the faith it records.

# **Week 2 Hope and Jesus**

Following yet another invasion, this time by the Seleucid Greeks, Jews led by Judas Maccabeus engaged in a guerilla war against their oppressors (167-160BC). At a similar time, a mystic Jewish sect (the Essenes) formed and flourished in the wilderness near Qumran. According to Josephus, a Roman historian, they practiced piety, celibacy, asceticism, communal sharing of both property and money, a strict observance of Sabbath, ritual immersion in water, and gathering to watch the sun rise. John the Baptiser may have been part of, or at least had a working knowledge of this community.

John came baptising in the Jordan river in a practice similar to the Essenes, at a site traditionally close where Elijah’s chariot took him off to heaven. Read Mark 1 v1-8. What do John’s manner, practices and dress say about his form of wilderness Jewish faith?

Jesus himself received the baptism of John and his earliest ministry may have been similar to John’s (Mark 1 v14-15), but later he transformed both. Read Matt. 3 v13-17. What impression of Jesus do you gain?

John the Baptiser seems to have had a very clear idea of who Jesus was from their first public encounters. Read John 1 v19-34. As John’s Gospel was the last to be written, this could be seen to sum up the faith in Jesus of the New Testament Church. How close to summing up your faith in Jesus does this account get?

Immediately following Jesus’ baptism, the Gospel writers tell us, that Jesus returned to the wilderness to overcome the evils of corruption, abuse of power and self-promotion. How? By focusing on the revelations of God. Read Matt 4 v1-11. How might a thorough grounding in Scripture help us resist evil today? What is God saying to you personally in this passage?

Jesus is recorded in the Gospels as frequently withdrawing to pray alone, or some distance from his disciples. He seems to have derived strength, rest and ‘refuelling’ from this focus on being alone with God. It is noticeable that events such as the Transfiguration (Luke 9 v28-36) and Gethsemane (Matt 26 v36-46) involved such prayer. Read both of these accounts. How might such a solitary focus enhance your experience of prayer?

# **Week 3 Desert Abbas and Ammas**

Wilderness is a place to encounter God, devoid of distractions and the complexities of daily living. Ascetics down the Christian ages have found that withdrawal to a wilderness, a simplicity of living, or a temporary retreat from the world have beneficial effects on their lives and spirituality as Christians. How this might benefit you personally? Are you drawn to take any particular actions?

Faced with persecution, hardships and corruption of life at the time, it was natural for devout people in the Early Church to follow the tradition of seeking God in the wilderness. Hermitages and early monastic communities flourished, notably to the East of the Nile in the fourth century. Their focus was on ‘purity of heart’ –overriding focus on the transcendent spiritual reality of God to the exclusion of almost everything else. The ‘prayer of the heart’ was *“*the centre of spiritual awareness of God*”* (McGukin), seeking the salvation of God by allowing Him to enter your innermost being through contemplative prayer. Read Romans 7 v22-24. Does this help you to understand the desire for a wilderness spirituality? Might the ‘prayer of the heart’ be helpful in your life?

One of the holiest of the desert Abbas (Fathers) was St Anthony the Great (251-356). The story is told that he was asked ‘What good work shall I do?’. He replied ‘All works are not equal. The Scripture says that Abraham was hospitable and God was with him; and that Elias loved quiet and God was with him; and that David was humble and God was with him. So what path you find your soul longs after in following God, do that, but keep carefully your heart.’ How might this be relevant to you?

John Klimakos (c579-649) was abbot of a monastery in Sinai. He wrote in his instructions to his monks: *‘*Your prayer demonstrates exactly what condition you are in. Theologians say that prayer is the mirror of a monk’*.* In a session reflect on these words and their relevance to you personally?

The tradition of wilderness and the prayer of the heart has been maintained down the centuries, notably in Eastern Orthodox Christianity. A collection of texts from the fourth to the fifteenth century is compiled in ‘The Philokalia’. Its wisdom covers contemplative prayer, sitting in inner quietness, and the Jesus Prayer (discussed in the month on Centring Prayer). Do any of these three particularly attract you?

Try sitting quietly for a while in a deserted place. How does it feel to be still with God in this place? If you have ever visited a desert or wilderness, think about how it felt at the time. How would you feel being there again, alone with God?

# **Week 4 Lent**

# *‘*In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God’ (Isaiah 40 v3).

# The words of Isaiah, taken up by John the Baptiser, still have their resonance today. This is particularly true in the season of Lent: *“*For in these forty days, you lead us into the desert of repentance, that through a pilgrimage of prayer and discipline we may grow in grace and learn to be your people once again*.”* (from the Common Worship proper preface for Lent). Echoes here of the wilderness wandering of the Hebrew nation, the asceticism of the Essenes, and the example of the desert Abbas and Ammas. Echoes too of Jesus being led into the wilderness by the Holy Spirit following his baptism. In one session this week, consider whether Lent is for you an important part of your spirituality or more of an anachronistic add-in by the church? What parts of keeping Lent do you particularly value?

# Lent, these days, can often seem to be a busy time. Some churches put on extra groups studying and discussing special Lent books; others advise ‘taking up’ something new; still others prefer you to ‘give up’ something by way of Lenten discipline. Lent seems to mean additional work on all our parts! Yet, a return to the wilderness, the simplicity of living and focussing simply on God seems to be too easy to lose. Perhaps we have lost the value of sitting alone in silence with God, of simply being in the Presence of God, mindfully. How busy is your Lent normally? Do you value that busy-ness or do you long for resting in God?

# Consider this quote in a separate session:

# “Contemporary man {and woman!], tired and discouraged by the various problems which torment him, is looking for rest and refreshment. Basically he is seeking a cure for his soul, as it is mainly there that he feels the problem… Every means that [Christianity] employs, and indeed its very aim, is to heal man and guide him to God. For in order to attain communion with God… we must first be healed” (Metropolitan Heirotheos, 1994).

# Does that resonate with you? Are there people you know who feel that way? How might you help them?

# Jesus, in his time in the wilderness, overcame the lure of corruption, the abuse of power and self-promotion. Wilderness down the ages has been a place of silent focus on God, a freedom from the displacement activities of a busy life, a searching for wisdom and guidance from God. Consider what you want to reassert in your next season of Lent.

# Finally, in a separate session, review what you have appreciated, learned or felt drawn to do during this month of wilderness spirituality. What is your next move?

# **Follow-up Resources**

* <http://www.orthodoxriver.org/oa/issue-69/life-in-the-wilderness>
* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hlBXib2sGTc>
* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W3H-QgpNLZs>
* <https://www.orth-transfiguration.org/>
* <https://thisredeemedlife.org/worship-in-the-wilderness/>
* JA McGuckin (2001) *Standing in God’s Holy Fire: the Byzantine Tradition*. DLT
* Rohr R & Martos J (1988) *The Great Themes of Scripture: Old Testament* DLT

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