

# Good Friday Talks: The Desert and the Cross

By Rev Dr Bill Domeris

## Introduction

The theme for these Good Friday reflections is the 'The Desert and the Cross'. There are three reflections and each deals with a different 'desert' and a different word from the cross. My purpose in choosing the desert theme is to find continuity with the series conducted here in the cathedral over the Lenten period, in which different people shared their own desert experiences. Since I was not present for these talks, I will try to imagine some of the shared experiences and to seek the resolution of these at the Cross of Jesus.

I have often travelled to the land of Israel/Palestine and have several distinct impressions of the geography of the place. It is a place of contrasts, from the greenery of Galilee to the harshness of the Judean deserts, from the bustle, noise and aromas (good and bad) of Jerusalem to the silence of the Dead Sea. Most of my visits were to participate in archaeological excavations, either in the City of David (Jerusalem) or at Shuni in the Galilee, not far from Caesarea. I enjoyed walking, whether around the ancient city walls of Jerusalem or up the ancient Snake path of Masada. So when I think ancient – I think of our excavations in the ruins of Jerusalem; and when I think desert, I think of the walks in the region of Ein Gedi, near the Dead Sea, where David hid from King Saul, in a place which still today bears his name Nagal David – the canyon of David.

Deserts are curious places, dusty and dry and yet beautiful in a haunting way. I found beauty in the silence and the desolation – in the absence of people and the presence of the wind; in the sense of isolation and the presence of God. The desert is a dangerous place, still today – not helped by the Israeli habit of placing land-mines in odd locations; but also because of the occasional wild animals. In the ravine of Nagal David, with its surprising greenery surrounded by bleak and inhospitable desert, one may still encounter snakes and leopards. A sign reads "If the leopard is far away, run; if it is close, keep still". We didn't see any either close or far.

Nagal David is a memorable location, because of the stream which flows through the valley, and the occasional pools and the beautiful waterfall, of which the Bible speaks. One emerges from the dust and heat of the desert into a place of shade, trees and bird song, mountain goats and cool pools. It is truly an oasis and has been a place of refuge since the first inhabitants built their temple in the Chalcolithic Period, five and a half thousand years ago.

In the early Christian centuries, the Judean desert became a chosen place of refuge for monastic communities. Indeed the Nabataean city of Pella, in the southern desert, was the place chosen by early Christians as their safe-place, when the Roman armies encircled

Jerusalem and laid siege on the holy city in 68 AD. In obedience to the words, of Jesus, at the sign of the approaching army, Christian believers literally fled into the desert – many to Pella, where they remained in safety, while thousands of people died in Jerusalem.

Jesus and Paul spend time in the desert in preparation for the years of ministry – and it is in the wilderness that the Children of Israel are formed into the People of God – consecrated and covenanted to their God. So with such an inheritance it makes good sense to spend Good Friday in the regions of the desert – not least in facing some of our own desert experiences – and in finding our own oasis – the Nagal David's of our own redemption.

## 1. Facing the Desert of our Emotions

Reading: John 19:28-30

Hebrew thinking divided the human persona into three parts – namely the place of emotions (our intestines and liver), the place of commitment and intellect (our heart) and the place of our spirituality and conscience (our soul or spirit). In what remains of this first talk, I will consider the place of emotions and the wilderness experiences related to our emotions.

The desert, of the emotions, might be either a lack of emotion or an oversupply of emotions. It might be a sadness that pervades every part of our being; or an emptiness, which turns our world into shades of grey – a desert, featureless, emotionless and cold. It might allow God to seem close or it might leave us feeling isolated and vulnerable. I imagine that most of us, especially those of us who have really lived, (I mean in excess of fifty years), have faced the desert of the emotions at one time or other.

