**MAKES YOU WONDER RESOURCES**

Do not Forget Jesus in the Desert

**By Ian Robinson**

Bible Readings

Mark 1.10-13

Dt 4.1-14

Psalm 62.5-8

There is a critical step in this passage which all of scripture says that **we must not forget**. It even says we are in deadly peril if we DO forget.

So I can’t stop here in reading Mark and go on to the next story, love it though I do. We must remember where Jesus *next* steps went after his triumphant baptism.

**The question is this: why is Jesus soon to be found in the desert?**

You would have thought that such a heavenly visitation by the river would have meant that all Jesus’ problems were over. He has the world to win and God the Father has just split the sky and shouted down his go-ahead. Now he just has to go for it, right, and everything will come his way, right? Certainly some preachers make it sound that way – come to God be filled with the Holy Spirit and everything will be at peace, right? So why is Jesus immediately to be found in the desert?

**v. 12-13 JESUS IS THROWN INTO THE DESERT**

It is the Holy Spirit who forces Jesus into the desert.

He is literally ‘thrown out’ *ekballein*. He would have walked south, further into the Arabah Desert, where St Paul was later to spend three years. This journey sounds so strange. What does it mean? Why do that?

Usually, in sermons we would turn now to the gospels of Matthew and Luke and read how Jesus underwent three major *inner* tests from Satan about his calling - how to carry through his mission. Mt and Lk go into the tests in detail. Intriguingly, Mark does not. There is something else here also that we need to see. It is the very big something that we must not forget.

Here it is. The desert has always, *always* been essential to our faith for biblical people.

We can carry forward that journey in two ways: by a journey in the desert out beyond the *margins* of town and farm, and secondly by returning into *mainstream society* to practices that preserve the desert’s lessons.

Today, let’s just leaf through some of the multitude of snapshots in the Bible about these two ways, and you will come to wonder why you have never seen it before this.

**a. God shapes people in the desert beyond the margins:**

Old Testament:

When God needed to form his people as his own he took them across the Reed Sea out of Egypt into the desert, for forty years. It was hard enough getting them out of Egypt, but it proved near impossible to get the Egypt out of them. They rebelled repeatedly. To prepare Moses for that job, God had maneuvered him into the desert for forty years. The Law, the Covenant and the Commandments are all given there. Their main images of God are formed there – Yhwh, Fire, The Way, The Rock, Mystery Revealed.

When they get to the Promised Land they are told they don’t own it. When they get into the wrong attitude to the Land and to wealth, God sent the prophets to warn them and remind them of their desert identity. Time forbids me to mention the significance of the desert in Isaiah, Jeremiah, Zechariah, Hosea and Malachi. In fact, this survey doesn’t leave much out, does out. How did we overlook this expansive theme so thoroughly?

New Testament

We can go further. In Jesus’ time, when Israel wanted to recover its integrity and identity, various messiahs and in fact John the Baptist returned people to the desert. The Dead Sea scrolls people, the Essenes, did it, and another Jewish community near Alexandria, and a host of other individuals, were all doing this around Jesus in different ways.

For centuries, therefore, the refrain that revitalized Israel’s faith was ‘back to the desert’, but how? Jesus had options in how he went about this, so when he acts he is acting deliberately. Later, on the mount of Transfiguration, Luke records that when Jesus chats with Moses and Elijah, Jesus’ mission is spoken of exhaustively in terms of carrying out another desert ‘exodus’ – a journey of freedom. So, a marginal journey to the Desert is not an option for Jesus.

A desert journey is the paper on which the story of faith is always written. Why is to so? We shall soon see, but first the other main way of remembering the desert in our lives.

**b. How will you Remember to Practise the Desert in mainstream society?**

It is never supposed to be something that stays out on the margins. It is supposed to go home with you and transform your life. The book of Deuteronomy, written on the edge of the Promised Land, at the place where Jesus’ baptism takes place, repeats again and again, ‘do not forget to do what you have learned when you enter your ease in the promised Land,’ and it sets them up with several institutionalized ways so they would never forget:

The biggest example among these is the annual pilgrimage (compulsory) Feast of Tabernacles, Booths Sukkot. For one week every year, every body had to sleep out under the stars. They did this to remember who they were and whose they were.

They remembered the awesome truth : ‘us plus God plus nothing’ = who we really are. No ‘plus our buildings no money no land’ . Np ‘plus our music or preaching’ NOT even ‘plus our spirituality’, not even ‘plus our great faith in you’, not even, ‘plus our great spiritual experiences’ – simply, it was a way of driving home the point to our selves - we hold no hope but God. And God loves just us, plus nothing. Just me and God and the clear air of love – that is enough.

This practice, in one action, removed all other idols from their places in their value system. Every one every year. In fact both scripture and history bear out that Tabernacles was the biggest festival of the lot, bigger than Passover.

Don’t think that this was just a religious history lesson. It was a way of taking hold of our identity. That is why it was always at this event when they dedicated or rededicated the tabernacles and temples, and the levite priests were dedicated too, amidst much singing and dancing, and some say much drinking. It was at this feast when Hannah prayed for a baby and Eli thought she had been drinking. It was at this feast that Jesus made his greatest claims and greatest confrontations (Jn 7-8). Never forget the desert, it says, we must never forget who we really are - Us plus God plus Nothing.

This and other institutions of Israel were set up as the seats in which the call to reform and renewal could constantly be heard. What sort of ways have you set up so you can constantly enact the desert truth :‘you plus God plus nothing is who you really are’ ?

