

A night sky with a dark blue background and numerous small white stars. A single, bright star with a four-pointed diffraction pattern is visible in the center. In the foreground, several large, smooth, reddish-brown rocks are scattered across the bottom half of the frame. The rocks have a textured, slightly weathered appearance.

INTO THE
Desert

40 Day Bible Study

A close-up photograph of a red-brown landscape, likely a desert or arid region. The ground is a mix of fine, reddish-brown soil and larger, irregularly shaped rocks in shades of brown, tan, and grey. Several thin, dry, yellowish-brown grasses or twigs are scattered across the scene, some lying flat and others standing upright. The lighting is bright, casting soft shadows and highlighting the textures of the soil and rocks.

*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 - The Quality of Sprawl

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 of Milingimbi²

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.

¹ Silence and Honey Cakes

² cited in Deborah Bird Rose, Nourishing Terrains

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.

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 Harvey⁴

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.

3 Pensées

4 Belden Lane, Solace of Fierce Landscapes

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.

Celia Kemp
Reconciliation Coordinator
Anglican Board of Mission



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.

Then pray to God about it.

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.

¹ The Lot



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.



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

Banjo Patterson - 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

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

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
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

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.

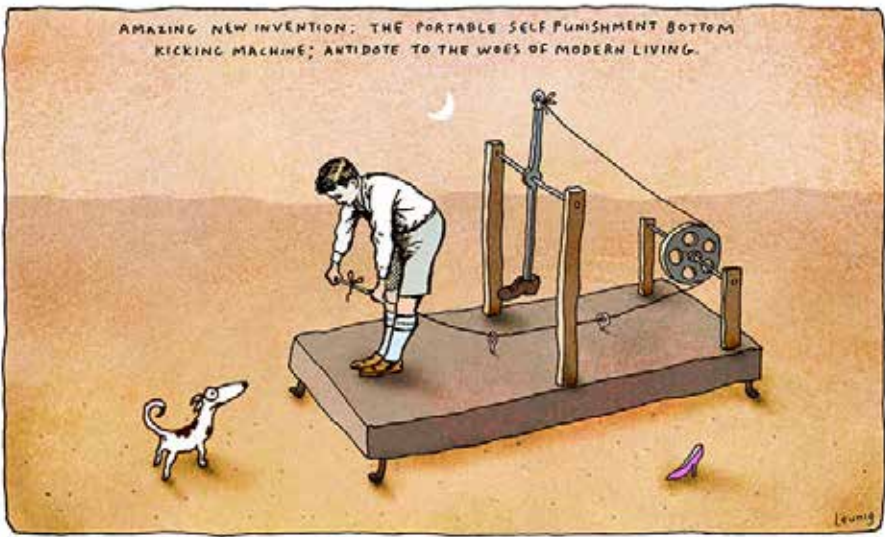
We think believing that 'I am a wonderful person who can be whatever I want to be' represents freedom and opportunity.

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.

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

God will do the rest.

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.

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

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.

Cloud of Unknowing

Pray

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

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

Then pray Psalm 86: 1-7.

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.
Amen.

*Dietrich Bonhoeffer
DBWE 13*

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 not-

ing, 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

Day 6

Read Leviticus 19: 1-2

Reflect

The Hebrew word translated holy is *qadosh*. It means 'to be set apart for a special purpose'.

Holy is closer to different than good.

For those of us who spend our lives striving to be good it may be a more helpful aim.

It is fiendishly difficult to distinguish goodness in the sight of God from the collective voices saying what a good life looks like in modern Australia; what Michael Leunig calls the 'clever well-adapted madness that the world rewards and to which the world aspires.'¹

We may need time away to become untangled from the web of expectations and normality so we can be shaped by God.

In the desert spaces we can expand into the slightly odd selves that we actually are.

The unique person, the holy person, that God calls into being.



Abba Antony said: "A time is coming when people will go insane. And when they see someone who is not insane, they will attack that person saying: 'You are crazy; you are not like us'".

Saying of the desert fathers and mothers

¹The Lot



Alienation and ostracism are found all too frequently in this democratic and fair nation. Since the finer print reads: you can only be my mate so long as you act the same as I do.

David Tacey - Edge of the Sacred

You shall know the truth and the truth shall make you odd.

Flannery O'Connor

Pray:

What would it be like if you stopped trying to be good and instead asked to be made holy?

Listen to the words (in person or in writing) of someone who appeals to you even though you are not sure if they are holy or mad or both.

Day 7

Read Matthew 6: 7-15

Reflect

The Lord's prayer is so familiar to us that its most marked quality can pass us by.

It is an extremely un-self-centred prayer.

We don't get to asking for our own stuff until half way through and even then it pretty much leaves it up to God to decide what we need.

A lot of our praying could be summarized as 'Dear God, may my will be done'.

As if we are the CEO and prayer is a daily performance review to hold God, the slightly reluctant employee, accountable against the KPIs (Key Performance Indicators) we have put in place.

This prayer bears the imprint of Jesus' desert temptations.

We ask for God's will to be done, not ours.

We ask God for daily bread, instead of providing it ourselves.

It is God's name that is hallowed, not ours.

It is God's kingdom that matters, not our own.

And if we end up in a time of trial, like Jesus did, then we need rescuing.

Our main role is not telling God how to run our life. We are sent out with the much harder task of forgiving those who have hurt us.

Abba Nilus said: "Do not always want everything to turn out as you think it should, but rather as God pleases; then you will be undisturbed and grateful in your prayer."

A saying of the desert fathers and mothers

These [Desert Fathers and Mothers] may sometimes appear eccentric; but eccentricity means moving the center, re-centering the world on God.

John Chryssavagis

In the Heart of the Desert

In an uncompromising landscape like ours, a person suddenly confronted with their essential smallness will often panic, become angry, disoriented, afraid.

Out of reflex they'll scramble back into the armoured shell of their pre-eminence: the air-conditioned car, the helicopter, the skyscraper, the shopping mall.

Tim Winton - Island Home

Pray:

Holy eccentrics as diverse as Teresa of Avila and Simone Weil write of the extraordinary power of praying the Lord's Prayer slowly and with attention.

The former used Latin, the latter Greek, but it works just as well in English.

Pray this prayer slowly and with attention in whichever language you prefer.



Day 8

Read Luke 11: 29-32

Reflect

We are used to voices that say exactly what we want to hear. They tell us we are wonderful and then offer us things we want. The world is full of them.

We do well to be suspicious of such voices. They are frequently not acting in our interest.

Often God doesn't come in the way we expect, which may well be the way that is immediately pleasing to us.

The crowds want a hero who will free them from the Romans and make them secure, who will perform exciting signs and wonders and regularly provide them with free food.

Instead they are faced with a bloke saying difficult stuff who refuses to produce on cue and who dies in the most humiliating way possible.

Here he compares them unfavourably to a foreign queen and a heathen city. This went down as well then as it would now.

The Queen of Sheba and the city of Ninevah recognized truth when it was spoken by a foreigner.

Jesus praises them for it.

We need to keep an ear out for the voice from an unexpected place that isn't saying quite what we want to hear.

It may be the strange voice of God.

