

A night sky filled with stars, with a prominent bright star in the center. In the foreground, several large, reddish-brown, rounded rocks are scattered across the bottom half of the image. The overall scene is dark and atmospheric.

INTO THE
Desert

40 Day Bible Study



Preview Days 1-5

www.intothedesert.org

Why the desert?

Rowan Williams has described Australia as a country with a *desert at its heart, a desert that it has only begun to explore spiritually.*¹

Australians haven't always valued their deserts.

The early explorers saw them as hot, dry and depressing spaces they struggled to cross.

School children were given maps showing the centre of Australia as a blank space to be slowly filled in by Western culture.

It was common to speak about the dead heart of Australia.

If it didn't immediately seem useful or appealing it had no point.

The term terra nullius was used in all seriousness for if people weren't connected with the land like the English were, well they weren't connected to it at all.

Of course this was all deeply wrong.

The land and the sea not empty sheds that man has built. There's something in it.

*Matthew Dhulumburrk*²

A society that has gained much from busyness and productivity still struggles with apparent space.

Some years back, I found myself in the desert of a painful illness.

Blaise Pascal claimed that the sole cause of a person's unhappiness was that they didn't know how to stay quietly in their room.³

I didn't.

A lot of people had a lot of suggestions for how to fix myself so I could return to my old busy ways.

I tried them all for as long as I could.

Eventually, exhausted, I found I was turning to those who had also spent time in barren places.

They talked about the gifts of the desert rather than how to avoid it.

1 Silence and Honey Cakes

2 cited in Deborah Bird Rose, *Nourishing Terrains*

3 *Pensées*

It was puzzling but relaxing.

I spent a lot of time in a Christian community in Alice Springs, on the edge of the actual desert, where people quoted things like:

*Come! Rest and wait in the wilderness
Listen and See with your heart*

Trisha Watts

I hated resting. And waiting. And the heart stuff seemed airy-fairy.

But God acting through their hospitality, and the desert itself, saved me.

I discovered that the ancient desert fathers and mothers spent a lot of time in their cells. They chose to do it.

I found, to my surprise, I was being led from the head to the heart.

It turned out to be an ancient truth rather than a self-indulgent poetic flourish.

I couldn't control the desert, the illness or, as it turned out, God.

*We are saved in the end by the things that
ignore us.*

*Andrew Harvey*¹

I had thought that reality was controlled by me from the inside of my mind.

That was shattered when I was taken beyond the limits of what I could control.

But it turned out God hadn't been ignoring me at all.

For there is no space that God opens up in our lives that God doesn't fill.

The challenge is to leave the busy surfaces of our lives and enter the desert at our heart in the wild hope that a way may be prepared for us to see God.

*God in Australia,
is a vast blue and pale-gold and red-brown
landscape,
and His votaries wear ragged shorts
and share his sense of humour.*

*Space like peace,
is one of the great,
poorly explored spiritual resources of
Australia.*

*Les Murray*²

**Celia Kemp
Reconciliation Coordinator
Anglican Board of Mission**

¹ Belden Lane, Solace of Fierce Landscapes

² The Quality of Sprawl



Day 1

Read Matthew 6: 1-6, 16-21

Reflect

A vast amount of time, a lifetime even, can be consumed by our efforts to appear worthwhile in the eyes of others.

Michael Leunig says we ‘mostly encounter a world that wants us to be pleasantly regular and presentable in some way or another – a stale, default personality in fact, but with an impressive gloss.’¹

And so we shrink or smooth or bend ourselves around to fit into what society says is successful.

We are so habituated to this that we carry it into our prayer.

Jesus is right onto this.

He calls us away from the crushing pressure to be sufficiently attractive to others.

He asks us to come before God alone and in secret.

When we let go of the appealing self we are desperately striving to portray and choose to spend time alone with God we are in for a surprise.

People who empty themselves in the wilderness always meet a God who is greater than they would have dared to hope.

Richard Rohr

Simplicity: The Freedom of Letting Go

What the [Desert] Fathers sought most of all was their own true self, in Christ. And to do this, they had to reject completely the false, formal self, fabricated under social compulsion in ‘the world’.

