

RETURN TO ME

Rend your hearts and not your garments. Return to the Lord your God...
JOEL 2.13

Of different the places I have visited in Israel the one that one that really spoke to me was the Judean desert. I had the same feeling about the Sinai desert when following in the footsteps of Moses through Egypt and Jordan. The wilderness has an important place in the spiritual history of Israel. It was in their journey through Sinai that Israel became a people, and it was to the Judean desert that both John the Baptist and Jesus withdrew to prepare for their ministry.

Before I went to the Middle East my mental picture of a wilderness was of a very untidy garden; a place of disorder and confusion, where there was no order or beauty, where it was difficult to pick out a path, where everything was at sixes and sevens, dense and impenetrable. When I actually went there, I had to abandon that picture pretty quickly. The Judean wilderness is a desolate place; far from being like an overgrown garden it is empty of life. When it rains there are a few streams, but their moisture is quickly absorbed by the parched land, and here and there the few bits of vegetation eke out a stunted and precarious existence. There are no trees, no grass, just rocks and stones and sandy soil. Sinai is just the same. What a place to go to find God!

Yet this empty desert spoke to me. It had its own beauty, and the more closely I looked I saw that it had its own forms of life which thrived in conditions we would think lifeless. And as the sun caught the hills they came alive with colour and form. At the time I was

aware of being moved; afterwards I asked myself Why? And the answer seemed to be to do with my own sense of emptiness before God. However much we kid ourselves, before God we don't amount to much, as the ashes we receive on our heads today remind us.

There is no hiding in the desert. In ordinary life there are all kinds of things to hide behind: success in work, pursuing our pleasures, the good opinion of our friends; but the desert reminds us that God sees through all these; he sees us as we really are. Jesus speaks about this in today's gospel. Whether its giving alms, saying our prayers, fasting or storing up wealth, he says, God sees beyond the outward show to how we really are in our hearts. If we feel uncomfortable about this, then take heart; this divine seeing is not judgemental, but loving. As St John said, it was not to judge the world that God sent his son into the world, but that through him the world might be saved. (*John 3.17*) God is the one who takes the initiative; before we ever find him he has already found us, and it is only when he sees all that he can forgive all.

The way of the world is to cover up, to try to hide the bad things, and to live by appearances.... And to some extent we are all caught up in this; outward show displaces inner reality. There is nothing new in this, nor is there in God's call to turn away from superficial concerns, and to seek him in the depths of our hearts. Four hundred years before Christ, that is almost 2500 years ago, the prophet Joel echoed God's eternal call when he called the people to rend their hearts and not their garments - tearing your robe was an outward show of penitence. But, says, Joel, its not outward show, but inner repentance that takes us to God: 'Yet even now, says the LORD, return

to me with all your heart, with fasting with weeping and with mourning; rend your hearts and not your garments. Return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love...’ There we hear the gospel two-and-a-half millennia before Jesus proclaimed it!

So how do we rend our hearts? How do we make the desert bloom? The only sure way, I think, is by learning to listen to God and take his truth to heart. At the beginning of Lent we are reminded that Jesus went into the wilderness to pray, to listen to God. And this comes first. Study courses, almsgiving, and fasting are important, but without a change of heart what we learn or do remains on the surface of our lives. God wants us to hear his calls in our depths. St Benedict urged his monks to listen ‘with the ears of their heart,’ that is with our whole person, and Esther De Waal in her book *Seeking God*, points out that the latin words for listen and obey, *audire and obedire*, come from the same root; true listening leads to action. We rend our hearts through obedient listening, and this, in turn, means learning to pray meditatively. I explain how to do this in *Deep Calls to Deep*. Its a way of praying with the Bible, called *Lectio Divina*, or sacred reading, which St Benedict taught his monks - its sometimes called the Benedictine method. It is a slow, meditative reading of the scriptures in which we repeat the holy words gently to ourselves, speaking them quietly with our mouth, letting the sound of them dwell with us as we might listen to the echoes of a bell. Its not repetitive, rythmic exercise, like saying a mantra, but a more engaged process, an active listening.

The aim of this way of praying is not to seek to understand the text intellectually but rather to let it speak to us intuitively. I find it helpful to think of meditation as tuning in to God's wave-length, letting the scripture become part of me, so that it is something I carry around in my heart. It is a way of coming to see the world as God sees it, letting his outlook inform our outlook, his values become our values, and his Will strengthen our will. So shall our hearts be rent lovingly, and in the desert we shall find new life.