If you're becoming weary and disillusioned with Australian values, Judeo-Christian values or Western civilisation, I recommend strangers – they're such a glorious, redeeming wilderness to wander into.

Michael Leunig - The Lot

In a world where success is the measure and justification of all things, the figure of Him who was sentenced and crucified remains a stranger and is at best the object of pity.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer - Ethics

Pray

Take time today to listen to someone who is foreign to you. Someone who perplexes you and yet you find strangely compelling (Mark 6:20). Perhaps someone who has expressed a critical view about either you or your people.

Instead of immediately going to why they are wrong, try to sit with their words and ask if there is something true that you need to hear in what they are saying.



Day 9

Read Matthew 7: 7-12

Reflect

Being taken by God into the desert is one of the most difficult, exciting, testing and rewarding adventures this life has to offer.

It is the quest for reality.

We consume stories and games about great quests because we are built for great quests.

Fantastical stories have true things to say about God that lists of doctrines can't even begin to touch on.

For the kingdom of God is like the discovery of an unexpected magical world. We are supposed to hear and respond to the hints of a deeper reality that seep into the everyday.

We are supposed to push at the edges of the obvious to seek the good. It is risky. It tests us to the limit.

Curiosity is of very great assistance. So is courage. So are other people on the same journey.

Together, you form "a free club for the search of surprise" (to slightly misappropriate Ivan Illich's term) or, in more prosaic terms, church.

Sometimes the reading today is used to suggest that when the door opens, behind it is whatever you want there to be. Behind the door is the real.

It may be like what you dreamt or nothing like it.


It doesn't matter once you see it, it will be good because it is God.

In the deeps are the violence and terror of which psychology has warned us. But if you ride these monsters deeper down, if you drop with them farther over the world's rim, you find what our sciences cannot locate or name, the substrate, the ocean or matrix or ether which buoys the rest, which gives goodness its power for good, and evil its power for evil, the unified field: our complex and inexplicable caring for each other, and for our life together here. This is given. It is not learned.

Annie Dillard - Teaching a Stone to Talk

It seemed to me certain, and I still think so today, that one can never wrestle enough with God if one does so out of pure regard for the truth. Christ likes us to prefer truth to him because, before being Christ, he is truth. If one turns aside from him to go towards the truth, one will not go far before falling into his arms.

Simone Weil - Waiting on God



Those who have quenched the heart, who would not dare.
For any cause to set life on a throw,
Who never walked with failure, death, despair
In long familiar converse: how can they know
What the world looks like in a blaze of glory?
They end as they began, and have no story;
With life unused they dwindle as they go.

James McAuley - New Jerusalem

Pray

What is it that you are truly seeking?

(Not what you should be seeking, or what you would like yourself better if you were seeking or what you would like others to think you are seeking.)

Use this as a basis for your prayer time today.

Day 10

Read Psalm 130

Reflect

I wish so much that you could get hold of the idea of what perfection in this world consists of. It is not like going up a great hill from which we see an ever-widening landscape, a greater horizon, a plain receding further and further into the distance. It is more like an overgrown path which we cannot find; we grope about; we are caught by brambles; we lose all sense of the distance covered; we do not know whether we are going round and round or whether we are advancing. We are certain only of one thing; that we desire to go on even though we are worn and tired. That is your life, and you should rejoice greatly because of it, for it is a true life, serious and real, on which God opens His eyes and His heart.

Abbé de Tourville - Letters of Direction

I was given this quote by a monk while I was staying in an Abbey.

Earlier that day he had told me he was having a difficult time and he was on the ledge but not quite ready to jump. I was not having the easiest time myself and told him so.

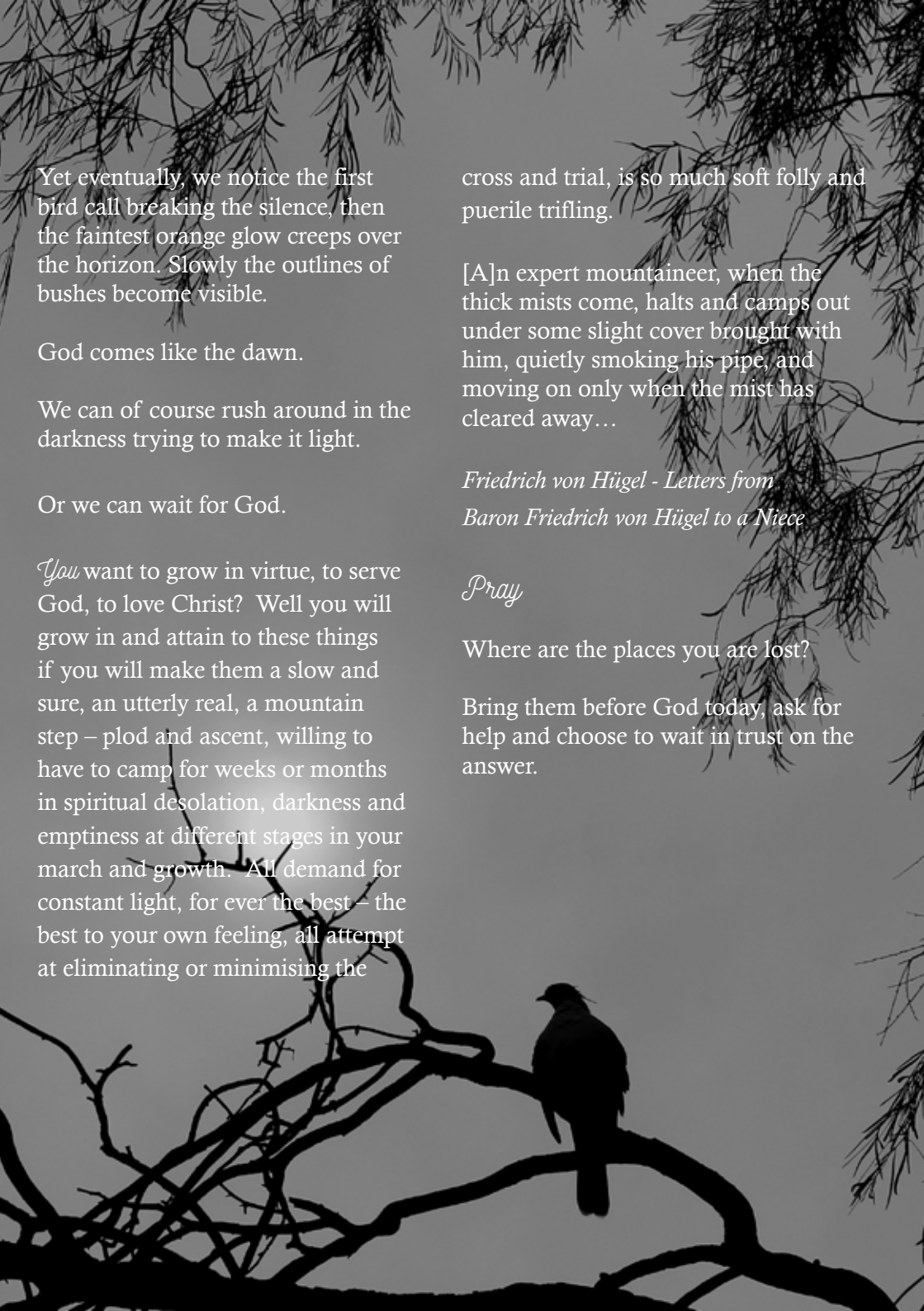
He went away and wrote the quote out in pencil on a piece of paper and surreptitiously (and somewhat illegally) handed it to me as he silently filed past for evening prayers.