Thomas Merton

The Wisdom of the Desert

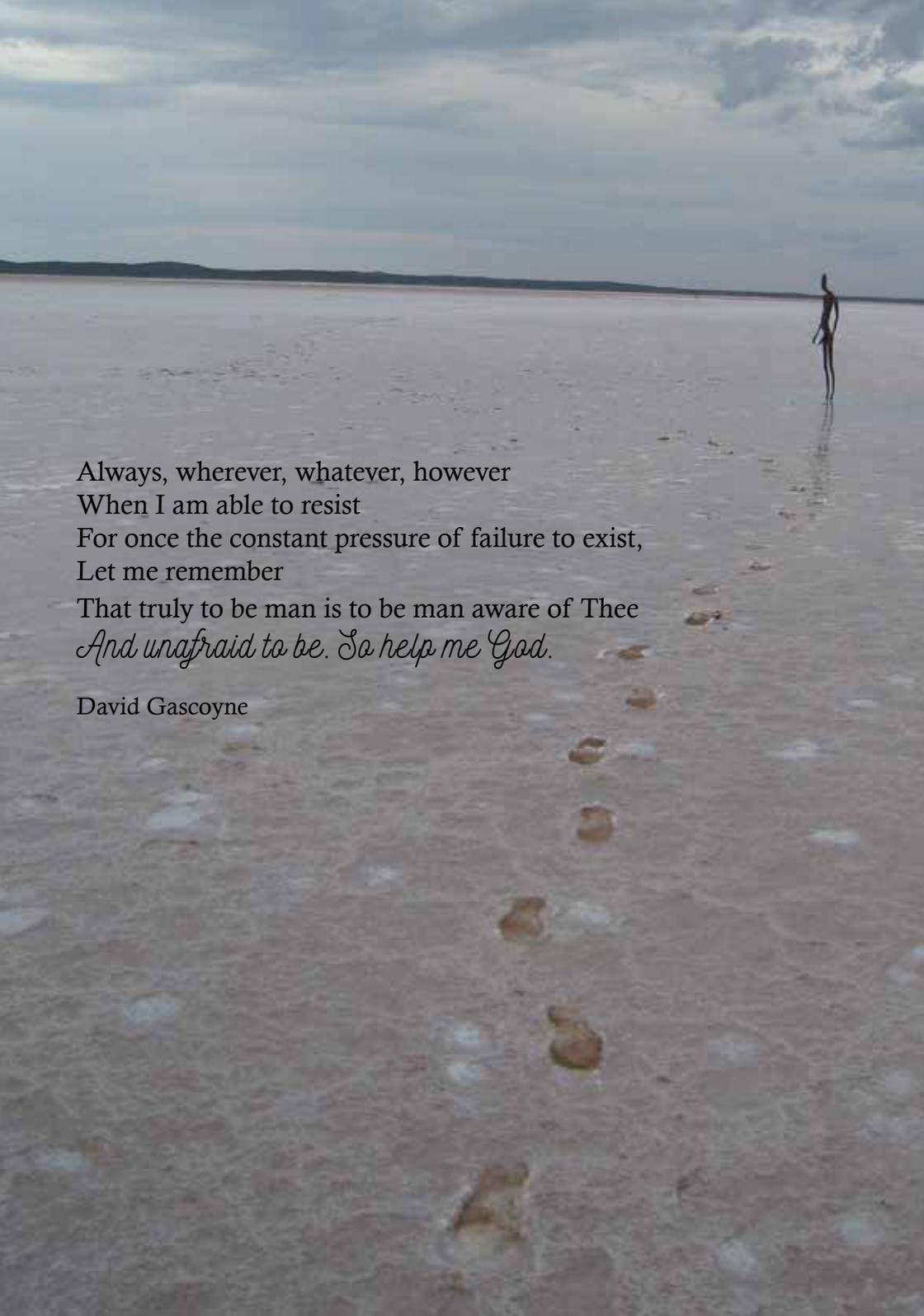
Pray

Fasting is giving up something to open up a space in the hope that the space will be filled by God. Consider setting aside time each day where you are free from the messages of the world.

Ask God to speak to you; read the daily readings; take the bit that has most jumped out at you (whether you liked it or it irritated you) and sit with it awhile.

Then pray to God about it.

¹ The Lot

A photograph of a vast, flat, wet beach under a cloudy sky. A person is standing in the distance on the right side, and a trail of footprints leads from the foreground towards them. The water is shallow and reflects the sky. The horizon is low, showing distant land.

Always, wherever, whatever, however
When I am able to resist
For once the constant pressure of failure to exist,
Let me remember
That truly to be man is to be man aware of Thee
And unafraid to be. So help me God.

David Gascoyne

Day 2

Read Psalm 1

Reflect

The wicked sound way more productive. They are following advice and walking down paths and hanging out with the scoffers.