Let’s move from public institutions to personal level practices. There are other ways in the mainstream, where Jesus’ kept a personal practice of prayer in the way of the desert. Just one I can mention now is the practice of prayer in solitude. He taught us the necessity to pray alone – ‘when you pray, go into your room alone, etc’. About a dozen times that are recorded he went off alone to pray, and taught his disciples to do the same. When he was among farms and towns and villages, he went, it says (in a way that is made obscure in the English it might be better in your other languages) to *a deserted place.* The word used is the greek word for *desert* eremos – he was *doing a desert prayer time*. If you study those times, in the majority of recorded cases anyway, they were not sweet retreats but *uncomfortable* experiences. Prayer that shows where we are uncomfortable, in solitude, open to the sky and stars is wondrously renewing and kind of scary.

And there are other practices too which I will just mention in a moment.

So, church, let’s stop for a moment and ask ourselves how we are doing with this essential element of a biblical faith. Do we gather annually to say - No buildings no money no land and no hope but God? Where do we deliberately and together discomfort ourselves and remove all other idols from our value system? Sorry Deuteronomy, I think we forgot ….

So whether in *mainstream* practices in public or private, or in the more *marginal* form of journey into and out of the desert, the spiritual values of the desert are not optional for biblical people. Especially when Australia has so many great deserts just a day away. Jesus remained faithful to this central pillar of faith through his forty days and his ongoing years. They defined strongly his life and his message and he taught his disciples to do likewise.

It was not much later in in Christian History, that the *Desert Fathers and Mothers* became known as typical of Christianity. John Wesley said they were the ‘true christians’. Thousands of Christians left homes and went to live in prayer communities. Ironically they renewed the whole church, throughout the Empires east and west, ac church that had thrived on persecution but was getting used to its safe position and later position of privilege, and going rotten. The Desert Fathers and Mothers practiced several disciplines, they they were not at all systematic about it, just dedicated to a holy love. They were not mystics, not pole sitters, not haters of women and not haters of life. They strived to reach as far as possible into the love of God – they practised four personal disciplines of - solitude, repentance, fasting (including celibacy), and meditation (upon scripture and sacrament). Through this they lived in simplicity.

They also shared in some disciplines of living in community – work (to earn their own keep), simplicity of lifestyle, deeds of kindness, and obedient submission of self. Through this they have for fifteen hundred years, repeatedly inspired the whole Christian movement into renewal. First they empowered the church to take the gospel throughout all of pagan western Europe and east into China, by the sixth century.

About every 500 years, they reappear in our teaching at times of great change. But we forget. We create idols in our churches. We get proud of our achievements and stuck on our traditions. It is particularly westerners who have forgotten – I would say that the churches in China and Kore are much closer to the discipleship of Jesus. Some good news at last, the study of the Bible’s desert spirituality has been growing for almost half a century now - Our time has come to remember. Praise to the Holy Spirit who has not forgotten us.

Let me close with the picture we have painted.

Jesus is baptized by John and explodes into history. God the Three in One wraps him in love, exposes us all to the harsh light of reality that we all have to deal with in our thinking. Then, the Holy Spirit of God sends the Son of God like a projectile into the desert.

Yes, as Matthew and Luke say, Jesus needs to get his bearings, orient his strategy and get his integrity sorted. But also as Mark shows, Jesus must learn in the flesh and not forget how to stand before God with nothing. As we do. Well, if he needed that, do you think that we do? Did you think that it was your talents your looks your organizational ability that God wanted? Your money? Your buildings and resources? No it is you. God loves just you. He will get around to calling you into some action or other, but please don’t go, please don’t do *anything* until you know how much a Just God just loves just YOU.

Those who physically can’t come to the marginal desert lands on a journey, or can’t go to Koora retreat centre on the edge of the desert, can (must) make ways to practice the desert’s disciplines here in the mainstream. That is, start soon to learn fasting, solitude, maybe celibacy, simplicity, generosity, generous acts of kindness and so on - to the extent where you know ‘you plus God plus nothing’.

His desire is for just you. It is you plus nothing that God loves with the power that animates the entire universe. Now, can you say with me this meditation again that is a response of love to God alone.

Read Ps 62.5-8 for God alone my soul waits

**Fullness and Emptiness.**

We have heard your name, *Father Son and Holy Spirit*.

You were at our baptism, too. *One with us*.

In you we live and move, *Creator, Saviour and Comforter*.

In Love, In Life

*Your Timeless breath sustains us.*

We have been wondrously in awe in the mystery of who you are.

*Wet, blood and flesh like us.*

We know enough that we do not know everything.

So, *Yahweh Rock and Fire*,

our hearts desires are all afire

*to be at One with you.*

Reframe our minds, *reshape our foundations*,

*So that we can obey all that we do know,*

And find the trajectory into more

*and more* and more.

*Triune Trinity* *One*.

Fullest Love, Cosmic Community,

*We confess that we are so full of ourselves.*

Empty us to prepare us for fullness,

*Discomfort us to prepare us for joy,*

Expose and cast down our idols,

*Be One with us and be our Only One -*

Call us to your desert and bring us home new.

*In the name of Jesus, friend of John,*

*And walker in the wilderness, Amen*

CONCLUSION

I do not know what you are going to do about this. Some of you it is just off your map, and you can’t relate to it at all, maybe. Some of you may wish you could dismiss it that easily, but you know there is something in this. Some of you know that God is calling you into his Love. Do it. Do it badly if you have to. But do it in the name of the Father Son and Holy Spirit. Amen