

## **Parish Quiet Day, 22 June 2019 – reflection**

We live in a wordy world – a world where people are forever advising us, instructing us, talking to or at us. We all play our part in that. How often do we *really* stop to listen to our neighbours' stories, to make the effort to understand their perspective? How often do we deliberately and intentionally take a break from our everyday lives, stop battering God with words of our own making, and listen instead for the still, small voice in the silence?

We are about to have another short period of quietness, perhaps in company with others, perhaps in solitude. Just over a hour isn't really very long but it's probably longer than most of us ever allow ourselves to 'do nothing'. Is that scary? or exciting? a welcome relief, maybe?

Perhaps we shall find ourselves having to confront what we would rather avoid. Thoughts and feelings and memories have a way of bubbling up to the surface at such times, nudging at us and not letting us go. That can be disturbing, perhaps distressing, but simultaneously empowering, enlightening, *if* we allow ourselves to engage with them.

Perhaps we shall have the chance to recognise what it is we really hope for. Just as we spend time pushing away issues we really don't want to confront, so we often fail to give ourselves time and space to crystallise our hopes and dreams, fail too to recognise the presence of God already in our lives. Some years ago, my mother was very ill and I stayed awake with her throughout one

night. She was in excruciating pain but she prayed all the time, begging God for comfort. I was too taken up with my feelings of helplessness, but looking back on it much later I realised that God had been there all the time in that little room. I just needed to slow down to let that recognition take shape.

In Jesus' time the steps leading up to the Temple in Jerusalem were uneven – one deep step, followed by one shallow step – perhaps specifically in order to slow you down as you approached God, almost to unbalance you, to make you concentrate. Setting time apart to slow down, ponder and pray about the happenings of the day, the week, the year, is not wasted but affords an opportunity to recognise God's loving presence.

Jesus often withdrew to deserted places to pray – and he would return with renewed strength. But his longest period in the wilderness, very early on, must have been one of terror as well as of renewal. After his baptism by John he was led, or even driven, by the Holy Spirit into the wilderness. For 40 days he was tested by the devil, he had no food, and he was famished. There must have been mental torture as well as physical. And yet throughout his ministry he returned again and again to such places.

For us, too, there is both the physical and the mental wilderness. The first we may choose to visit deliberately, searching for beauty, solitude, adventure, knowledge. There can be danger here – when we were driving in Namibia hire cars came with two spare tyres as standard – but God can seem very close. The

second, the wilderness of illness, bereavement, loneliness, anger, depression, is more often visited upon us against our wills – and is far more difficult to navigate. Sometimes God seems to have vanished altogether, leaving us with no spare tyres, no light and no way out. And yet so often if we move among those living on the edge, those who appear to us to be struggling to survive in a wilderness of physical and mental disability, we are humbled to discover that the shining presence of God is already among them, always there ahead of us.

The bible is full of references to the desert blooming, to waters and streams breaking forth in the wilderness. I wonder what our streams are? what makes the desert bloom for each one of us? Maybe if we take time to think about that we shall be better able to find sustenance in those times when we find ourselves wandering against our wills, better able to endure the desolation of the spirit and find that God is present for us too, even when we feel most abandoned.

And what of our neighbours? If we find strength for ourselves in the bad times, are we ready to share it with others? Do we take the time to recognise when our neighbours are struggling? Do we listen to each other, pay attention to each other? or do we, through our careless thoughts and thoughtless deeds, drive people further into whatever their own personal deserts may be?

One of the greatest of the desert fathers, Abba Anthony, said in the 4th century that ‘our life and our death is with our neighbour’. The desert monastics

understood very clearly that our relationship with God is inextricably bound up with how we are in relationship with our neighbours. In our worship earlier we lit three lights in the name of God. We pray now that God will use us as we step out on our journey to keep those lights shining steadily for all our companions on the way.

John Moses, a former Dean of St Paul's cathedral, outlined five themes of the desert journey – solitude, testing, self-emptying, encounter and transfiguration. A little bit over an hour seems hardly long enough even to begin such a journey but, to paraphrase Isaiah, God's ways are not our ways and God's time is definitely not our time.