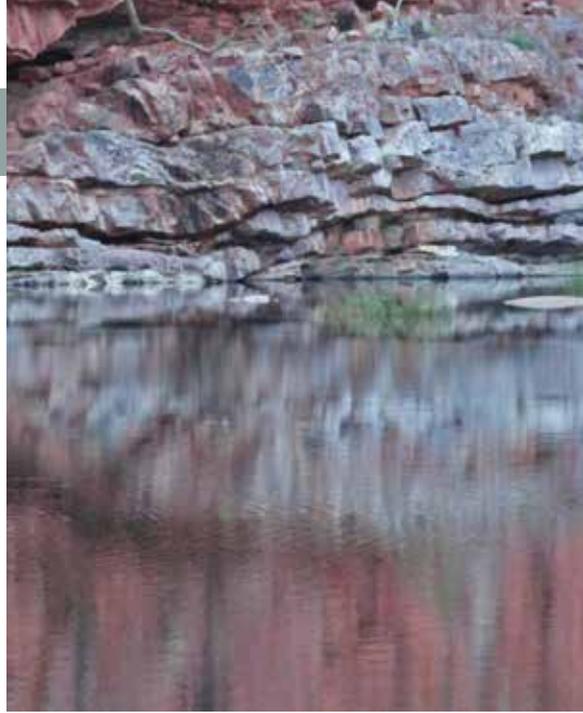
The other lot are stuck in one place like a tree, meditating on the law of God.

This seems just plain lazy in a world that says fruitfulness comes from being efficient, working harder, moving faster and doing more.

It is deeply subversive to say that fruitfulness comes from being rooted in the word of God. That endless activity and movement, otherwise known as the modern virtue of 'busyness', may well be nothing but chaff that is blown away by the wind.

Taking time out from the constant exposure to the world's messages is a hard thing to do because initially it feels like a crushing waste of time.

It is an act of radical trust to accept that foregoing immediate productivity and entering into stillness with God is necessary for real usefulness.



It was said of Abba John the Dwarf that he withdrew and lived in the desert at Scetis with an old man of Thebes. His abba, taking a piece of dry wood, planted it and said to him, "Water it every day with a bottle of water, until it bears fruit".

Now the water was so far away that he had to leave in the evening and return the following morning. At the end of three years the wood came to life and bore fruit. Then the old man took some of the fruit and carried it to the church saying to the brethren, "Take and eat the fruit of obedience".

A saying of the desert fathers and mothers

Far townsfolk have no time to grow, they have no time to waste.

*Banjo Paterson
Clancy of the Overflow*



*I can stick artificial flowers on
this tree that will not flower,
or I can create the conditions
in which the tree is likely to
flower naturally.*

*I may have to wait longer for
my real flowers but they are
the only true ones.*

John Fowles
The Aristos

Pray

Take a copy of Psalm 1 and
go and sit by (or lie under)
a tree without any way to
be interrupted for a while.



Day 3

Read Isaiah 58: 1- 9a

Reflect

These self-righteous fasters can't understand why God doesn't notice how impressively religious they are being. The problem, they decide, is God.

God isn't looking.

But God sees all too well.

God sees exactly what the pious fasters are doing to their workers and to each other.

'Look' God says twice in this reading. And shouts with a voice like a trumpet in a way that is still resounding thousands of years later.

For the people are the problem.

They are blind and deaf to what is crooked about their own lives and the effect this has on others.

Self-justification and religion have been a dangerous combination throughout history.

This is exemplified in the musings of Mounted Constable William Willshire who was posted to Alice Springs in 1882:

"Men would not remain so many years in a country like this if there were no women, and perhaps the Almighty meant them for use as He has placed them wherever the pioneers go."¹

Highly motivated people who just can't see and hear have caused untold suffering.

The external deserts in the world are growing, because the internal deserts have become so vast.

*Pope Benedict XVI in Laudato Si':
Pope Francis' Encyclical on Environment and
Climate Change*

*The truth does not change according to
our ability to stomach it.*

*Flannery O'Connor
The Habit of Being*

*At the point of his death, Abba Bessarion
said: "A monk ought to be like the
Cherubim and the Seraphim: all eye!"*

A saying of the desert fathers and mothers

Pray

Find out about the local indigenous history where you grew up, live or work; an internet search reveals a surprising amount of information.

¹ The Land of the Dawning





Day 4

Read Psalm 86: 1-7

Reflect

This is the alternative.

To see ourselves as we actually are.

The Psalmist is very clear about his state. I am poor and needy, he says. No mucking around. And yet he has the confidence to come straight into the presence of the loving God.

*We have put aside the easy burden,
which is self accusation, and weighed
ourselves down with the heavy one,
self-justification.*

John the Dwarf

A saying of the desert fathers and mothers

John the Dwarf, a desert father, is saying something we don't hear that much.