The quote stayed on my fridge for many years. It was immensely comforting. Life was hard. I felt lost. That was the way it was.

There are times when our life of faith is like the desert at 3 am on a cloudy night, it is pitch black and there is nothing to see.

We are lost in the dark.

St John of the Cross called this 'the dark night of the soul'.



Yet eventually, we notice the first bird call breaking the silence, then the faintest orange glow creeps over the horizon. Slowly the outlines of bushes become visible.

God comes like the dawn.

We can of course rush around in the darkness trying to make it light.

Or we can wait for God.

You want to grow in virtue, to serve God, to love Christ? Well you will grow in and attain to these things if you will make them a slow and sure, an utterly real, a mountain step – plod and ascent, willing to have to camp for weeks or months in spiritual desolation, darkness and emptiness at different stages in your march and growth. All demand for constant light, for ever the best – the best to your own feeling, all attempt at eliminating or minimising the

cross and trial, is so much soft folly and puerile trifling.

[A]n expert mountaineer, when the thick mists come, halts and camps out under some slight cover brought with him, quietly smoking his pipe, and moving on only when the mist has cleared away...

*Friedrich von Hügel - Letters from
Baron Friedrich von Hügel to a Niece*

Pray

Where are the places you are lost?

Bring them before God today, ask for help and choose to wait in trust on the answer.

Day 11

Read Matthew 5: 43 – 48

Reflect

Jesus links the prickly requirement to love our enemy to the apparent indifference of the generous provision of God.

There is something the same about them both.

He's not wrong. They are both deeply irritating for starters.

Who isn't moved by a vast spread of rippled clouds turning pink, blue and golden against the glowing red hills of desert sunset?

But can it really be of God if it is visible to, well, anyone?

The ubiquity of sunrise and rain-showers is often used as evidence that they can't be communications from God.

Surely God would appear in particular signs just for the people that know him.

Private miracles. My name in lights in the night sky. That sort of thing.

We live in a world dominated by the belief that good things are scarce and life is one long fiercely fought competi-

tion to secure them for ourselves over and against everyone else. However if God's grace is without limit then there is no competition and there is no need to hoard.

If God loves our enemy, we are not loved any the less.

If we can accept God has the bad taste to love that deeply flawed and unlovable creature, my enemy, then it slowly becomes apparent that love doesn't mean what we thought it did.

That maybe God also loves that deeply flawed and unlovable creature, me.

And if we want to see God in a way peculiar to us we might try loving the enemies peculiar to us.

[T]he central problem of our lives is that we are torn apart by the conflict between our attraction to the good news of God's abundance and the power of our belief in scarcity - a belief that makes us greedy, mean and unneighborly. We spend our lives trying to sort out that ambiguity.

Walter Brueggemann - The Liturgy of Abundance, The Myth of Scarcity

Primroses and landscapes, he pointed out, have one grave defect: they are gratuitous. A love of nature keeps no factories busy.

Aldous Huxley - Brave New World



*You shall love your crooked neighbour
with your crooked heart.*

W. H. Auden

Pray

Spend time today praying for everyone who has caused you harm.

Day 12

Read Genesis 15: 1-18

Reflect

This is a strange story.

Abraham is given a look at the stars and the improbable promise of God.

When, like Abraham, we ask for help to trust God's promises we are expecting some sort of mundane but binding guarantee.

Like a contract.

Which ensures God will cough up because we are, well, equals and both bound by human law.

Abraham ends up sitting on the ground between bisected corpses slowly going off in the sun, shooing away vultures and waiting.

This may or may not have been an ancient way of sealing an understanding but it makes it no less bloody, smelly or susceptible to our control.

And then God comes as deep and terrifying darkness and then fire and light. And a promise of both suffering and joy.

The images seem foreign to us.
And yet strangely familiar.

This is not the only time God speaks fire and light in the midst of deep darkness.

The Torah is full of stories of God appearing in dramatic and unexpected ways to people where they are and in the image of the concrete things of their place.

It is possible that God now appears only as urgent memos and traffic jams, committee meetings, government questionnaires and internet click-bait.

If we leave aside the bureaucratic busyness of our lives to search for God perhaps there is still the chance of the look at the stars, the deep and terrifying darkness, the promise of suffering and joy, the light and the fire.

On that happy night – in secret; no one saw me through the dark -
and I saw nothing then,
no other light to mark
the way but fire pounding my heart.

That flaming guided me
more firmly than the noonday sun
and waiting there was he
I know so well- who shone
when nobody appeared to come.

St John of the Cross - Dark Night

On the whole, I do not find Christians, outside of the catacombs, sufficiently sensible of conditions. Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews.

Annie Dillard - Teaching a Stone to Talk

Pray

You do not have to sit outside in the dark. If, however, you want to look at the stars, you will find that darkness is necessary. But the stars neither require nor demand it.

Annie Dillard - Teaching a Stone to Talk

Pray today in the darkness, under the stars if you can.

My God my bright abyss
into which all my longing will not go
once more I come to the edge of all I know
and believing nothing believe in this:

*Christian Wiman
My Bright Abyss*

Day 13

Read Luke 6: 36 - 38

Reflect

Jesus continues to make this disconcerting link between how we treat others and how God treats us.

It could be read as legalism. We earn the mercy of God by dishing it out to other people. Or arbitrary nanny state behaviour by God to ensure the world is how God wants.

However, it goes deeper than that.

There is something about the world, God and we actually are that means Jesus is just describing it as it is.

It has something to do with what we are able to see. If we are mean, judge-y and condemnatory then we will only be able to see a God who is mean, judge-y and condemnatory.

It has something to do with who God is. God isn't present only in a private place in my heart. God is just as, maybe more, present in my relationships.

It has something to do with living in the fountain-like flow of the spirit. It is not a commodity that can be privately owned and used in the way most pleasing to us.

The strange truth is that, the more we

give, the more space there is for God to give to us.

The transcendental is not infinite and unattainable tasks, but the neighbour who is within reach in any given situation.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer

Letters and Paper from Prison

A brother questioned Abba Poemen, 'If I see my neighbour committing a sin should I conceal it?' The old man said, 'The moment we hide our neighbour's fault, God hides our own; and the moment we reveal our neighbour's fault, God reveals our own'.

Sayings of the desert fathers and mothers

...*you* neglect and belittle the desert.
The desert is not remote in southern tropics,
The desert is not only around the corner,
The desert is squeezed in the tube-train next to you,
The desert is in the heart of your brother.

T S Eliot

Choruses from the Rock



Pray

Who are the people that you think
are dragging Australia down?

Things would be ok if it wasn't
for those [fill in the blank].

Sit with your judgment of those
people and ask to be shown a
little of how God feels about
them.

Day 14

Read Matthew 23: 1-12

Reflect

It is considered very wise to spend a lifetime trying to get to the pointy top of pyramids.

If we do this we will probably be very successful.

