

'Living in the Desert ... When God seems Absent'



Brochure Four

Brochure 4 of 4

In this final brochure of the series, I want to offer some practical suggestions while recognising that they are limited. If we come to understand that we must not just pass through the desert, but make it our home, and if we further recognise that what is happening to us is something that God is deliberately doing to us, drawing us on, drawing us deeper, then our responses can be but few. Certainly to opt out is the wrong approach as is trying to 'solve' it.

We live in an age of the 'quick fix' and 'self-help'. As we have seen in these brochures, surviving in the desert is not a 'quick fix'. It is going to take us a lifetime. Someone once asked, 'When will I be free of temptation'? And the reply came, 'When you are dead'. As we know, sometimes for us the issue of temptation can be greater at various times. In a similar but different way, there are oases in the desert where we can and will find refreshment before setting out once more. However, not always. Times of drought are common.

A good metaphor may be this. Here in Australia where much of the land is desert, sometimes you will see large gum trees as opposed to the scrubby Mallee bush. You know that there is a watercourse beside them even if it is dry most of the time. The trees 'know' that this is the place to grow and over the years put down a deep taproot to find the nourishment needed in order to survive a drought.

This is our story too. So where is our watercourse? The first place will be the Church, for it is where we are supported and support others in our common Christian journey. Then there are the Scriptures of the Church, which also provide the nourishment that we need. As well, the Eucharist will particularly nourish us in worship.

We may not always feel nourished, but they are critical foundations given by God to sustain us. Droughts come and we just have to accept them because we cannot continually uproot ourselves and at the same time expect to have a deep taproot. The taproot will sustain and nourish us. I have also said in these brochures that our feelings are on the surface of our life and God is working at a much deeper level. We cannot allow ourselves to become a prey to our feelings: 'God does not *feel* close to me' or 'I don't get anything out of going to Church or to worship'.

We might also notice in what I have just been saying, that the focus is on me! While we need to take care of ourselves, at the same time we don't wish to become unhealthily focused and absorbed in 'me'. Bitterness, cynicism, and despair can easily emerge as a response to feeling 'trapped' in the desert.

So might we choose to be a blessing to others? In being life giving to others we will not be taken from the desert, but will find our own situation somewhat eased. We may be in an oasis or at least at a waterhole for a time. The paradox here is that we need to be doing this for the right reasons. If we are only doing this to help ourselves rather than because of a genuine desire to walk with another in some way, then our efforts will be self-defeating.

Then there is remembering. 'Remembering' is a key concept in our Scriptures. The Jews were constantly reminded to look back to the formative experience of the Exodus and how God saved them out of love. As Christians, we are constantly reminded of what Jesus did for us in dying and rising. One dimension of the Eucharist is remembering. So remember God's many past blessings as a way of sustaining you in the present. In David Steindl-Rast's phrase, it is 'to have a grateful heart in all circumstances'.

When we feel we are living in the desert, it is especially important to have a routine and sense of discipline about us. We need to be faithful in private prayer and public worship, even if it seems as if you are only going through the motions and it feels hypocritical. It is about not letting things slip; it is about standards.

Remember too that we not only carry others in our prayers but they can carry us. In intercession, we hold another person or a particular situation or need up to God, asking Him for transformation in some way. In partnership with God, a new synergy is created that does not exist with individuals. It can be similar to the dynamic and the synergy created in marriage and families. The prayers of others can be as important for us as our prayers for them.

Patience is also needed. We are God's creation, a work of art, and our transformation takes time and so cannot be rushed. A small baby cannot be rushed to the maturity of an adult. It is a process that takes long years. With our spiritual maturity growing we must be patient as things can be ruined with haste.

In *Zorba the Greek*, Zorba finds a butterfly chrysalis almost ready to hatch and he carefully blows warm air on it to hasten the process. And, he succeeds! However, what emerges is not a beautiful butterfly ready to fly but one, which is crippled. It was not ready; it was not the right time.

Think of a child entertainer on stage who looks and acts way beyond their years. No matter how good they might be, as adults we can feel uncomfortable, wondering what damage it may do to them both socially and psychologically. They are being forced to be what they are not.

We cannot force the pace of our physical, psychological and spiritual growth. It must unfold in its own way and time. So have patience with yourself and with God knowing that He has your best interest at heart and in fact knows you better than you know yourself.

Things to Consider

- ▶ Lamentations 3.25-26 reminds us that 'The Lord is good to those who wait for Him, to the soul that seeks Him. It is good that one should wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord.' Further, in verse 41 we are told 'Let us lift up our hearts as well as our hands to God in heaven'.

- ➔ All this speaks of patience and our prayer emerging from our heart, meaning that it is heartfelt, not simply something of the mind going through the motions. A sense of trust, just 'waiting on the Lord', undergirds all this.
- ➔ When we think we are simply wasting our time, this can be our gift to God when there is seemingly nothing in it for us and we seem to be living in the desert under the mid-day sun.

- ▶ Eventually we realise we have come some distance when we begin to feel 'comfortable' in this desert place, albeit one which is harsh, and may even notice some beauty around us, unlike the gentle beauty that we previously experienced. We come to realise and accept that this is where we will find God. It dawns on us that our transformation is God's work with our cooperation. We cannot save ourselves, only God can.

- ▶ It has been said that you cannot visit new shores without leaving the safety of the old one. It occurs when we enter the vast area that makes up the desert landscape. It is an invitation to step out in faith, but many choose to pull back. Perhaps to begin with, it is what we all do and who can find blame in it. Eventually a decision must be made to either follow God into the desert and be drawn towards union with Him, or to return to the safety of the known shore and a more pedestrian way of life. The choice is always ours and God awaits our decision.

- ▶ O God
you withdraw from our sight
that you may be known by our love:
help us to enter the cloud where you are hidden,
and to surrender all our certainty
to the darkness of faith
in Jesus Christ. Amen. (Alternate Collect, Prayer of Week, Easter 7)

MBH