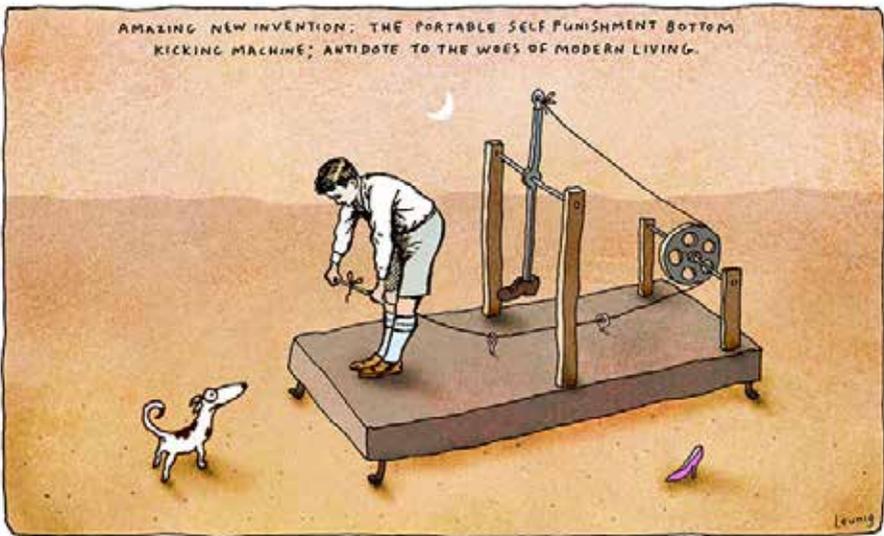
We think believing that 'I am a wonderful person who can be whatever I want to be' represents freedom and opportunity.

He regards it as a crushing burden.

The need to be that good.

To have to spend your days demonstrating this to others and your nights alone in your head demonstrating it to yourself.

Admitting we are poor and needy is the easy burden.



It is easy, because it is the truth.

Pray

It is a relief to kneel before God as we actually are and find that is all we have to do.

Ask God to show you the areas in your life where you are poor and needy.

God will do the rest.

Bring them before God (on your knees if you can) and ask for help.

*Anxiety comes from the self
as ultimate concern,
from the fact that the self
cannot bear this ultimate concern:
it buckles and wavers under the strain,
and eventually, inevitably, it breaks.*

Then pray Psalm 86: 1-7.

*Christian Wiman
My Bright Abyss:
Meditations of a Modern Believer*

*The human creature sinks down to the
ground and stretches out his or her hands
and is no longer his or her self
but is in God.*

That is perfection.

*Take the good, gracious God, just as he is,
without qualification, and bind him,
as you would a poultice, to your sick self,
just as you are.*

Amen

*Dietrich Bonhoeffer
DBWE 13*

Cloud of Unknowing

Day 5

Read Luke 4: 1-15

Reflect

Jesus had just been baptized and dramatically affirmed by God.

Now he is led into forty days of starvation and temptation by the devil in a desert.

We get an indication of what Jesus was longing for by what he was offered.

You can imagine how painfully difficult it must have been uselessly sitting around in this empty space.

How reasonable the devil must have sounded.

God said you were his son? Would a father want his son to be this hungry? God gave the Israelites bread in the wilderness right? If God hasn't provided it then surely he is waiting for you to sort it?

Three times the devil suggests Jesus take control of the situation rather than just waiting in trust on God's word.

If Jesus wants God to manifest, well force God's hand. If Jesus wants the kingdoms of this world, instead of this barren desert where he has nothing,

switch allegiance and he will have them.

This sort of temptation is everywhere in our modern world. You can imagine the devil sidling up to Jesus in an expensive suit and saying – Don't be so passive. If it is to be, it is up to me. God helps those who help themselves.

It takes vast strength not to act in obedience to God, when the devil in the guise of the weight of the world's advice is telling you the opposite.

It reaps rewards beyond imagining.

For there is no space that God opens up in our lives that God does not fill.

Pray

Is there space in your life for God?

What things are you tempted to fill space with?

Where are you tempted to act when is God asking you to wait?

Close with the following prayer:

God help us to live slowly:

To move simply:

To look softly:

To allow emptiness:

To let the heart create for us.

Amen

Michael Leunig



Who The Meek Are Not

Not the bristle-bearded Igors bent
under burlap sacks, not peasants knee-deep
in the rice-paddy muck,
nor the serfs whose quarter-moon sickles
make the wheat fall in waves
they don't get to eat. My friend the Franciscan
nun says we misread
that word *meek* in the Bible verse that blesses them.
To understand the meek
(she says) picture a great stallion at full gallop
in a meadow, who -
at his master's voice - seizes up to a stunned
but instant halt.
So with the strain of holding that great power
in check, the muscles
along the arched neck keep eddying,
and only the velvet ears
prick forward, awaiting the next order.

Mary Karr