

THE DESERT TODAY

By PIERRE-MARIE DELFIEUX

For two years of my life I was able to live as a hermit in the Sahara. I retain an unforgettable memory of this experience. Time spent at some length in the desert is never wasted. And in the lived experience of this exposure, in this 'rite of passage', something opens one up to what I choose to call the 'paschal light of the desert'.

THE DESERT strikes one first of all on account of its size and its presence everywhere on the earth. One fifth of the land of our planet is made up of deserts. This is not by chance. In every human life a moment comes, one day or another, in which each of us has in some manner to go through our own desert. This passage is never in vain.

The desert is present too at the heart of the scriptures and of revelation. In the history of the chosen people, in the life of Christ and in the Church's journey, time has to be spent in the desert. There must be some deep meaning in this.

In his well-known letter to a Trappist at Staoueli, dated 19 May 1898, Charles de Foucauld wrote:

You have to go through the desert and dwell there to receive the grace of God; there one is emptied, everything which is not of God is taken away and this little house which is our soul is emptied to make room for God alone.

This is a time of grace, a period every soul which wants to bear fruit must go through. This silence, this recollection, this forgetting of all that is created are necessary for the kingdom of God to form one's interior spirit, one's inner life with God and dialogue with God in faith, hope and charity.

Later the soul will bear fruit in direct relation to the extent to which this inner person has been formed in her. If this inner life is negligible then zeal, good intentions, a great deal of work are all in vain: like a well which wants to give holiness to others and cannot as it has none itself. You can only give what you have and in solitude, in this life alone with God alone, in this profound recollection of the soul which forgets everything created to live

alone in union with God, God gives himself entirely to the one who gives himself or herself entirely to God.

There is an irresistible call to the desert written on the heart of the universe, both in the infinitude of interstellar space and in the invisible but real void made by matter.

This call is written in the heart of the Holy Land and the heart of sacred history. Jesus himself, God become human in the midst of us, did not try to avoid this essential journey. He came to know the desert in the rocks of Judah at the beginning of his public life. He knew it in the nameless depths of solitude at Gethsemani at the close of his life. He experienced it in the exile of his first years in a foreign land and in being rejected by his own as soon as he first began to preach the kingdom. The desert marks the history of Israel as much as it marks the Church; the world's progress as much as that of every individual. Whether we desire it or not, whether we seek for it or not, it is there.

Where then is the desert? I said this to myself as I wandered through the wastes of Hoggar. And it came to me that there is more than one secret, more than one value, more than one teaching in the desert. There is the 'mystery of the desert'.

I would like to speak of this mystery first of all in its own right, before going on to show how we try to translate it by living it out in the heart of the city.

Easter in the desert

The desert is first of all a place of stripping. A naked landscape to bear one's feet, under a naked sky to light one's path. No growing thing; the presence of rocks on the ground stretching out under the blasted emptiness of the firmament. No living thing; in this place which says everything about the Creator there is no sign of the creature. No sounds; absolute silence invades the sand dunes and the rocks. No shade from the sun during the day; no shelter from the cold at night. On this empty earth, the human person has to be emptied out. Having, doing, knowing no longer count here. In the desert one is no longer valuable for what one has, for what one does, for what one appears to be, but for what one is. In order to live one has simply to survive. And this is only possible if one accepts the need for such stripping. So it is for anyone who wishes to follow Christ (Lk 9,23-26. 57-62; 14,25-27).

The desert is also a place of struggle. Struggle against tiredness, against discomfort, against thirst, loneliness, hunger, but even

more against the devil, the world and against oneself: against the devil who is revealed unequivocally as the enemy who brings anxiety, fantasies, temptations; against the world which reaches solitaries right in the midst of their isolation with its memories, taunting and nostalgia; and against oneself when one feels chattering and murmuring and boredom and tepidity rise up within . . .

And so one has to struggle. Struggle to acquire peace. This time is not about tranquility but about confrontation. This is the time and the place of struggle. No one can walk in Christ's footsteps without this struggle (Mt 10,34; Eph 6,10-20; I Thess 5,8).

The desert is the place where what is essential is revealed. Flight into distraction is impossible. Here everything is relativized, honed down, rendered more essential. At the heart of this stripping, of this struggle a presence is revealed. The very presence of the Creator of this universe. The one to whom all one's thoughts return, one's every cry is raised; the one who is written so deeply within and so obviously established above that this presence is to be discovered in what is most intimate and what is most exalted. The God of time and of before time. The God of the universe and of history. God who fills the human person, God who orders the elements, God who creates and sustains the world. The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of my trials, the God of Jesus Christ. The desert of life reminds each of us that there is no other absolute than God (Hos 2,8-22; Lk 12,13-21).