But the top of a pyramid is a competitive and lonely place as there is, after all, only space for one.

And we run the grave risk of missing Jesus altogether if we spend all our effort climbing away from the exact place where he says his greatest people are to be found.

Jesus isn't saying that it is wrong to want to be exalted. He is saying that what the world considers up is in fact down, and what the world considers down is up.

The bottom of a pyramid is a much more spacious and relaxing place.

We don't have to secure our love or our worth by standing on the heads of other people.

It is close to the ground so we can take risks as there isn't far to fall.

And there is room for anyone who wants to be there.

Hancock is quoted as saying, 'Nothing should be sacred from mining, whether it's your ground, my ground, the black-fellow's or anyone else's.' The man who suggested the government should 'dope up' the water supplied to Aborigines so as to render them sterile was in no doubt about what this country signified and who it rightfully belonged to. He made his fortune from dirt but he saw the land from on high, which is a polite way of saying his perspective on the living world and his fellow humans was resolutely downward.

Tim Winton
Island Home



[T]he continent to which the rejects of Great Britain were sent turned out to be one in which the native people were egalitarian in their way of life beyond the imagination of privilege and even of earlier liberalism; it must have been of some effect, even if only a barely noticed one, on the colonists that the new land offered no ancient indigenous models of hierarchy at all. The solitary ego could be at once as vast as the horizon and as unimportant as a straw of windblown grass. Fences were a desperate spiritual necessity, and yet kept failing to hold. We still punish the Aborigines for the fear and temptation that this sets up in us. It was an insult to all our notions of productive work and getting ahead, that they could be so seemingly destitute and yet at the same time lords of infinite space...

Les Murray
The Quality of Sprawl



humility -
being your right size in the universe.

Noel Davis

Pray

The small number of people at the top of pyramids are disproportionately vocal. It can be a refreshing change of perspective to look at things from the underside.

Take an issue or event you really care about and seek out the view of those at the bottom of it.



Day 15

Read Psalm 84

Reflect

How have you found the road? Very easy to your feet? A green, grassy, flowery garden? a smooth meadow, with primroses and violets in the hedges, and you every now and then sitting on a stile, inhaling the breath of the May morn? or sometimes reclining on the grass, listening to the nightingale? This is not the way to heaven; you have mistaken the road. The way to heaven is through “the valley of Baca!” the valley of tears—a dry, parched, and burnt up valley, with thorns lacerating the traveller’s feet; the wild beasts lurking in the dens; and Satan and his host, as armed prowlers, seeking to destroy. Depend upon it, if we find the way very smooth, very easy, very pleasing, and very agreeable, we have made a great mistake; we have not got into the right road yet.

J C Philpot - The Valley of Baca’ preached at Zoar Chapel London, 1846

This vivid and confronting sermon is unmistakably a voice from another place and time.

Philpot’s imagery gives an insight into English concepts of beauty and how early British explorers like Charles

Sturt must have felt faced with the deeply unfamiliar Australian desert.

Can’t we follow God by lurking around in the rather appealing violet and primrose strewn meadow accompanied by the music of the nightingale?

It doesn’t seem right that the path to the delights of Zion goes through the Valley of Weeping (which is what Baca means) as it lacks the key necessity for a travellers life - water.

Why would a loving God lead by such a sad and dry route?

Surely the reasonable choice is to stay where we know there is water to be found, and abundant pleasantness beside?

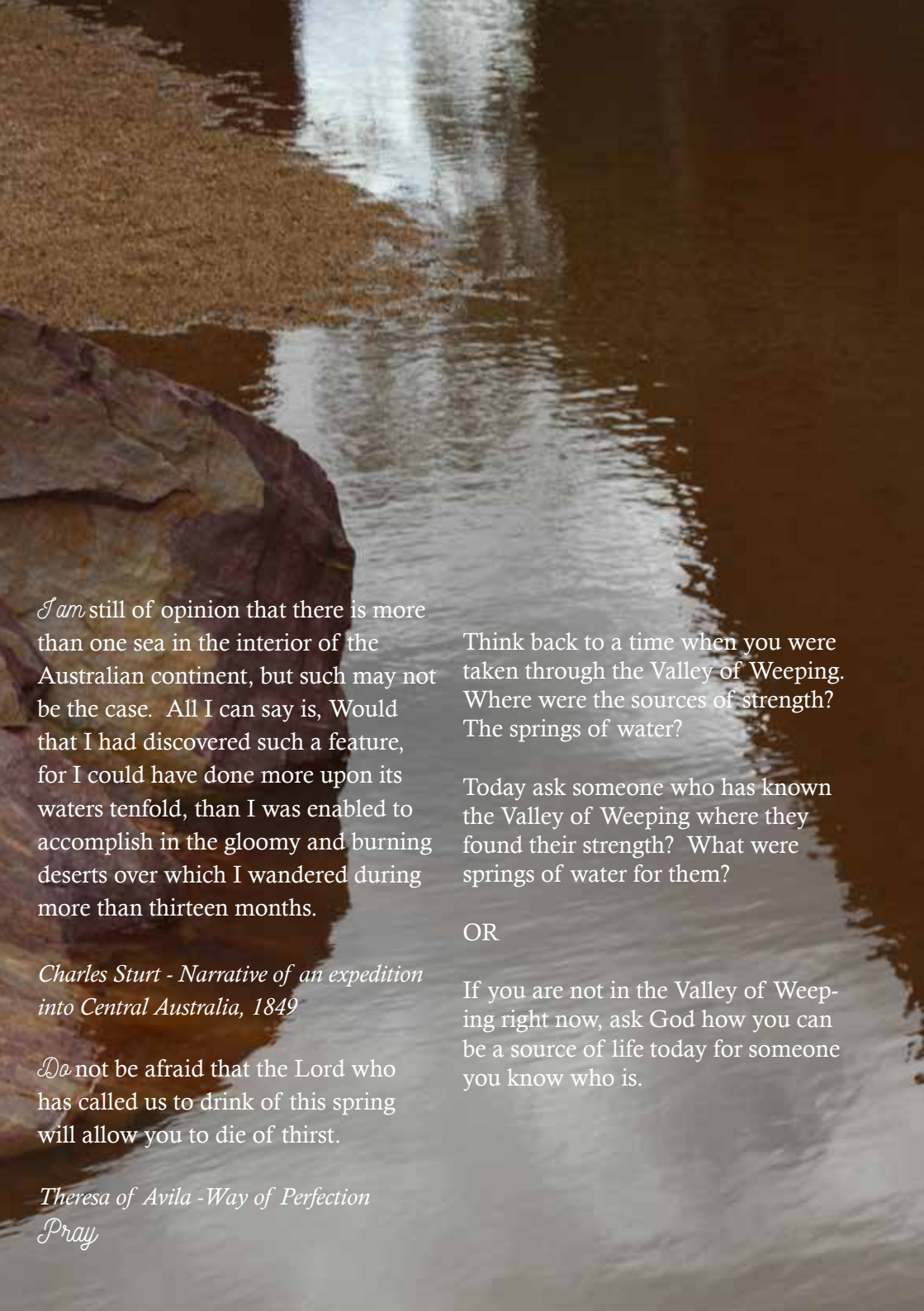
Yet those who are led down this unappealing path find that it becomes a place of springs.

