

# **The Fire of Grace**

**By Rev Michael Harper**

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The bush was blazing but it was not consumed  
*Genesis 3:2*

I have chosen as my text one of the best known stories in the Bible about the desert. Moses sees a bush on fire – but not being damaged at all. He hears the voice of God speaking to him; God tells him to remove his sandals, because he is on holy ground. God then tells him what his life work is going to be – to lead the Jewish people from Egypt to a land flowing with milk and honey.

This story, set as it is in the desert, always figures prominently in the spirituality of the Church of the East. For instance, in the Canon of St Andrew of Crete, read in Churches during the first week of Lent, there are the words, “Moses, the great, went to dwell in the desert. Come seek to follow his way of life, my soul, that in contemplation thou mayest attain the vision of God in the bush.”

The desert has again and again been the setting for divine revelation. Moses met with God and received the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai, which is in a huge desert. He was there for forty days. The Israelites spent forty years in the desert being prepared for their entry to the Promised Land. The prophet Elijah spent much of his time in the desert. John the Baptist, who was linked closely with Elijah, lived and ministered in the desert, and Jesus Christ, after his Baptism and before commencing his public ministry, was led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted by Satan. Also like Moses, St Paul's ministry was revealed to him in the desert. In Galatians he writes, “I did not confer with any human being, nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me, but I went away at once into Arabia.” It was in the desert that his unique calling was

made clear to him by God. So if we want to hear God, the desert is a good place to do so.

In the following century, we see that the origins of monasticism can be traced to the deserts of Egypt – as men and women left the cities to wait upon God in the surrounding desert. Their pioneers were to be called “the Desert Fathers”.

The desert experience is closely linked to Lent, with the forty day fasting period. Actually it was a late starter, and was first noticed in the Council of Nicaea, 325 AD. The great Lenten fast started this week. Unusually it begins in both the Eastern and the Western Churches at more or less the same time. In the East it began on Monday, in the West on Wednesday. We can see in the desert experiences of God’s people the true origins of the Lenten Fast; like Moses on Mount Sinai and Christ’s battle with the Tempter, it lasts for forty days. It too is intended to be a desert experience; a kind of monastic interlude in the midst of an otherwise busy and full life. Like monastics we fast; like monastics we pray; like monastics we live a life of simplicity, cutting ourselves off as best we can from the outside world. Yes, we can create a kind of desert in our own lives, without having to go literally to the desert.

What is it that grabs one about the desert? I am going to suggest three reasons why we should be drawn to the desert:

### **Its Simplicity**

The desert is a simple place to live in.

We live today increasingly complex lives. The stress factors are heavy burdens. The quest for knowledge never abates. I always dread having to buy a new computer – having mastered the last one the new one will be very different – and the learning curve seems to get steeper and steeper.

Lent is about living, at least for six weeks, as far as we can, a simpler lifestyle. The story is told about a person walking through the woods and seeing someone sawing down a tree. “You look exhausted”, he said to his perspiring friend, “how long have you been at it?” “Over five hours” he replies “and I’m exhausted! This is hard work”. “Well, why not take a break for a short time and sharpen that saw, I am sure it would go a lot faster?” “I don’t have time to sharpen the saw”, the man replied, “I’m too busy sawing”. So in Lent we should

take time off to do some sharpening of our minds, hearts and lives, and not make the excuse we are too busy.

The desert has many features. The landscape is often dull and monotonous. That's fine – then nothing to distract us from meeting and hearing God!

The second reason why the desert attracts us is:

### **Its Silence**

We have all had the experience, of moving from the tension and feverish activity of the town or city, to the comparative quietness of the countryside. In the city there is the constant noise of traffic and the crowds of people. In the desert there is stillness, silence and solitariness; an excellent environment to listen to God. The Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr Rowan Williams, in his book *Silence and Honey Cakes* has written “authentic silence is difficult, yet it indicates an affirmation, a great ‘Yes’ to life in freedom” (Lion p 108.) When I visit the country, I can hear the birdsong in the daytime and see the stars at night, often inaudible and unseen in the noise and glare of the town or city’.

