

## **Space in the desert**

**Matthew 4:1-11. Galatians 1 and 1 Kings 19**

Some years ago in a rush of blood to the head I decided it was time I purchased a Jaguar car. It must have been the advertising that attracted me. Eventually a friend talked me out of it but the words of the advertisement remain. A Jaguar, the blurb assured me, possessed “Grace, pace and space.”

I’ve often thought of those words as I’ve reflected on the Christian life. Christian experience is rooted in the grace of God and the life of a Christian is designed to be a grace filled life. So also with pace or power. Paul reminded his young protégée Timothy that God has not given him a spirit of timidity but of power. A power the Apostle likened in another place to dynamite. The Bible translator J.B. Phillips said translating the Acts of the Apostles was like “wiring a house with the power on.” But “space.” Where does that fit into the equation? It doesn’t seem to belong to the vocabulary of the spiritual life.

Yet every life needs space.

We need physical space. The sabbatical principle is a Divine reminder that our bodies, the land, life in general need rest and space.

We need emotional space, relational space, what Kahil Gibran called, “spaces in our togetherness.”

We need spiritual space. Lent is the time we celebrate our Lord’s forty days and nights in the vast and lonely spaces of the Judean desert. His experience mirrors other desert experiences in the Bible. If we examine some of those we get a clue as to why space is an important ingredient of the Christian way as grace and power.

Let’s examine three desert encounters, Christ’s desert experience in Matthew 4:1-11, Paul’s desert experience in Galatians 1:17-18 and Elijah’s desert experience 1 Kings 19, to catch something of what spiritual space can bring to our lives

### **We Need space to re-focus our Core Convictions about God.**

Jesus, led by the Spirit into the wilderness wrestles with the profound issues of faith and life, success wealth and power. In this space he arrives at the core conviction that will govern his life and ministry that God, and God alone, will be the arbiter of his life and mission.

Like our Lord we need space to determine what is at the core of our lives. What are the basic convictions by which we live? Life is clamorous and we are too easily sucked into the prevailing attitudes of the day. As members of the Christian community it is possible to be religiously busy and never take time to examine what it is that motivates us, shapes our attitudes and responses, fashions the way we live. As followers of Jesus we can have too many convictions. The Australian novelist Morris West lamented that after leaving the Roman Catholic seminary where he had spent several years training for the religious life he came out a person stuffed full of unexamined convictions. In the busyness of life and faith its to be stuffed full of convictions on everything yet having no driving conviction that shapes who we are.

It's also possible to have too few. William Barclay spoke of people who suffer from "the bed mentality-they make up their minds every night and morning." Such lack of a dominant conviction means we drift without any guiding star to direct our course. We need to give ourselves space in our lives to examine and determine what is the core conviction by which life is lived.

### **We Need space to Renew our relationship with God**

Writing to the Church in Galatia Paul describes his desert encounter. It came as he prepared to enter into a life of apostolic ministry and after a frenetic few years as an avid persecutor of the Christian Church. By his own confession he was, during those persecuting years, a deeply religious man intent on serving God. But his dramatic conversion on the Damascus Road led him to see his whole relationship with God was deeply flawed and wrongly based.

If his dramatic conversion happened today we would have him on the speaking circuit, fronting innumerable TV interviews and opening up various blogs and pages on the social networks. But God had other ideas. He took Paul aside setting him down in the Arabian desert so that in that space he could unravel his distorted understanding of God and re-focus his relationship with a gracious God.

Some years ago a study by the Marriage Guidance movement in Great Britain found that most marriages broke down when the children had grown and gained independence. Until then couples focused on raising the children and all that family life entails, Once that situation changed they looked at each other across the table and realised their own relationship was on the rocks.

It's a sober moment when after years of active religious life, busily doing things for the Church and others you realise that your relationship with the true love of your life, Jesus Christ, barely exists or has evaporated entirely and you are living the life of faith on auto pilot.

It's here that the rise of the monastic principle found in meditation, retreats, and spiritual direction and in communities like Taizé and Iona are evidence of a hunger to establish in fresh and deep ways our love for Jesus Christ.

### **We Need Space to renew our service for God**

Service for God plays a big part in our understanding of God's Kingdom. No more diligent servant of the Most High God crosses the pages of Scripture than Elijah the prophet. 1 Kings vividly describes his encounters with the priests of Baal and his contretemps with Jezebel. Fearful for his life, Elijah flees to the desert and there, in that lonely place, dispirited and worn out by his efforts he pleads for God to take his life. The man is worn out, burnt out. All his vitality has ebbed away. He suffers what someone has called "The Angelic Fallacy." Angels serve God day and night but we his human servants are not angels, we are human and it's possible to be worn out doing good. We need space to renew our resources and wise Christian leaders will not impose on their people more than they can bear. A healthy faith expresses itself in service to others but a healthy faith also needs service breaks, spaces when we can stand aside and renew life.

Several years back I listened to a message given by an American psychologist to a large gathering of missionaries who were home on furlough. Describing this experience of Elijah he went on to recommend that for the next six weeks of their furlough they leave aside their bibles, do not attend services or speak of their work and get themselves out into the wide-open spaces and absorb the wonders of creation.

It was a wise plea for them to discover the importance of space in their service for God

If the Son of God needed space in living the life of faith how much more do we?