They are those who trust in God and they are the happy ones. They go from strength to strength and they will see God.

It is a hard lesson to learn that the things of God are often not what they seem to us.

That we have to walk by faith and not by sight.

That God will sometimes lead by barren paths asking us to trust in the promise of hidden springs.



I am still of opinion that there is more than one sea in the interior of the Australian continent, but such may not be the case. All I can say is, Would that I had discovered such a feature, for I could have done more upon its waters tenfold, than I was enabled to accomplish in the gloomy and burning deserts over which I wandered during more than thirteen months.

Charles Sturt - Narrative of an expedition into Central Australia, 1849

Do not be afraid that the Lord who has called us to drink of this spring will allow you to die of thirst.

Theresa of Avila - Way of Perfection
Pray

Think back to a time when you were taken through the Valley of Weeping. Where were the sources of strength? The springs of water?

Today ask someone who has known the Valley of Weeping where they found their strength? What were springs of water for them?

OR

If you are not in the Valley of Weeping right now, ask God how you can be a source of life today for someone you know who is.

Day 16

Read Luke 16: 19-31

Reflect

This parable is disturbing in every way.

Why is the bloke called Lazarus? This is the Greek form of a Hebrew word which means, with what seems grim irony, 'God helps'.

What did the rich guy do so wrong that he ends up in Hades?

The Greek word translated 'feasted' actually means to make good cheer. You could translate the end of the first verse as 'being merry every day splendidly'. All this bloke seems to have done was happily live the sort of well-clothed abundant-food good life that many people in Australia live each day.

What did Lazarus do so right that he ends up in the Bosom of Abraham?

All he did was suffer and long for food.

It seems the rich man's only problem was that he paid no attention to the unpleasant and gloomy spectacle of sore-ridden Lazarus starving on his doorstep.

Looking back at our own history reveals some disturbing parallels.

How is it possible that the church existed and by and large didn't notice while 4,000 Tasmanian Aboriginal people were wiped out of existence?

And it raises the uncomfortable question: what is it we are not seeing now?


Abba Poemen said, 'The beginning of evil is heedlessness.'

A saying of the desert fathers and mothers

It is as if one were to enter a place flooded by sunlight with his eyes so full of dust that he could hardly open them... This seems to me to be the condition of a soul which, though not in a bad state, is so completely absorbed in things of the world and so deeply immersed, as I have said, in possessions or honours or business, that, although as a matter of fact it would like to gaze at the castle and enjoy its beauty, it is prevented from doing so, and seems quite unable to free itself from all these impediments.

Teresa of Avila - The Interior Castle

James Bonwick's words about the Tasmanian Aborigines in 1870 haunt us today: 'We cover our faces while the deep and solemn voice of our common Father echoes through the soul, "where is thy brother?"' What the Christian churches were doing while all of this was going on is a question which is shameful to have to ask. His answer is simple: almost nothing.

A close-up photograph of a tree trunk, showing a hole in the bark and a branch extending from the right side. The bark is a rich, textured brown color. The lighting is soft, highlighting the natural grain and imperfections of the wood.

Church of England, Catholic, Presbyterian and Methodist churches had all been established quite early in Hobart, yet in 1929 Henry Widowson was led to write: 'I have never heard, nor do I believe, that any teacher of the gospel ever went half a dozen miles from Hobart Town to inquire into their condition'.

Pray

Sit with this parable for a while and ask God, who is Lazarus today?

Day 17

Read Genesis 37: 3-28

Reflect

In Scetis, a brother went to see Abba Moses and begged him for a word. The old man said, “Go and sit in your cell and your cell will teach you everything.”

A saying of the desert fathers and mothers

The cell was the name of the small room the desert fathers and mothers spent their time in.

‘Go and sit in your cell’ is a strange way to learn.

Surely the way to learn more is to have more.

The desert way is the opposite.

It is to stay. And not just to stay but to stay within restrictions.

Sometimes we choose our restrictions, more often they come unbidden as we face illness or imprisonment, care of another, poverty or old age.

It can be tempting to think if only the limits were not there we could be really effective for God.

However, in God’s eyes, less is often more.

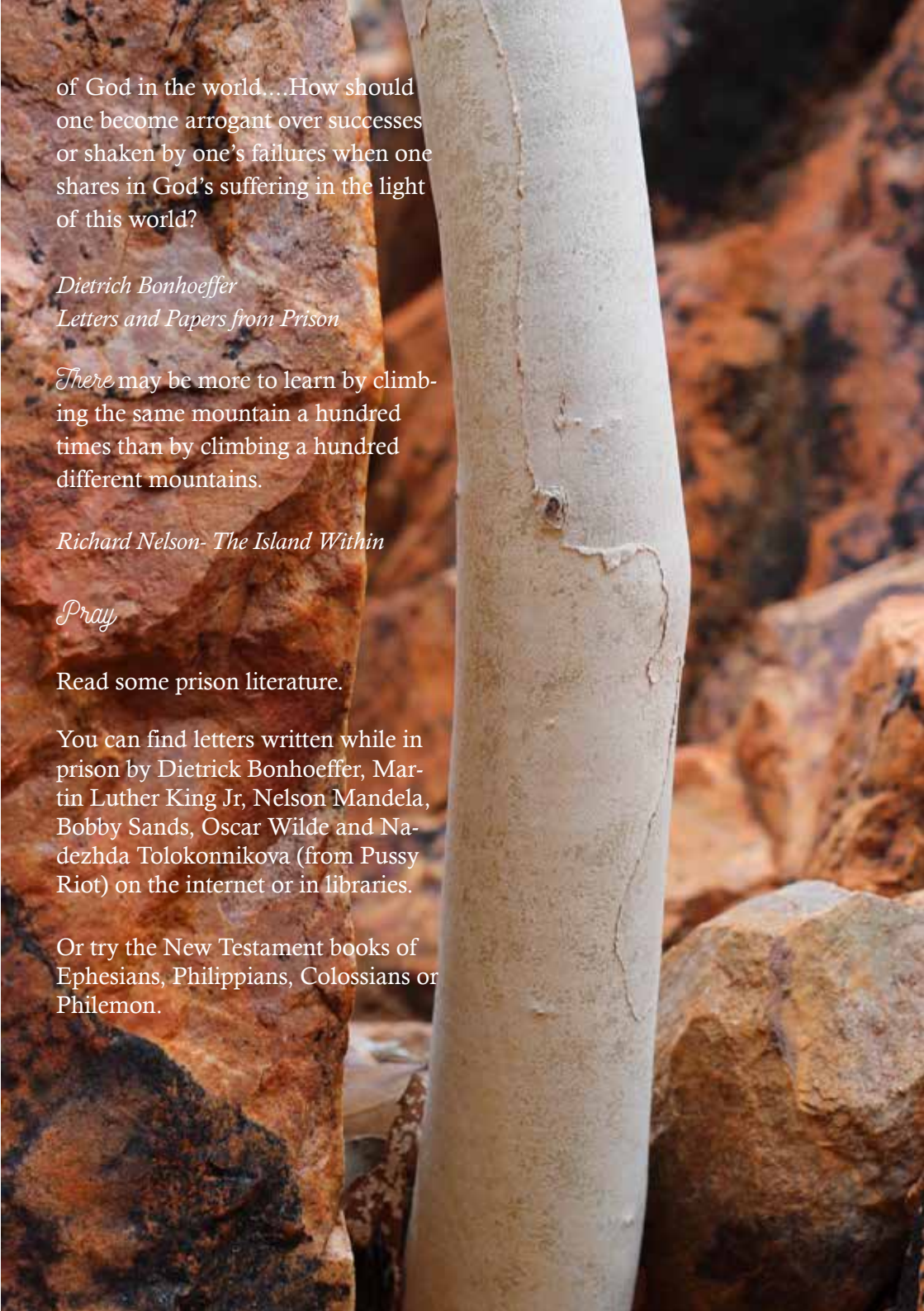
God can transform a trapped space. God doesn’t always alter the circumstances. Sometimes God uses them to alter us.