At this moment the desert is at last revealed as a grace of wonder. What is most beautiful in every desert is that somewhere it conceals a well. After a biting cold night there is the magic of the rising sun: the hour when the earth emerges from the dark, where the horizon is sketched out in blues, where the soul awakes to God: 'God, you are my God, I search for you from the dawn, my soul is thirsting for you. Dry land, parched and without water, my lips will tell of your praise' (Ps 63,1). After the scorching heat of midday, there is the wonder of the setting sun; the mountains go to sleep, the dunes become drowsy, the gentleness of evening dispels the harshness of the day: 'In peace I lie down and fall asleep at once, since you alone, Yahweh, make me rest secure' (Ps 4,9). The attraction of this world is forgotten. Christ's strength has triumphed over the adversary. 'In the evening tears, but joy comes with the dawn' (Ps 30,6). In the very depths of one's heart the presence of God has cleansed everything, brought every calm.

God alone is there, but within God is the world and my heart contains the God of the world.

Distance reveals a presence. Separation leads to communion. All one's friends are re-discovered, one's enemies forgiven. 'You give me unbounded joy in your presence, and at your right hand everlasting pleasures' (Ps 15,11). Everything is reconciled. Everything is brought together into one. Wonder of this fulness. Within one's very depths one discovers what is most universal.

God is indeed all in all, everywhere and for ever. The desert tells us: God alone is necessary. At the end of their trials, the saints and mystics recognized to what a state of wonder the 'Easter of the desert' had brought them. 'God alone suffices', Teresa of Avila taught. 'My Lord God served first', Joan of Arc proclaimed. 'All for the greater glory of God', Ignatius Loyola sang. 'My strength is my love', Augustine of Hippo wrote. In this way, at the end of their own journey they saw the desert both coming to an end and flowering. There is only one way in to the Promised Land (Isai 35,1-10).

A place of stripping and of struggle, a place where the essential is revealed and a place of wonder, such is the desert into which Christ himself makes his way with us and for us. In two key verses Mark tells us this: 'Immediately afterwards the Spirit drove him into the wilderness and he remained there for forty days, and was tempted by Satan. He was with the wild beasts and the angels looked after him' (Mk 1,12-13).

Jesus goes there and lives 'with the wild beasts'—the stripping. He is 'tempted by Satan'—the struggle. He is 'driven by the Spirit'—the essential of every life. 'And the angels looked after him'—the grace of wonder.

We too must follow him out into the desert. Because, in a certain manner, we all know the desert. The desert of sickness, the desert of failure, the desert of loneliness; the desert of boredom in a monotonous life, dryness of a joyless interior life, of disillusion, of divorce, doubt, or that jaded feeling the mystics call *accidie*.

Each and every one of us has known or will know the need to go through our own desert. And the season of lent, each year, like a *leitmotif*, invites us to go forward on the path which leads through Easter to life.

The desert in the heart of the city

I was too happy on a mountain in Assekrem. After years spent as a chaplain at the Sorbonne in the heart of the Latin Quarter,

in the centre of Paris, how could the desert of Atakor have done other than seduce me? There is something fascinating in the stripping I have described. Something ecstatic in the struggle it provokes. Something that enraptures one in the discovery of the essential to which it leads. And something thrilling in the contemplation of the Face which it unveils.

But, in point of fact, was there any real stripping in that? Were real struggle and the path to what is essential and the meeting with the presence of God upon earth in that?

And so it came to me little by little, at first in an obscure way and then in the light, that if there is a true desert nowadays, then it is situated in the heart of the city. In the heart of major cities such as Paris, London, New York, Kinshasa, Tokyo, São Paulo, Cairo and Mexico.