The people of the Bible, with their close understanding of the physical desert, knew also the dangers of the desert of the emotions. In fact, several of the most memorable Bible stories takes place in the desert, like the Exodus and that wonderful story of Elijah (1 Kings 19). Elijah, fresh back from his victory at Carmel over the prophets of Baal, discovers that he has made a mortal enemy of Queen Jezebel. Upset that no-one seems to have taken up his defence, Elijah goes into the wilderness. His state of depression is so deep that he decides to allow the desert to take his life. But God has other plans and, with some difficulty, wakes the sleeping prophet, gives him food and drink and sends him to Horeb (the alternative name for Mt Sinai). There Elijah has a meeting with God and receives the commission that will give meaning to him for the remainder of his life. Perhaps the most beautiful part of this story is the picture of Elijah, in the cave, waiting for God – a dramatic earthquake occurs, a mighty wind, and a fire – but God is not in the earthquake, or the wind or the fire. There follows what the King James Version translated as “a still small voice” – but the Hebrew says simply “the sound of a small silence” and in that silence, Elijah finds God.

For the early Israelites, the desert became the place of struggle and the place of meeting with God – it is this double meaning, which gives us hope when we face our own deserts.

The Church is often not very good at responding to people who are enduring a desert experience. The Church, which should be a place of healing and safety, can become a prison – where ordinary people, trapped in the desert of their emotions, are surrounded by folk who seem to believe it is their professional duty to bubble constantly. We desperately need real people, with real struggles and real emotions, who can journey with us through our desert experiences, as we, in turn, journey with them: People who have walked the same path and felt the same emotions, or lack of them. Paul, in First Corinthians 12, tells us that the Body of the Church feels the pain of the hurting parts of the body. The Church is pre-eminently the place of wounded-healers, following in the footsteps of Jesus.

At the conclusion of this first talk, we come at last to the cross in time to hear Jesus cry out “I am thirsty”. What a paradox that the same Jesus, who spoke to the Samaritan woman about Living Water, should face death by thirst and exhaustion. Crucifixion was a slow death by attrition which might last up to five days, each one an extension of increasing agony and dehydration – ultimately suffocation. Invented by the Phoenicians a thousand years before Christ, it was perfected by the Romans as a way of dealing with escaped slaves and would be revolutionaries. It was designed to shame and humiliate – to crush the spirit and mind.

But in his request for a drink, Jesus gives us a clue to facing our own deserts – as he asks for help for his simple need. “I thirst” he says and he allows the very soldiers who crucified him to be the answer to his prayer.

On this Good Friday – we pray:

Holy Lord. When we walk the paths of the desert of our emotions, those places of apathy or confusion of feelings, we feel so alone. In our thirst for understanding and the presence of another, we cry out. Come today and bring your living water to refresh us and to heal our emotions. Set us free to be the wounded healers, you desire us to be. In Jesus’ Name, Amen.

## 2. Facing the Desert of our Mind (Heart)

Reading: Luke 23: 32-43

The second desert, which we face, is the desert of the mind (which in Biblical terminology would be the desert of the heart). Recent research has suggested that the heart plays a critical role in the ordering of both the body and the brain. Quite the reverse of what for so long was assumed to be the relationship between heart and brain. Far more instructions emanate in the heart than scientists first imagined. So the ancient Hebrews, once again, anticipated the findings of modern science – the heart is indeed part-brain and part blood pump.

What is the desert of the heart? The romantics, among us, might suggest that the desert of the heart is an absence of someone to love, or someone to love us, but that does not define the limits of this desert. I imagine that if the desert of the emotions is an absence of emotions, then the desert of the heart might be the absence of unconditional love – and by extension, the trauma of faith stretched to breaking point.

Let me explain: Christian believers have long realised the challenge of hard questions. Questions are not, in themselves, things to fear, but when life throws down the gauntlet of challenge, questions can diminish our capability to respond. So often, as a priest, I have listened to people explain how an unexpected death, or lengthy illness of a loved one, exploded their faith in God. “How could God allow this to happen?” they enquire, as they seek some assurance that things are not as they seem. They have been robbed of the sense of God’s unconditional love.