In today’s reading, a 17 year old with strange dreams is dropped helplessly into a dry pit in the middle of a wilderness and then sold as a slave.

After years of unjust imprisonment he becomes a great leader who saves his people.

Those who dream of things being different have continued to end up in jail and have continued to become people who transform the world.

Later on I discovered, and am still discovering to this day, that one only learns to have faith by living in the full this-worldliness of life. If one has completely renounced making something of oneself - whether it be a saint or a converted sinner or a church leader (a so-called priestly figure), a just or an unjust person, a sick or a healthy person – then one throws oneself completely into the arms of God and this is what I call this-worldliness: living fully in the midst of life’s tasks, questions, successes and failures, experiences and perplexities – then one takes seriously no longer one’s own sufferings but rather the suffering



of God in the world...How should one become arrogant over successes or shaken by one's failures when one shares in God's suffering in the light of this world?

Dietrich Bonhoeffer
Letters and Papers from Prison

There may be more to learn by climbing the same mountain a hundred times than by climbing a hundred different mountains.

Richard Nelson- The Island Within

Pray

Read some prison literature.

You can find letters written while in prison by Dietrick Bonhoeffer, Martin Luther King Jr, Nelson Mandela, Bobby Sands, Oscar Wilde and Nadezhda Tolokonnikova (from Pussy Riot) on the internet or in libraries.

Or try the New Testament books of Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians or Philemon.

Day 18

Read Psalm 103: 1-5

Reflect

I think it's a strange feature of developed life that our wants and our needs are always being agitated by things around us.

John Lanchester - Family Romance

We often solve problems with goal setting.

We list the things we don't have but want and then harness our will, and our days, to getting them.

It is very effective. The risk is what it does to our seeing and to our life.

It is a way of fixing our attention on what isn't, rather than what is.

On what we want rather than what God wants.

On our abilities rather than God's strength. On ourselves, not God.

Worship is a way to undo all this.

'Bless the Lord, O my soul, and do not forget all his benefits', says the Psalmist.

The Hebrew word *barak*, translated as bless, means something like 'adore on bended knee'.

The habit of praise, looking up at the goodness of God, is one of those seemingly insignificant things that has the power to completely transform our life.

Given how much time we spend pursuing our goals, it seems crazy not to set aside a few moments each day for praise.

Worship is a way of seeing the world in the light of God.

Abraham Heschel

O Thou our Emperor! Supreme Power, Supreme Goodness, Wisdom itself, without beginning, without end and without measure in Thy works; infinite are these and incomprehensible, a fathomless ocean of wonders, O Beauty, containing within Thyself all beauties. O Very strength! God help me! Would that I could command all the eloquence of mortals and all wisdom, so as to understand, as far as is possible here below, that to know nothing is everything.

Teresa of Avila - Way of Perfection

If we knew how to adore, then nothing could truly disturb our peace. We would travel through the world with the tranquillity of the great rivers.

Eloi Leclerc

The Wisdom of the poor one of Assisi

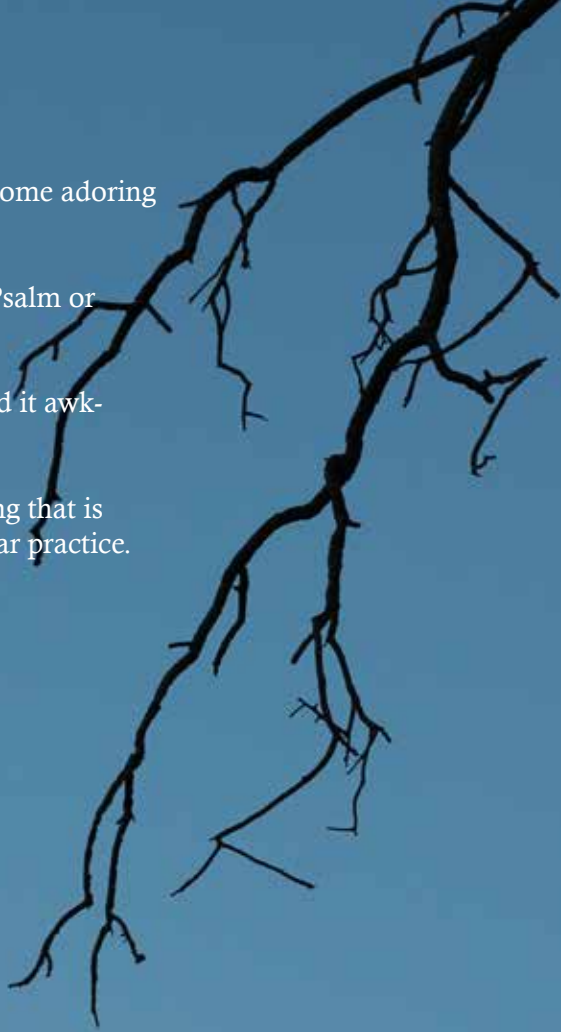
Pray

Spend your time today doing some adoring on bended knee.

You could try the words of a Psalm or Revelation 7: 12.

If you are not used to it, or find it awkward, persist.

The habit of praise is something that is learned in the process of regular practice.



Day 19

Read Psalm 103 :1-5

Reflect

This wilderness psalm is attributed to David, that man after God's own heart, who spent years as a desert vigilante trying to avoid being killed by King Saul.

It compares the fierce longing for water in a barren land to the feeling of yearning for an absent God.

Over and over in the scriptures God promises to provide food and water in the wilderness. And yet right now, they are absent.

Over and over in the scriptures God promises never to leave us. And yet right now, God is nowhere to be found.

How can this be understood? Has God stopped loving us? Or perhaps God is nice but ineffective? Or, most likely, God never existed in the first place.

The Psalmist's cry from the heart is echoed when Jesus calls out on the cross 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me'.

It seems that thirsting for an absent God is something God's finest followers do.

It seems that thirsting for an absent God is a form of faith.

Simone Weil puts it (with her characteristic use of the male pronoun) "he who has not God in himself cannot feel his absence."¹

Longing for a seemingly absent God is an ancient and powerful form of prayer.

A giant thirst is a great joy when quenched in time.

Edward Abbey - Desert Solitaire

Pray

The unknown fourteenth century author of 'The Cloud of Unknowing' beautifully describes longing as a form of prayer:

Reconcile yourself to wait in this darkness as long as is necessary, but still go on longing after [God] who you love.