The first Adam, excluded from Paradise, had to set off for the desert of an arid countryside or a nameless city. The new Adam came into the desert of our heart and to the heart of our cities in order to lead us to Paradise. We have to set off in the footsteps of Christ; to find him where he is truly present and at work in the everyday. That is how the monastic and lay 'Fraternities of Jerusalem' were born, with the intention of living 'in the heart of the city in the heart of God'.¹

As places where people are isolated, indifferent and anonymous, modern cities with their fragmentation and arbitrary development are more and more like deserts. We all know how easy it is to feel alone in the heart of a city crowd; how easy it is to feel affronted in so many different ways in the rough and tumble of social and professional life; or harassed and lost in the whirlwind of daily life. It has become more important than ever to create places of silence and peace, of sharing and communion where individuals can find their centre again and enjoy meeting at some depth. Hence the 'carpet of prayer' set out in the midst of the tarmac of Paris and which fills the church of St Gervais.²

Our modern cities are full of thirsty people. They seek for light and truth, love and peace, for anything which can help them find meaning in their own lives. We have to dig wells in the midst of our major cities and set up oases in the heart of these modern-day deserts. Wells where 'living water' may spring up; oases where the 'living bread' of the Eucharist may be shared. Where so many senseless and discordant words are heard, we have to let God

speak. For God alone can restore our vision, comfort and build us up again. Hence the monasteries.

If the world of yesterday was 90% rural, nowadays it has become urban in inverse proportion. So in the heart of the cities new kinds of monks and nuns have to emerge. By the twofold testimony of their daily (personal and liturgical) prayer and their shared love, these proclaim their faith in God and the joy of living in God's presence. Jesus does not pray that we may withdraw from the world but that we may be protected from evil (Jn 17,15), and in this way witness to the absolute centrality of God right in the midst of our own precariousness.

And so the city is there, a city come of age, present everywhere, and in search of God. It is as full of demons and temptations as ever the deserts of Judea, Scitis and Nitria were. This presence is nevertheless able to lead people who are hungry for God to unceasing prayer of intercession and praise. At all points of the globe this phenomenon of urban life marks present-day thinking with its fingerprint. If cities nowadays are not rendered Christian from within, then prayer from without, from the countryside is not going to change them.

For this reason a living, life-giving form of monasticism which is situated in the heart of the city, in the heart of God, must be brought into being as soon as possible. This is what the Church is calling for and what the world expects. So let already existing monasteries on the mountains, in the forests and the valleys flourish but, equally, let oases open up in the midst of the desert of our major cities. To struggle against mirages, relentless thirst, the loneliness of the city; and to speak of its true beauty, aspirations and deep values to the praise of God's glory.

But is it possible to pray and contemplate in the midst of a great city, you may ask? This is a valid question. But the answer is even more important. Yes, one can and one must. We can because we must; we must because we can. So we have to learn new ways of praying with, in and through the city. It is tempting to think that the city is a distraction from prayer. We have been experimenting for ten years, in the footsteps of those who have gone before us (because there has always been a city-based form of the contemplative or monastic life). One does not pray less in the city than in the country. But one does pray differently.

In one sense the prayer is even more intense. How can I say this? Quite simply because the most beautiful image of God to

help us pray on this earth is neither the desert nor the mountain but the human face. And so, by extension, the human city. Praise and intercession therefore belong to the city above all else. Of all the places named in scripture such as the city, the desert, the temple and the mountain, in the long run the only one which endures is the city. And it is within Jerusalem that the true face of Emmanuel will ultimately be revealed (Apoc 21,3).

Archbishop Bloom once wrote:

It often seems difficult to us to relate life and prayer. This is wrong. A complete mistake. This is because we have as wrong an understanding of life as we do of prayer. We think that life is all about being busy and that prayer is all about withdrawing somewhere and forgetting everything about our neighbour and our human circumstances. This is false. It is a misreading of both life and prayer itself.³

It is possible, and our lives attempt to demonstrate this, to set up 'one's prayer in the city and the city in one's prayer' as Cardinal Marty once said. We cannot praise the Master of the universe with conviction if we are not interested in his universe, or set out to follow Christ if we do not seek him in the heart of our fellow human beings, where he is incarnate and lives in our times, where his Spirit is at work. We are not supposed to contemplate God as one alternative and serve each as another but to bring together contemplation and work, sharing and prayer, Martha and Mary.

Our search for God—the one thing necessary—leads us towards people because man and woman are made as 'the image of the Father, the body of Christ, the temple of the Spirit'. In this world where everything is passing, 'God alone suffices'. God has placed himself within our world and placed us there too. To love, work and pray there. If the city is 'Babel' it is also the 'Holy City', whether it be London tomorrow, if God so desires, or Paris today.⁴ God is within the city and we must contemplate God there.

NOTES

¹ Cf *A city not forsaken: Jerusalem Rule of Life*, (Darton, Longman and Todd, London, 1985).

² A 16th century church in an area of central Paris bounded by Notre Dame, the Marais, Beaubourg and the river Seine.

³ *Documentation Catholique*, 1968; 185-187.

⁴ For information about the Jerusalem communities, write to 13 rue des Barres, 75004, Paris.

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