The problem with education is that it conditions our minds to question, with scalpel-like efficiency, in order to expose false logic and faulty reasoning; sometimes, before we have developed a faith that can deal with the difficult questions. So one finds priests struggling with the shreds of their faith; students of theology puzzled and perplexed; and ordinary people in the Church growing tired of the implied order – ‘to shut up and simply believe’. Ideally, one needs both faith and logic to grow in tandem so that hard questions find their resolution in good theology. At the same time, common sense dictates that there will be time when we experience the desert of the heart – those moments when we are overwhelmed by doubt and we lose the security of God’s unconditional love.

Hard questions remind me of the story of Job, the innocent sufferer. The first two chapters give us the outline of the tale, with the unprecedented misfortunes which come on Job and his family. Job copes well with the loss of wealth and family, but the attack of boils leaves him rather depressed – depressed enough to curse the day of his birth.

After a series of lengthy speeches by the friends of Job, and Job’s long-winded responses, Job (in chapter 19) reaches a point of desperation. Relentlessly, the three friends have

argued that Job's sufferings are a manifestation of hidden sin. His solution and salvation lies in the acceptance of God's justice and the confession of his sin. But this simple solution flies in the face of Job's own faith and experience. So he refuses to confess imaginary sins before God and instead searches the heavens for some understanding of his plight. Surely, somewhere out there, there is another explanation of his terrible suffering and loss.

Job demands justice. Unsatisfied with the evidence of his friends and the stark reality he faces, he looks for someone to redeem him. The Hebrew word is Go'el and means "kinsman redeemer" – a family friend to help you in times of desperate trouble.

Like those of us who have journeyed into the desert of the heart, Job has become dissatisfied with trite analogies and simplistic answers. He longs for something more – something real, that will satisfy his heart/mind and not just his emotions. "How can God be a just God, when he attacks innocent people without provocation or just cause?" reasons Job.

The speeches of Job are extraordinary in their interweaving of the righteous anger of Job and the resurgence of his life-long faith. In chapter 9:33, Job makes a strange, but logical request – he asks for an umpire. By which he means, an umpire between Job, the sufferer, and God, the implied author of the suffering. This umpire will adjudicate between the two and hopefully redeem Job. Later in chapter 19, in those well-known, but misunderstood, words, Job cries out, "I know that my redeemer lives!" (v25). Here the faith of Job leapfrogs over his present trials to seek out a different God – one who will defend him (v26); and not the false god that informs the theology of his friends.

In my life as an academic teacher of the Bible, I have wrestled with those hard questions, which have occupied other greater minds. "Is there really a God? Is there life after death? Did Jesus rise from the dead? Is God really a God of love?" So many great questions! Strangely enough, I have found that in reading the writings of the sceptics and those biblical scholars who choose to deny the authenticity of the miraculous including the resurrection, I am affirmed in my faith. The very shallowness of their solutions is evident – "Science tells us that miracles cannot happen; Mary went to the wrong grave; the women at the tomb were hysterical"; Such simplistic answers stand in sharp contrast to the unfashionable, even uncomfortable, message of the Gospel. It is not wrong answers which break faith; I think it is the failure to keep looking for good answers.

I imagine that, like Job, there have been moments in the desert of the heart when we have longed for a referee, between us and God – someone who truly understood our struggles, and questions of faith, who knows what it is like to be us – to be human and ordinary and trying to do our best, and sometimes failing: When we wanted someone to save us from some Christians, and some Churches. We wanted a referee – one who played more fairly than those we see on Saturday TV. We wanted to be heard – we wanted our hearts to be heard – we just wanted our hearts to be heard.

I imagine that Jesus, at times, longed for a referee to adjudicate in the injustice he experienced – through the mockery of a trial and the torture which followed. The Garden of Gethsemane was a place of acute struggle, where obedient faith collided with the instinct for survival. “Not my will” implied a very conscious sense of the strident claims of his will. Indeed, the conclusion, “Nevertheless, your will be done” is more prayer than statement. Jesus struggle was real, since the sweat-blood is only evident in moments of acute trauma according to recent medical research.