Strike that thick cloud of unknowing with the sharp dart of longing love, and on no account whatever think of giving up.

Today spend some time with whatever it is you truly long for.

Feel the longing, and direct it to God, no matter whether you feel God's presence or not.

¹ Gravity and Grace



Thirst

Another morning and I wake with thirst
for the goodness I do not have. I walk
out to the pond and all the way God has
given us such beautiful lessons. Oh Lord,
I was never a quick scholar but sulked
and hunched over my books past the hour
and the bell; grant me, in your mercy,
a little more time. Love for the earth
and love for you are having such a long
conversation in my heart. Who knows what
will finally happen or where I will be sent,
yet already I have given a great many things
away, expecting to be told to pack nothing,
except the prayers which, with this thirst,
I am slowly learning.

Mary Oliver

Day 20

Read 2 Kings 5: 1-15

Reflect

Naaman expected a personal audience with a prophet, fine words, a dramatic gesture and an instant result.

Instead he got fobbed off with a messenger and the instruction to bathe repeatedly in a foreign stream.

Such ordinary treatment slighted him and his nation.

He would have left in a huff with both his pride and leprosy intact, except for the wise words of a persistent servant.

The mighty warrior listened to his inferior, humbled himself repeatedly and was cured.

Could it be that we still suffer from the Burke and Wills syndrome? Before those two explorers perished so miserably in the outback, they stumbled lost, starving and delirious – and shooting at aborigines who were trying to offer them food, water and salvation.

Michael Leunig
The Lot

The debates about why Burke and Wills died continue today.

It is not in dispute that Burke shot over the heads of the local people who had the knowledge the explorers lacked and that shortly afterwards they both starved to death surrounded by plentiful bush tucker.

Another member of the expedition, John King, was befriended and fed by the local Yandruwandha people and successfully completed the journey.

It is Burke and Wills who are commemorated in statue in Swanston St, Melbourne.

It can be very challenging to encounter grace. It comes from strange people and in strange places and we may have to give up our pride before we can receive it.

The notion that grace is healing omits the fact that before it heals it cuts with the sword Christ said he came to bring.

Flannery O'Connor - The Habit of Being

Plunge yourself into humility and you will see the glory of God.

St Isaac of Syria



Pray

Try humbling yourself before God today in whichever manner seems right to you.

You may consider kneeling before God (actually literally kneeling on the ground) or adopting any other prayer or worship practice that you have been drawn to but haven't adopted because it has always seemed just a little bit unsophisticated or simplistic.

Day 21

Read Psalm 25: 3-9

Reflect

It is only someone who has spent a lot of time feeling lost who asks repeatedly to be shown the path.

God will lead but it may not be by clearly comprehensible step-by-step instructions in advance.

'The wilderness with a map' in Stafford's pithy description of what his creative writing students demand.

It may be more like one step at a time in what appears to be a trackless waste.

But if God is guiding then although we may often be bewildered, we are not, in fact, lost at all.

They want a wilderness with a map

William Stafford

The bush was sinister in its monotony; it was trackless and unremembering. It closed like water over anyone who strayed into it. Men were lost a few yards from the settlement.

M B Eldershaw - Phillip of Australia

Discipleship is not limited to what you can comprehend – it must transcend all comprehension. Plunge into the deep waters beyond your own comprehension and I will help you to comprehend even as I do. Bewilderment is the true comprehension. Not to know where you are going is the true knowledge. My comprehension transcends yours. Thus Abraham went forth from his father and not knowing whither he went. He trusted himself to my knowledge and cared not for his own, and thus he took the right road and came to his journey's end. Behold, that is the way of the cross. You cannot find it yourself, so you must let me lead you as though you were a blind person. Wherefore it is not you, no person, no living creature, but I myself, who instruct you by my word and Spirit in the way you should go.

Martin Luther

Pray


I know a nun with a heart full of the blazing love of God.

Every day for many years she prayed the prayer on the following page

She is a courageous woman and it is a courageous prayer.

If you are able to do so then pray it.

If not, pray for the courage to be able to pray it.



*Lord,
lead me where you want me,
and give me the grace to respond.*

Sister Kathleen

Day 22

Read Psalm 147: 12-20

Reflect

This world where people hear the word of God sounds archaic and vaguely threatening.

However many of us now have the opposite problem.

God speaks no more.

We live in an entirely disenchanted world.

The Psalms repeatedly make a somewhat puzzling link between the word of God and the 'could not be less word-like' things of the sky.

The heavens are awe-inspiring, mysterious and uncontrollable. They are also ubiquitous.

Perhaps God is still pouring out speech like precipitation if only we could remember how to hear.

In the semi-arid range country where I live these days the heavens draw you out, like a multidimensional horizon. For most of the year the arrival of a cloud is something of an event. Along the south coast where I spent my adolescence, the air boils with gothic clouds. There the sky's commotion renders you so feverish your thoughts are closer to music than language. In the desert the night sky sucks at you, star by star, galaxy by galaxy, until you begin to feel you could fall out into it any moment... In our hemisphere the sky stops you in your tracks, derails your thoughts, unmoors you from what you were doing before it got you by the collar.

Tim Winton

Island home: a landscape memoir

It is difficult to undo our own damage, and to recall to our presence that which we have asked to leave. It is hard to desecrate a grove and change your mind. The very holy mountains are keeping mum. We doused the burning bush and cannot rekindle it; we are lighting matches in vain under every green tree. Did the wind use to cry, and the hills shout forth praise?

Now speech has perished from among the lifeless things of earth, and living things say very little to very few... It could be that wherever there is motion there is noise, as when a whale breaches and smacks the water – and wherever there is stillness there is the still small voice, God’s speaking from the whirlwind, nature’s old song and dance, the show we drove from town.

Annie Dillard
Teaching a Stone to Talk

The world is charged with the grandeur of God. It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;

Gerard Manley Hopkins
Grandeur of God

Pray

The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork.

Day to day pours forth speech, and night to night declares knowledge. There is no speech, nor are there words; their voice is not heard; yet their voice goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world.

Psalm 19:1-4

Spend some time today with these verses under the Australian sky.



Day 23

Read Psalm 95: 6-11

Reflect

At Massah and Meribah the Israelites found themselves in a desert without water.

I have been in a desert without water.

I did not worship.

I became dizzy, then I worried, which escalated into panic shot through with anger and blame.

Not entirely unlike the Israelites.

Why does the bible make such a huge deal about trusting God to provide food and drink in the wilderness when, right now God clearly isn't because it isn't there?

It is only when we are taken to where we no longer have control that we know what it is we are trusting in.

Whether it is in God or in ourselves.

In our modern lives we control many things.

We can go on a long time in the illusion that we are controlling everything.

It takes a lot, and it is very painful, to have our hands prised off the levers.


But then, after the letting go, there is grace. And we can rest.

[A] shadow common among leaders is “functional atheism,” the belief that ultimate responsibility for everything rests with us. This is the unconscious, unexamined conviction that if anything decent is going to happen here, we are the ones who must make it happen – a conviction held even by people who talk a good game about God.

