

## Lent 1: THE DESERT

Mark 1:9-15 [MW18-06]

Sermon preached by Rev Wayne Thornton at Mangawhai and Wellsford, Sunday 18 February 2018

Desert, d-e-s-e-r-t, desert

- give me some words that come to you when you hear the word 'desert'  
what comes to mind when you think of 'desert'  
(space for answers)
- who thinks the desert is positive?  
who thinks the desert is negative?

Today, the first Sunday of Lent

- is traditionally the time to focus on Jesus in the desert  
and it suddenly struck me ...
- I've been preaching on the first Sunday of Lent for many, many years now  
so I know that Jesus goes out into the desert  
yet it didn't really come home to me, in all those years  
just how long Jesus was out there
- forty days and forty nights ... forty days and forty nights!  
that's one heck of a long time  
I know all about it being a traditional number  
having significance in Jewish history and Jewish theology ...
- but it's still one a heck of a long time

Forty days and forty nights ...

- what was Jesus doing out there in the desert ... why did he stay so long?

May be you have an answer or some thoughts about that?

- I've been thinking about, reflecting, considering  
one "answer", one angle, one thought  
for a while now
- it starts where our Gospel reading starts

What happened immediately before Jesus went into the desert?

- he was baptised, by John, in the Jordan  
and when he was baptised something significant happened
- remember what it was?

Jesus heard a voice from heaven

- according to Mark, Jesus was the only one who heard this voice  
and do you recall just what this voice said?
- *You are my own dear Son, and I am pleased with you*

That is a voice from heaven

- and it seems to me that's a voice you would want to hear  
that's a voice you would want to be able to recognise  
that's a voice you would want to listen to again and again and again
- for it is the voice of guidance: a voice that leads on the right path  
a voice that gives direction on the way ahead
- the voice of life

No doubt, as he was growing up

- Jesus' mother, Mary, would have told him stories and given him guidance  
no doubt Jesus would have worked alongside Joseph  
picking up valuable learning and insight
- we know too, that Jesus received excellent instruction from teachers and rabbis  
yet nothing would be as helpful, as necessary, as important as this voice  
this voice from heaven

In all my years of being involved with this first Sunday of Lent

- I have always been told Jesus went out into the desert  
to prepare for his ministry
- to prepare for showing and sharing the Good News  
to prepare for the demonstration of God's Kingdom in people's midst  
to prepare to give himself as the ultimate sacrifice on the cross
- and that's what I have preached too  
and it's all still true, nothing has changed
- there was certainly a whole lot to prepare for  
probably more than enough to occupy forty days, and nights!

Lately though I have been focussing on just one particular aspect

- in the midst of all that Jesus was going to come across  
in the thick of all Jesus was going to have to deal with  
as soon as he stepped out of that desert
- among the hustle and bustle, the clamour of people  
the cheering, the booing, the arguments and difficulties  
the triumphs ... and trials
- Jesus would want to be sure of being able to recognise the one voice  
that would lead him through all of that: the one voice that would keep him on track  
the one voice that was true and dependable
- and it might take forty days, and forty nights  
to be sure he could recognise that voice  
so that he could pick it out in a crowd or a solitary encounter

It seems to me there are two parts to this 'voice recognition'

- the first is encouragement  
no matter what, Jesus could hear the words  
*You are my own dear Son, and I am pleased with you*  
how fantastic is that!
- on the mountainside with thousands  
on the road with the disciples  
alone in the garden
- *You are my own dear Son, and I am pleased with you*

The second is guidance

- I remember attending a week long seminar  
on healing and evangelism I think it was
- and I was very struck by what one of the presenters stressed over and over again  
"Jesus only ever did what he saw his Father doing"

It might have been in response to ... why did Jesus not always heal?

- why did he go to one place and not another?  
why did he stop to respond to this person?  
and pass by others in similar situations
- "Jesus only ever did what he saw his Father doing"  
Jesus was not calling the tune  
not following his own agenda, was not responding to his own ideas

I think what that presenter was saying is linked with that voice from heaven

- Jesus only did what his Father told him  
this was the one and only voice he followed
- it even caused him to push his friend Peter aside in one instance  
because Peter spoke with another voice  
a very tempting and agreeable voice, but not *the* voice
- and sometimes Jesus had to go off to a quiet place  
to find that voice again
- to hear that voice, to listen  
to find encouragement, direction and guidance

Forty days and forty nights in the desert

- enabled Jesus to recognize that voice in any circumstance

Now I am not suggesting that we all troop off to the desert for forty days

- I'm not suggesting that we all go on retreat  
for forty or even four days or even four hours
- I am suggesting that this Lent we might take a cue from Jesus  
and focus on finding and listening to the voice from heaven

Because there is a voice, from heaven, which says to us, which says to you:

- *You are my own dear daughter, and I am pleased with you*  
*You are my own dear son and I am pleased with you*
- did you get that, there is a voice of encouragement from heaven  
for each and every one of us
- we just need to hear it

And speaking of "hearing"

- my experience is that each of us will hear that voice in our own way

It won't necessarily be the same for each of us

- sometimes there is clearly a 'voice'  
sometimes it is not so much words as an idea or image  
sometimes it can be while reading the scriptures  
and sometimes it can be while reading something else
- sometimes it is more a feeling  
sometimes it can be a physical sensation like a knot in the stomach  
or tingles in the fingers
- usually accompanied by a word or suggestion or prompting

The key is to be able to recognise that whatever thought

- suggestion or action comes with this  
it is a message from heaven
- for the voice from heaven, our Heavenly Father, speaks to us  
what we need to do is take the time to work out how ...  
... and listen

There are in all our lives today many, many other voices

- some of them will lead us astray  
some of them say things we are more keen to hear, some of them are insistent  
some are inconsequential, and some are downright insidious
- however only one voice leads in the right direction  
for it is the voice of guidance  
a voice that leads on the right path
- the voice of life

Jesus knew that

- and took forty days and forty nights to familiarise himself with that voice  
this Lent follow Jesus' lead  
seek that voice  
become familiar with it
- and let it lead you on the way ahead

I invite you to reflect on that, or wherever this has taken you

- reflect on the voice and the desert and your path, your way ahead  
as I read "The Desert Waits – An Invitation to Lent" by Ruth Burgess  
(and it will be on the Power Point slides also)

*The desert waits  
ready for those who come,  
who come obedient to the Spirit's leading;  
or are driven,  
because they will not come any other way.*

*The desert always waits,  
ready to let us know who we are -  
the place of self-discovery.*

*And whilst we fear, and rightly,  
the loneliness and emptiness and harshness,  
we forget the angels  
whom we cannot see for our blindness,  
but who come when God decides  
that we need their help;  
when we are ready  
for what they can give us.*