It is a constant criticism these days of politicians that they do a lot of talking, but little listening. Such censure can just as much be applied to our general society.

There was an incident many years ago in the *Goon Show*, starring Spike Milligan, Peter Sellers and others. The telephone rings, and one of them picks it up. “Hello” he exclaims, “hello, hello”. His voice becomes more strident, “who is speaking? I can’t hear you. Hello – who is speaking?” A voice at the other end says, “You are speaking” “Ah” he replies, “I thought the voice sounded familiar”, and he puts the receiver down.

One - way conversations like that are all too common in Christian living. We may pray a lot to God, but how much listening to Him do we do? It is interesting that *listening* is the literal meaning of the word *obey* in both Greek and Latin. To listen we need to try to detach ourselves from the noises and complexities of modern living. To listen is an essential pre-requisite to obedience. We obviously need to know what to obey.

There is a story about the present Bishop of London that when he was preaching recently in St Paul’s Cathedral, he asked the rhetorical question (which can sometimes be dangerous) “and what is

God saying to you?” At that exact moment someone’s mobile phone rang.

I’d like to quote (with permission) from an essay by Tamar Gogvadze, who comes from Georgia, formerly part of the Soviet Union. She is now a student at Cambridge University. She writes, “inner silence is the only soil in which God can sow his word. It is a permanent willingness for acceptance and to discover the truth...inner silence makes a person free from his ego; it frees a person from imagining that he holds the central position in the universe.” Later she quotes from the famous Russian mystic, St Seraphim of Sarov, whose desert for most of his life was the thick forests of his homeland, “acquire the spirit of peace, and a thousand souls around you shall be saved”.

Next Sunday the Orthodox Church commemorates the monk St Gregory Palamas. This great 14<sup>th</sup> Century Christian, is referred to in Vespers on that Sunday as “the herald of the fire of grace” My title for this teaching is “the fire of grace”. The two words “fire” and “grace” are not naturally compatible. But the phrase does remind us of the burning bush in the desert. For the Orthodox this man is as important as St Thomas Aquinas is to the Western church, and his work was a defining moment. His greatest ministry was to help people to learn how to be inwardly silent, and thus to hear God. The movement called Hesychasm owes much to St Gregory Palamas. Its emphasis has always been that in order to know that **God is God**, one has to be still.

The third reason why the desert attracts us is:

### **Its surprises**

Clearly Moses was taken by surprise when he saw the remarkable sight of a bush burning without being consumed. It grabbed his attention immediately. Both the Old and New Testament testify that the desert is a place for the surprises of the Holy Spirit. Dr Rowan Williams has written, “very, very occasionally, around an unexpected corner or with an unexpected person, we catch a glimpse of the fire, the desert filled with flame.” Thus we are told that when we welcome people, we can be “entertaining angels unawares” (Heb 13:2)

It is interesting that the first Gospel reading in Lent in the Eastern tradition is an Easter or Pascha reading. Lent must never distract us from the central message of the Resurrection. Thus in the same

tradition, prostrations are forbidden on Sundays, and the otherwise strict fasting rules are relaxed at weekends.

Many years ago I had quite a lot to do with the Mary Sisters of Darmstadt. Their vision arose this time in a man created “desert”, the destruction of their city by the Royal Air Force in 1944. When they left their air raid shelters – not a single one of them had been killed or hurt – but their city lay in ruins. It was at that moment that the note of “repentance” came into focus for them, a note they have sounded ever since. Some years later, one of the founders, Mother Basilea Schlink, wrote a book with the intriguing title, “the joy of repentance”. I myself witnessed a Lutheran community with a strong emphasis on “repentance”, yet being the happiest of places to visit.

So let us enter the desert of Lent, and let’s make it a time of joy. Let our repentance be joyful. Let us anticipate the gifts of Lent with faith, and so with joy. And let us find time to listen to God and hear his words to us.

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