

I am making a way through the wilderness

Exploring Landscapes

Introduction

Over the last few years, the Church has been facing up to the painful reality that, what should have been a safe space in which people could grow and flourish, some have been abused and damaged and the lives blighted by what they have suffered. The fact that they have suffered at the hands of people whom they should have been able to trust.

From seeing the Church as a refuge and rock, many people are feeling that they are in a wilderness – a place we have never been before and do not know how to navigate.

However, this is not new. From the beginnings, the People of God have found themselves in dark and frightening places – but always, God has been with them. God is with us now and, as God said to Isaiah 3000 years ago, so God says to us now: “I am making a way in the wilderness”.

The Scriptures are full of landscapes- including wildernesses – which offer more than just a backdrop for an event or story. They help to deepen the experience they describe.

Pause for thought

- What are the landscapes or other aspects of the natural world that you can remember from the Bible? How essential are they to how the event unfolds?

Exploring the landscapes

- In this booklet, you will find thoughts about the wilderness, but also other landscapes from the Bible. They may help you to reflect on the abuse within the Church in the light of the bigger picture of God’s love and guidance through dark and troubling times.
- You do not need to do them all or use them in any particular order. Choose whichever appeals to you and do any or all of them in whatever order seems right to you.
- In each section, there are “Suggested Journal Exercises”. These are prompts for reflection and it can be helpful to jot down or sketch what the Reading, reflection and thoughts have brought to mind. They could also be the basis of a shared reflection in a small group.

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The Wilderness



The desert or wilderness is a common feature throughout the Bible and it is a particularly powerful theme in the Book of Isaiah.

He is writing for people who have been uprooted from home – from all that was familiar and safe. They will have crossed desert to come to Babylon and may have physically been fairly comfortable. But spiritually, they were lost in a wilderness.

It echoes the wilderness into which God led the Hebrew people – for 40 years, around in circles and making temporary encampments. Through all the confusion and discomfort, God guided and challenged and comforted them. They yearned for things to go back to the way they were – but knew that this was not going to happen. The only way to the Promised Land was through the wilderness.

We can also think of Jesus and his experience of wilderness. Even he needed time in this barren and bleak place to work out what was authentic and to build up the strength to face the temptations he encountered in the desert but which also lay ahead through the whole course of his ministry.

Hosea puts it well when he says (slightly paraphrased): I will lead them into the desert and there I will speak to their hearts.

Suggested Journal exercises

- Spend time looking at photos and videos of deserts and jot down your immediate reactions to what you see and hear.
- List the hardships you think you would experience in the wilderness (heat, thirst, bleakness, rough paths, etc)
- Bring your thoughts into a time of meditative prayer. How does this landscape reflect how you are trying to deal with the news and its aftermath?

The Sea



The Jewish people did not like the sea. They saw it as a place of chaos. Think back to Genesis 1 and the waters that covered the world, waiting for the calming and creative work of the Spirit of God. A famous story in the Gospels is of Jesus calming the storm. The disciples had probably experienced storms on land, but the combination of storm and sea filled them with terror – even the hardened fishermen among them. And to cap it all – Jesus remains serenely asleep and seemingly unaware of their fear and then chastises them for it!

Suggested Journal Exercises

- Read The Calming of the Storm at Sea and/ or find a picture of it online. Then pray with it imaginatively. Build up the scene of calm as the disciples and Jesus set out – and then feel the storm beginning to build. Draw in as much detail as you can as the storm begins to rage – the sounds – the sights – the smells – the things you touch and are touched by – the taste of sea, and so on. Bring yourself into the account. Where are you? What are you feeling? What do you want to say – or do – to Jesus? What happens as he faces down the storm? After the prayer, jot down any thoughts and any new insights that have emerged from your time of prayer.
 - How does what you experienced in the prayer echo what is happening to you and others at this time?
- Pray Psalm 107(106): 23-32. Read it slowly and notice any words or phrases that seem to stand out – or an overall “feel” of what the psalm is saying to you. Pause and hold on to the word, phrase or “feel” for as long as feels useful, then pray it again. Now stay with the word or phrase and repeat it, allowing it to take root in your soul – to speak at the depth of your being.
 - After this time, jot down your words, phrase or “feel” and ponder it a little more. How does it speak to you about your current experience and where God is in it with you?

Mountains



Mountains serve two purposes in the scriptures. We have Moses going up Mount Sinai and having an experience that leaves his face radiant. Jesus goes up on the mountain with three companions and there he is transfigured. Mountains can be places where we encounter the transcendent and majestic and feel radiant and energised. We eventually have to come back down the mountain, but those moments are very precious as we walk through the mundane and everyday.

Mountains are also tough places. They are hard to climb. They are steep and the ground underfoot is treacherous. They seem to go on forever and we feel we will never get to the top.

