

## Children of the Desert

Some years ago, on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land with a group of others to follow in the footsteps of Christ. We visited Bethlehem, Nazareth, and Jerusalem; climbed the Mount of the Beatitudes and swam in the Sea of Galilee and even in the Dead Sea (not a pleasant experience!). We walked from Jerusalem to Jericho, looked into Jacob's Well, stood on the place in Cana where Jesus changed the water into wine and even knelt at the place where he was crucified. Everywhere we went, we took our gospel with us and read the appropriate passage. It was a moving experience all the way. But the strongest impression I have retained is that of the desert where Christ spent forty days before starting his public life. During our pilgrimage, we spent a day and a night in the desert.

It is not surprising that the three great world religions, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, were all born in the desert. It was through the desert that Moses led the Israelites from slavery in Egypt to the Promised Land. It was from that desert that John the Baptist came to herald the Messiah and soon after Jesus followed to proclaim himself Messiah. After my visit there, I came to realize the significance of the desert. The desert is a purgatory man must pass through to reach paradise. What is impressive about the desert is its sheer aridness. There is no vegetation, no bird life and, apart from the odd tiny lizard, almost no animals.

The silence is almost total. In that bleak landscape, nothing comes between man and his God. One either discovers God or succumbs to despair. It is no wonder that those Bedouins who ply the salt trade following their caravans across the desert are deeply religious. No life thrives here except the inner life. It is not surprising that it was the Desert Fathers who created that great institution dedicated to fostering the inner life, Western monasticism. It has so profoundly marked Christianity that we are all now, in a sense, children of the desert.

Living now as many of us do, in built-up areas, piled high on top of each other in high-rise apartments, bombarded day and night with the roar of city traffic and the blare of electronic music, we are in danger of losing our desert roots. And with that our inner life. We need to create a time and a space to nurture our spiritual lives. Lent is such a time. The Spirit drove Jesus out into the desert, and he remained there for forty days. Like Jesus, we should let the Holy Spirit lead us out into the desert this Lent where we can confront the devils that haunt our lives, and like him too, triumph over them. That is the freedom, dignity, and gift that is offered in today's gospel.