To the cries of those who mocked him, on the cross, Jesus was silent; even when they seemed to repeat the temptations of Satan – “if you are the Son of God, the Messiah, then come down from the cross”: Such a simple solution to a horrible situation – to opt out, to do something for himself, to choose another way. Instead, Jesus turned to one of the revolutionaries who were crucified with him. The man called out, “Jesus, remember me, when you come into your kingdom”: and Jesus responded with those glorious words, “Today you will be with me in Paradise”.

There will be times when we find ourselves in the desert of the heart, when we struggle to understand God’s plan for us and his purpose in our lives. We look around for signs and indicators, but this is a desert and all we find is sand and rocks. We go to Church to find answers to our questions and come home bewildered and hurt. We make promises of commitment and it seems that all of creation conspires to break us down. We try to be the people of hope and peace, but society seems to be somewhere else, with a far-distant agenda. In our desert, we need a referee, a redeemer, but the only one we find is a man who died on a cross, a victim of violence and ethnic prejudice. Is there really no justice in this world?

And yet, there is this subversive memory that will not let us go; it holds to our heart and clings to our mind. Somehow, somewhere, on that cross, there is a God who understands and journeys with us, even in the desert of the heart – who enables us to say, with the Psalmist, that “Even when we walk through the death-filled valley, our Shepherd God will be there to comfort us and to release us from our fears”.

The unconditional love of Christ stands knocking at the door of our hearts, “Behold I stand at the door and knock” (Rev 3:20); we know that when, against all hope and in the midst of doubt, we open that door, Christ will come in. We may not feel any different, we may not look any different; but in God’s eyes we are different – and that’s what counts.

In the awareness of that God, we pray; “Holy Redeemer, come today and set me free from the fears of my heart/mind. Take your place in my heart as my Lord and Saviour and reign in my life. When I cannot find my way in the desert, come and be my light and my guiding cloud. Today on this Good Friday, save me from my doubts and bring me to that place when I can see you with the eyes of faith. In Jesus’ Name, Amen.

### 3. Facing the Desert of our Soul (Spirit)

In this third talk, we consider the desert of the Soul or Spirit. We remember in the understanding of the ancient Hebrews, that we are a unity of three parts; emotions, heart and soul/spirit. It is the soul/spirit where the essence of our persona – what we call our personality – lives. But it is also the place of communion with God and the space where God's Holy Spirit speaks with our spirit, and from whence the deepest prayers emanate (according to Paul in Romans 8:26). But it is also the place of our deepest struggle – the place where we enter into the desert of the soul.

We have looked at the desert of the emotions, the struggle against apathy and emptiness and listened to Jesus cry "I thirst" as he grappled with his own emptiness. We have looked at the desert of the heart, and the human struggle with doubt and hard questions of life and issues of faith. We listened to the promise of Jesus – "Today you will be with me" as he faced his own questions and doubts. Now we go to the third dimension and the darkest desert of them all, the desert of the soul.

I imagine that, like me, you have survived the challenges of emotional emptiness or places of intellectual wilderness, but have a healthy respect for the desert of the soul. Emotions come and go; hard questions can be resolved or even ignored; but the place of the soul or spirit is a holy place, at the very core of our being – what happens there impacts immediately and unmistakably on our whole life and well-being.

For the third time we go back to the Old Testament – this time to the Psalms. In my experience, when I am looking for God's voice, I do what both Jews and Christians have done for thousands of years – I go to the Psalms. Here in this series of prayers, we find both questions and answers, as we read of real people who faced real issues; struggled to find God; to hear his voice and to feel his love.

In Psalm 22, sometimes called the crucifixion Psalm, the writer, perhaps David, struggles through the desert of the soul. The passage reminds me of the speeches of Job, because faith and doubt stand side by side contesting for dominance. The writer begins, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me; far from my deliverance are the words of my groaning. O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer; and by night, but I have no rest. Yet thou art holy; O thou who are enthroned on the praises of Israel" (v1-2). I love the juxtaposition of doubt "Where are you God?" and faith "You are enthroned on our praises".