It was a mountain such as this that Elijah climbed. He was led there to encounter God – as Moses had before him – and how Jesus was to after him. (In fact, he met Jesus on a mountain-top). On Elijah's mountain, the encounter was not straightforward. He was probably looking for something that would fill him with certainty (as with Moses) or transcendent (as Jesus would). Instead, he had wind – and fire – and earthquake. His world was, literally, shaken. It is only when he has come through all this that silence descends – and it is in this silence that he realises he is encountering God.

Suggested Journal Exercises

- Think about any mountaintop experiences you have had. Remember the exertion it took to get you there and how it felt at the top. How does all this apply to the stage of the journey you are currently on?
- Read the short account of Elijah's mountain experience. (1 Kings 19: 10-12). What are you experiencing as an earthquake? A hurricane? A raging fire? Are you finding the silence where God dwells? Or are you still waiting?

The Garden

We may not think about the Garden being part of a landscape but gardens appear at the very beginning of the Bible and at regular intervals.



Here are three Gardens to prompt your thinking and prayer.

Garden of Eden

Here was a place that God was delighted to share with his human children. It was filled with beauty and wonder but, if God can make a mistake he made a mistake – he made just one thing forbidden. And human nature being human nature, it was perhaps inevitable that this would have an irresistible attraction to the man and woman. All might not have been lost as God must have known what had happened but still came to find them – but their guilt and shame got in the way of their being able to ask God's forgiveness.

Suggested Journal Exercise

- Read Genesis 2 in the light of what you are experiencing and reflect on how the myth speaks to the human condition in general, and yours in particular.

Garden of Gethsemane

On the last and worst night of Jesus' earthly life, he did not go to the desert but to a garden. In this enclosed space with its ancient trees and flowers, Jesus begged God to take away the cup of suffering. As the forces that would lead to his torture and death gathered around him, Jesus poured out his anger and despair in a garden.

Suggested Journal Exercise

- Read one of the accounts of the Agony in Garden, (Matthew 26:36-46, Mark 14: 32-42, Luke 22: 39-46, John 18: 1-7). Try to put yourself alongside Jesus and sense what he is going through. Reflect on how his deep emotions are like your own and how he works through them to the final acceptance. (Note, he does not take shortcuts or simply offer it up – although he could have avoided it all, Jesus goes through the processes of fear, anger, isolation, etc before finding a way to face what is happening and what is to come.

Garden of Resurrection

The Christian teaching on Resurrection begins in a garden. Even though it is a momentous event, the disciples and the authorities have little idea of just how significant it is. The authorities try to silence the truth. The disciples see the signs of the empty tomb and discarded grave clothes, but do not understand their meaning. Just one stays put. Just one weeps and laments that horrific happening and all that has been lost and the destruction of a beautiful life. Just one is there to hear the Lord call her name and the commission to tell the others. Many will not believe here – but Mary's steadfastness in grief at all that has happened brings her to the joy that will make her the apostle to the apostles.

Suggested Journal Exercise

- The account of Mary's lament and call can be found in John 20: 1-19. Read and pray it through. What was Mary lamenting and mourning? What would she have been angry about? What would be causing her despair? How did Jesus intervene?

How might this apply to your own journey through the deaths of abuse allegations to hope and commitment to be an apostle bringing hope and light into dark places?

Places of Rest



In the Mountains section, we meet Elijah and hear of his experience of meeting God in the sound of sheer silence. Just before that, though, is an important sequence of events that is easily missed in the light of earthquakes, wind and fire.

Elijah has fled a dangerous situation and just wants to die as he cannot see a solution to it all. He is exhausted and afraid. Into this situation, God sends an angel with food and water. The angel allows Elijah to rest and then gives him more before sending him off the mountain. It reminds us that, sometimes in the midst of events beyond our control and which fill us with conflicting emotions, Knowing that we are going to face challenges and tackle things that feel beyond our strength, sometimes God just taps us on the shoulder and tells us simply to eat and to have a good night's sleep and prepare in this way for what is to come.

Suggested Journal Exercises

- Read the account of the angel's visit in 1 Kings 19: 1-10. What does this gentle practical ministering to Elijah say to you? How might you use it to help others?
- Pray with Psalm 22/23 – using the text or a sung version or video presentation of it. Allow the words speak to you of the God who is your shepherd – who guides you along the right paths, by restful waters and into green pastures. Reflect on the God who takes us into the wilderness and through valleys of shadow, darkness and death – but who prepares good things for you and all who need this love and kindness as they go through dark times.
- How can you bring this simple wisdom – of good food and adequate rest as a way to prepare to deal with difficulties into a wholesome discipline for dealing with what is happening?