

Genesis 17. 1-7, 15-16

Psalms 22. 24-32

Romans 4. 13- 25

Mark 8. 31-38

Sermon Sentence: God is a God who is not distant but present in the wilderness. To take up one's cross is to take up the life which led to the cross and which followed the cross.

Loving God, may the words of my lips and the meditation of all our hearts be now and always acceptable to you our strength and our redeemer, Amen.

"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning? O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer; and by night, but find no rest.... I am a worm, and not human; scorned by others, and despised by the people.... I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint; my heart is like wax; it is melted within my breast...."

(Silence)

At Holy Covenant this Lent we have a study group exploring Rowan Williams's *Silence and Honey Cakes* - A book which takes the reader on an inner journey of silence and community, with the help of the desert mothers and fathers of the 4th and 5th centuries. The book was the result of a series of lectures that Williams's had given here in Australia in 2001.

In his preface he speaks of a special resonance the wisdom of the desert tradition has here in Australia, with a desert as our heart land.

"A desert as our heart land".

Following on from our first meeting on Wednesday I have spent much time reflecting on this idea of Australian geography and its connection with our spirituality. The vast majority of our population live on the edges, not only do we face outward but life is constant. Life is characterised by deadlines, study, work, over-stimulation, an abundance of choice.... Hardly a geographical wilderness...

Being in a desert brings one to silence. There is something inherent in the geography which can be greeted solely with the absence of words.

I want to use this desert as a metaphor. A metaphor which describes the journey of encounter with God, Self, and neighbour. A journey which Rowan Williams and the desert tradition call us, here gathered, to begin. Lent too is taking us deeper into the wilderness. It is a difficult and challenging terrain this land of the heart... the sun is scorching.... There is no reprieve... feet are weary and the soul is heavy..... It is a space where we risk encountering silence, stillness, darkness and even the illumination of those parts of ourselves which we may prefer to hide. Silence is at times deafening and the absence of God seems close.

The psalm from which we read today opens with the psalmist crying out to God "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning?"

The psalmist too has gone into the wilderness, in this desert place he cries out to God... why are you so silent now God, why.... Why... why. Not only is the psalmist experiencing an absence of God but also disconnection from community and alienation from himself, evident in his cry; "I am a worm and no man". Some may name this place the psalmist describes as the "dark night of the soul"

When I moved to Canberra I was 20. This was a difficult letting go process at the time. An older and wiser friend said to me, this will be a wilderness time for you, at least for the first little while. Use it as a time to learn about God, to be in God's presence... and to grow closer to God and yourself.

Her words certainly became flesh. It was not that Canberra was a desert but the dislocation and disconnection of my being from that which I knew and which knew me was deeply disturbing.

For those weeks and months, I kept Thomas Merton's prayers close.

One particular prayer which has stayed with me through the subsequent wilderness periods has been "O Lord, I have no idea where I am going...." Then he goes on "You will lead me by the right road, though I may know nothing about it. Therefore I will trust you always though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and You will never leave me to make my journey alone".

(Silence)

Some days I want to yell at God, like the psalmist, “Where are you?”, Why are you so far away!

I am sure we could all share this cry at times

The psalmist cries of the absence of God and yet paradoxically, speaks to God as if God is very near...

“Yet it was you who took me from the womb; you kept me safe on my mother’s breast. On you I was cast from my birth, and since my mother bore me you have been my God... he even goes on praising God... “I will tell of your name to my brothers and sisters; in the midst of the congregation I will praise you”.

(Silence)

We now come to the text which is set out in the lectionary today, the final section of the psalm. The language of the psalmist changes, now it is focused on affirming what he believes about God, the individual language turns into communal language.

As the psalmist walked through the shadow of darkness, he appears to have encountered God in the wilderness. As he travelled the rugged terrain of his heart and soul he has met with God, present. The wilderness has made way for the still small voice of God, proclaiming a new vision of reality, where the poor shall eat and be satisfied, where the cry of the afflicted will be heard, that nations may come together, and that life may be proclaimed even to a people yet unborn.

The psalm has opened up the question of the nature of God and God’s relationship with humanity. If we read the psalm in part we could assume that God might be far from the groaning of the heart, but it becomes clear that not only is God in the depths of our dark night, but is offering a light by which we can make the way ahead into a society / world which is craving the solace of the wilderness and the justice and peace of the God who is encountered there. The desert sends us forward into a certain way of life – a particular relationship with God, self and neighbour.

(silence)

Let us turn now, to the gospel reading. What, in light of all that has been said, might it mean to take up one’s cross and follow Christ?

Surely it would mean to take up the life which led to the cross...

Jesus foretells of the suffering and rejection that he must endure, he speaks openly about his pending death. He then goes on to speak about what it is to be a disciple of Christ. One must deny themselves, and take up their cross and follow Christ. This self-denial is not about self-loathing or a lack of self-care but rather is a process of walking into the wilderness to encounter God and therefore who we are and from this place being led out to live as Christ lived...

In lent we remember Jesus' time in the wilderness. We mark this period as 40 days. But Jesus was never very far from the desert places, the heart land. He frequently withdrew to quiet places. From these places he lived a life which brought life to the world - "binding up the broken hearted, proclaiming freedom to the captives, bringing comfort to all who mourn, bestowing on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes".

To take up one's cross then, is to take up and attempt to live into the life of God. *This God who meets us...*

(silence)

Where then is God? God is in the desert place, and will go with you as you go on from there, sustaining and equipping.

Let us Pray:

God, you will lead us on the right road, though we may know nothing about it. Therefore will we trust you always though we may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. We will not fear, for you are ever with us, and you will never leave us to make this journey alone. **Amen**