Psalm 30, another Psalm of David, is filled with questions of faith – "What profit is there in my blood, if I go down to the pit? Will the dust praise you? Will it declare your faithfulness?" (v9). And moments of faith – "God's anger is but for a moment, his favour lasts for a lifetime. Weeping may last for the night, but a shout of joy comes in the morning" (v5).

In my experience as a priest, I have sometimes encountered people lost in the desert of their souls. Unlike those people who have lost faith and slowly dropped out of church, these

are Christians who want to be in church and long for a real, living experience of God. Like Mother Teresa they have an unshakeable faith but no sense of God's closeness. I wonder how many people sit in church, week by week, unable to admit to the feeling within – that they do not feel God's presence at any time. For them, God has become distant and far away – seemingly, too busy to hear them or to attend to their feelings or even their prayers. Heaven is silent and their prayers seem incapable of piercing the void.

For the third time, we come to the cross to listen to the words of Jesus. He has spoken of thirst and of Paradise. This time he speaks out of the depths of his soul, "My God, my God why have you forsaken me?" Few of the words of Jesus made such an impression, that they were remembered in their original language as here: Once, when Jesus speaks to a teenager calling her back from death to life and here, at his own death. Jesus is quoting a psalm, but the raw pain of the God-forsaken cannot be disguised and should not be disguised.

Of all the deserts which Christ would enter – the deserts of emotion, intellect and spirit – this is the desert which must have troubled him most – the desert of the God-forsaken. This is the place where people struggle to find God; where God seems to have abandoned them; where there is no residual sense of his presence – only darkness and sometimes pain and confusion. How does one help people to experience God in those moments, when for them, God feels far away? How do you explain your own sense of the nearness of God, to someone who has sat in church, year after year, and never experienced that nearness?

For Jesus to be truly human, and, as the author of Hebrews writes, conversant with all our experiences, he must, at the last, become the bearer of our sin and so experience the judgement of God for us. Carrying the sacrifice of his own life, he enters into the sanctuary on our behalf – our great High Priest and our Saviour. Scarcely wonder that he cries out the call of the God-forsaken.

Job lost his God somewhere in chapter 19, but God found him again. This is the story of Scripture; as the prodigal who returns to find a parent already looking for him or her. The message of a cross, on which the arms of Jesus are always open, is one of love. And so in our journey through the deserts of emotions, heart and soul, we come back to the cross. Strange that no matter which path we take, if we search for truth and life, we will always come to the cross – to the reality of a personal relationship with God. Jesus was at pains to explain that whether God is a shepherd looking for his sheep, a woman looking for her coin, a father looking for his son – God will keep on looking for us and he will bring us to the foot of the cross.

I do not have solutions for all those desert-times, which we face as Christians, and which some of you are facing today. There are no shortcuts out of the deserts, even deserts of our own making. There are no magic words we can say to dispel the darkness or make us feel better. Jesus died on Good Friday, alone, God-forsaken, in the dark and in his pain.

But the story did not end there; and our story does not need to end in the desert. "Sorrow and tears come in the night" says the Psalmist, "but joy comes in the morning" and Easter morning was no exception. Paul reminds us, that Jesus was raised by God, placed at the right hand of Heaven and given a name above every name – that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, on heaven and earth, and everyone should confess that he is Lord to the glory of God.

I find it strange that the love of God, in its most complete form, comes wrapped in this frail human shell. All the teaching of the Old Testament and the New Testament is crystalized in this one human being. All of our hopes and dreams are invested in this man Jesus. He alone carries them into the future, including those of the past generations of Christians, and those of the unborn generations. On this Good Friday, as we stand once again at the cross; we marvel at the wonder of God and his amazing love; at the simplicity of the Gospel; at the depth of his concern and the extent of the suffering of Jesus.

"Amazing love how can it be that Thou my God should'st die for me?"

Holy Lord. Thank you for sending Jesus to be our Lord and Saviour. Thank you, Jesus, for your great love for us. Allow us to receive that love. Give us the grace to let you work in us and through our experiences. Walk with us in our deserts and this Easter pilgrimage and bring us all to the celebration of the glorious resurrection of Jesus.

In Jesus' name, Amen.

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