Sunday August 9th 2020

**John the Baptist in the Desert Mark 1:1-8**

What picture does the word “desert” bring to mind? A bleak area, maybe miles of hot sand dunes or an arid stony expanse or even a cold wasteland stretching far into the distance. The one thing that all deserts have in common is the lack of water… they are dry.

This passage uses the word “wilderness” to describe the place where John the Baptist was and where Jesus experienced His temptations. As one travels down the road from Jerusalem into the deep valley which marks the eastern border of Israel, the area to your left is the start of the Judean desert or wilderness. It is a rocky place. John is described as “appearing” in that area having been living alone and existing on what he could find. Eating wild honey from the bees nests in the scattering of trees.(There must have been some flowering plants around.) He also ate locusts. It is now generally thought that the word used really does mean locusts rather than the bean from the locust tree. My husband assures me that in parts of Africa locusts are considered a delicacy and the desert locust can grow quite large and juicy!

So, why was John in that area? Firstly, his parents Zechariah and Elizabeth lived in “the hill country of Judea” which stretched north from Jerusalem to Samaria and was on the west of the Judean desert. Secondly, he was from conception a man with a God given task. We have to go to Luke’s gospel for the details.

*Luke 1vv13-15*

*But the angel said to him, “Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John. You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He must never drink wine or strong drink; even before his birth he will be filled with the Holy Spirit. He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. With the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before him, to turn the hearts of parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.*

Wow! That is quite a life task. Unfortunately, we have no details about John’s upbringing and he next appears- aged about 30- from the desert to baptise people in the River Jordan. I would surmise that he spent time alone with God in the desert to prepare for his mission. We do not know how long, but it was long enough for him to become a real desert dweller.

John certainly needed a special helping of God’s strength as he was given the task of challenging the people to repent and be baptised because the Kingdom of God was at hand. Many people came to where he was baptising in the Jordan and John was clear in his call for repentance: sometimes he was rude calling the religious leaders “you brood of vipers”, telling the soldiers to treat people properly . He built up a group of his own disciples and he may even have had an influence on the Essenes at Qumran.

But when Jesus came for baptism, John had the God given insight that this was the Messiah and was witness to God’s confirmation and the Holy Spirit descending like a dove. His time in the desert had made him open and sensitive to God’s promptings. After Jesus’ baptism John continued preaching and baptising in parallel with - but not in opposition to - Jesus’ ministry. After all there was no mass media in those days*. (See John3:22-30)*

Returning to our definition of “desert” or “wilderness”, we can all experience dry times in our lives when things are difficult and God seems distant or uninterested. John the Baptist experienced this too. If you remember, he was put in prison by Herod after John had criticised Herod’s marriage to his brother’s wife. *(see Matt 14:1-12).* Stuck in jail anxiety and depression set in and John started questioning what his ministry had been all about…. was Jesus the Messiah was it all a mistake…. had he wasted his life? He really was in a desert place, but his own disciples stood by him and he sent them to Jesus. (*Matt 11:2-6).*

Jesus sent them back with a reassuring message which we can only hope helped John out of his desert of doubt so that he could face his death with the knowledge that he had been faithful to the right calling.

We may be finding this present situation a difficult and dry experience. I can only suggest we keep firmly in touch with Jesus and look for His answers in the things that God brings across our path day by day. Let us remind ourselves of the amazing, powerful and loving things that we see Jesus doing in the Gospels and hang on to the fact that He is still at work today and His love is just the same.

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