

Where is your desert? A Lenten message of hope during adversity.

1/3/20

I speak in the name of Jesus the Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit, to the glory of God the Father.

Amen.

O Lord, who for our sake didst fast forty days and forty nights; Give us grace to use such abstinence that, our flesh being subdued to the Spirit, we may ever obey thy Godly motions in righteousness and true holiness, to thy honour and glory, who livest and reignest with the Father and the Holy Ghost, one God, world without end.

Amen.

Where is your desert?

I most certainly know where my desert was.

As I reflected upon the Gospel of Matthew this week with the story of Jesus spending forty days and forty nights in the desert, I tried to put myself into His shoes for a while and imagine what He must have gone through during this time of isolation.

I then asked myself the question, "What could have been a desert time for me in my life that really brought me to my knees?"

The answer came immediately to me.

I thought of my divorce that took place fifteen years ago.

This was clearly one of the hardest life events I have ever had to experience.

It was, for all accounts and purposes, my desert experience.

Perhaps you are lucky enough never to have experienced a divorce?

Well, the feelings are overwhelming... it is one of the hardest forms of grief to handle, apart from the grief of a parent losing a child. The challenge with divorce is that you need to grieve the loss of someone you love very much, whilst they are still alive. They have not died.

When I reflect back upon my divorce all those years ago, a few moments really stood out for me as particularly challenging.

Some of them were:

Having to meet my wife with her lawyer to discuss and agree upon the conditions of the divorce. Here, I was meeting with a lawyer, who was a complete stranger and having to discuss my most intimate life details.

Having to pack up the family home all on my own. This was a tough one.

Having to deal with a total of five lawyers in order to complete the various transactions that were taking place simultaneously.

Having to accept that a total stranger, as in a lawyer, could now dictate to me when I was allowed to see my daughter. This was the toughest one.

Having to, essentially, say goodbye to my daughter as a full-time father.

These were all life changing events that took place in a very short space of time, often simultaneously. I was a broken man. This was my absolute desert experience.

I was on my own.

I had no family to support me on my journey.

I had a few close work friends at the school where I was teaching, who walked the journey with me on a daily basis.

At the time, I realised that I was a shell of the former person I once was. I was spiritually, physically and emotionally broken. I was in survival mode, literally living my life one hour at a time.

As I reflected upon my brokenness as a human being during this time, I realised that I had two choices...

I could either walk towards God or I could walk away from God.

Here I was, an absolute broken human being, with nothing more to give, nothing more to live for, struggling to find purpose and meaning in my life again. I had lost everything that was dear to me. I could turn to drink and I do

admit that I did imbibe a little too much for a while because it helped me forget what I was going through. I could turn to other women for solace. I could throw myself into my job and keep myself so busy that I didn't have time to think about what I was going through.

All of the above actions would have been a conscious decision to walk away from God.

Or I could have embraced my desert experience and used the time to find myself again and find God again in a new and refreshing way that would lift me up and help me rebuild my life again.

This is what I eventually did.

When I was at my lowest point in my desert experience, I realised that I had nothing more to give to myself or to others. I could only offer my broken life back to God. So, this is what I did. I came before God and asked Him to come back into my life so that I could rebuild who I was and what I believed in.

I chose God during my desert experience. I could have walked away, but I chose to walk towards Him.

And you know what? He was there waiting for me with open arms. He always was. It was I who had strayed for a number of years. God never failed me. I had failed him.

I chose God.

God chose me.

Jesus had his desert experience. He must also have battled with His conscience, what He stood for, His purpose in life, His mission and journey. Jesus was also tempted by the devil and encouraged to stray from the straight path. Yet, through all of this, Jesus chose His Father and what He was called to do. Jesus honoured righteousness and holiness.

He chose God.

He did not walk away.

Ever.

What have your desert experiences been in your life? Perhaps you are going through a desert experience right now? Perhaps you have recently lost a loved one, or a relationship has come to an end? Perhaps you have been retrenched or struggling financially? Perhaps you have become estranged from your children and are struggling to reconcile with them? Perhaps you have recently retired and you are struggling to adjust to this new life changing phase? Perhaps you have recently been diagnosed with a serious illness and you are not too sure what the future holds for you and your loved ones?

I most certainly don't have all the answers.

What I can say with certainty is that you have two choices.

During your desert experience, you can either walk towards God or you can choose to walk away.

And here's the thing...

Sometimes, choosing to walk towards God and all that this means for your life, is NOT necessarily the easier option. Walking towards God can sometimes mean confronting and dealing with difficult emotions and truths that are challenging and hurtful. Walking towards God can sometimes mean accepting necessary changes in your life. Walking towards God can sometimes mean leaving certain people behind, even if you love them with all your heart. Walking towards God can sometimes mean that we are called to change who we are and how we live our lives. Walking towards God can be both scary and frightening BUT it will always be fulfilling and righteous, as we begin to rebuild our lives based on love, light and truth.

You have two choices...

We can either choose to walk away from God or towards Him.

Jesus set the standard for us in the Gospel by enduring His desert experience and coming through stronger than ever before. Even though we sometimes feel alone in our desert experience, we are never alone. God is walking right with us, we only have to turn around and reach out to Him.

There is one more caveat...

Sitting here in the pew this morning in church does NOT mean that you have chosen God! It does mean that you are open to the idea of God. We have to choose God every day, every hour and every second of our lives. We have to choose God in everything that we say, do and act. It is a conscious and continuous decision. Sometimes, we do not even realise that we are moving away from God. It is a constant state of mind that we need to be in when we continually choose God.

You and I have most probably not had our last desert experience in our lives. The more deserts we travail through, the stronger spiritually we become and the easier we find it to traverse through the hard times in our life. Eventually, we learn how to lean on Jesus so much that our faith becomes stronger and stronger. Once we are able to reach this position in our lives, then we are finally ready to travel alongside someone else on their desert experience. We are now able to be as Christ to those in their desert experience, for we know what it is like to travel through the desert. We are there to help our Christian brothers and sisters choose God and keep on choosing God.

Life is challenging. Life is difficult. Life is painful. Life can be a desert at times that brings us to our knees. Life can break us.

But, there is always hope. There is always light. There is always love. There is always Jesus who is able, through our faith, to carry us, keep us and lift us when we are unable to do that for ourselves.

Where ever we go in life, be it through the desert or the good times, we have two choices.

We can either choose to walk away from God or towards Him.

Choose wisely.

Amen.