Parker Palmer - Let your Life Speak

“God is at home,” says Meister Eckhart, “We are in the far country.” We are most deeply asleep at the switch when we fancy we control any switches at all.

Annie Dillard - Holy the Firm



Words are part of our rational selves; to abandon words is to give way to our spiritual selves. Nevertheless, the Desert Fathers and Mothers advise us to stay silent and to stay put! They counsel us to shut the door and to sit in the cell! We are simply to wait, even as – indeed especially when – we experience moments of panic, of powerlessness, of helplessness, of terror, of death. That is what they did. After all, where do you go beyond the desert?... You just sit; you just stay; you just wait. Then, when you arrive at the end of your individual resources, an infinite and eternal source can open up. Not that divine grace is absent beforehand; it is simply unnoticed, while we yet depend on ourselves.

John Chryssavagis
In the Heart of the Desert

Pray

There are ways of praying that teach us to let go of the levers.

One is Christian meditation as taught by the Benedictine Monk, John Main (who was inspired by John Cassian, a 4th century monk).

If you do not already have a meditation practice try meditating for 5 minutes using this method (look up the World Community of Christian Meditation on the web) or any other method that seems right to you.

Don't be discouraged whatever happens.

This is another of those 'it seems to simple to be of any use' things that reveals its power only when practiced faithfully over time.

Day 24

Read Psalm 81: 6-10

Reflect

The Israelites were freed from their slave-like work conditions.

For many of us today it would be relieving the shoulder from the stress and freeing the hands from the computer keyboard.

The Psalm moves from a picture of extremely hard work to a very strange image.

Open your mouth wide and I will fill it

It sounds like a baby bird in a nest waiting for a mother to return with a worm.

Not exactly an aspirational image.

Many of us would rather the burden on the shoulder and the hand on the basket.

At least we are busy. And productive. And in some degree of control.

God says over and over it isn't up to us.

We aren't to rely on ourselves (our stubborn hearts and own counsel later in the Psalm) or other powerful world-views (foreign Gods in Psalm-speak).

We are to rely on God.

Or in wise words once spoken to me in a desert:

Let Go. Let God. And be surprised.

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

The emptiness of the desert makes it possible to learn the almost impossible: the joyful acceptance of our own uselessness.

Ivan Illich - Foreword to 'Letters from the Desert' by Carlo Corretto

It is undoubtedly a desert place, clean, pure, totally useless, quite unprofitable.

Edward Abbey - Desert Solitaire

Suffer us not to mock ourselves with falsehood

Teach us to care and not to care

Teach us to sit still

Even among these rocks,

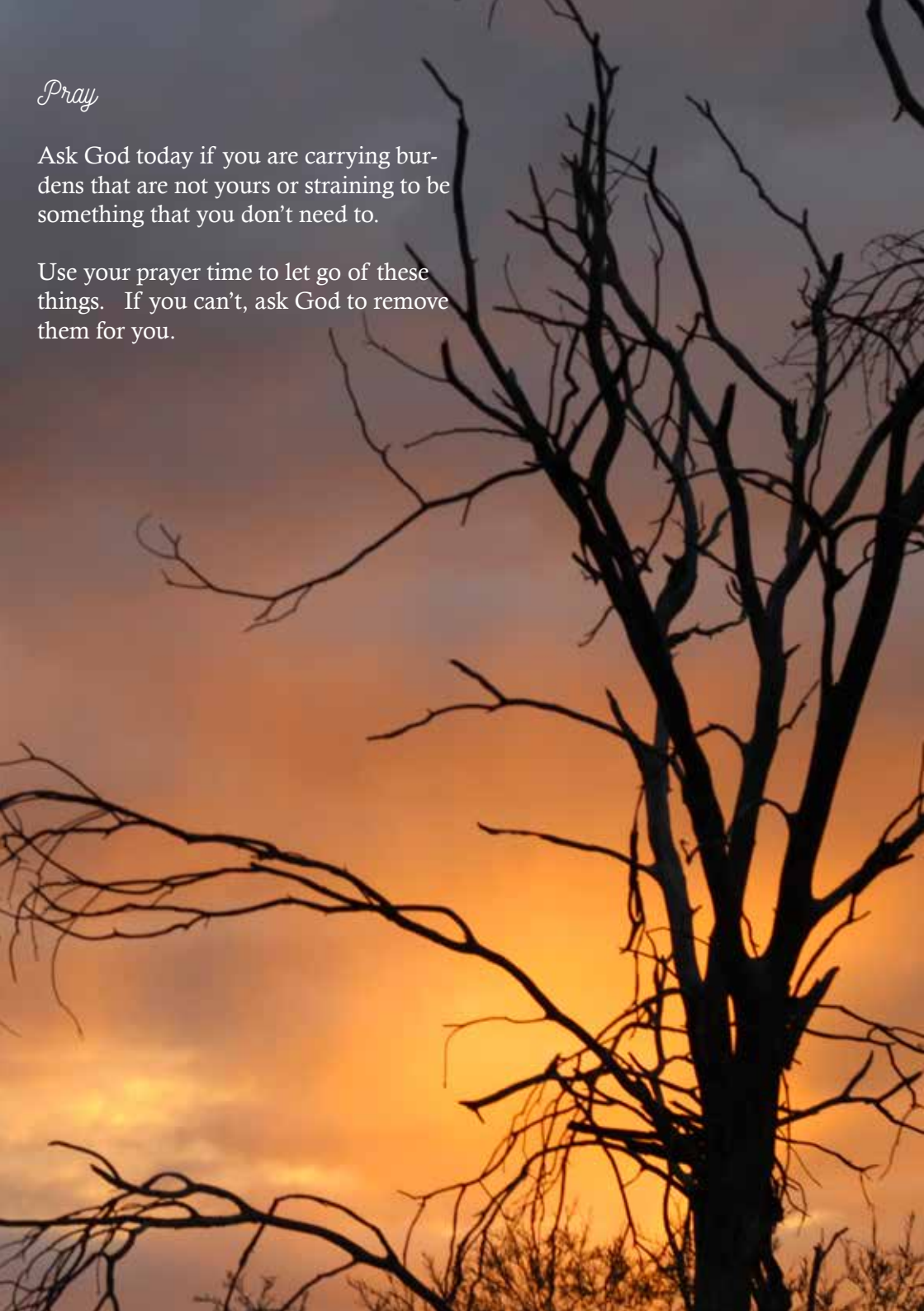
Our peace in his will

T S Eliot - Ash Wednesday

Pray

Ask God today if you are carrying burdens that are not yours or straining to be something that you don't need to.

Use your prayer time to let go of these things. If you can't, ask God to remove them for you.



Day 25

Read Luke 18: 9-14

Reflect

The Pharisee is a deeply unpleasant person and frighteningly recognizable as ourselves.

We can see through his pompous prayer to the deep anxiety underneath. Am I good enough? I must be because I act so virtuously. Am I good enough? Well this bloke is worse so I must be ok.

His head, and thus his prayer (and his life) is full of himself, and the effort of securing his goodness over and against the inferior other.

There is no room for God. And so he leaves without encountering God.

The Tax collector knows he isn't good enough. He doesn't see or care about the Pharisee.

In his misery he doesn't make it to the temple and he can't bring himself to look up.

He asks God for mercy.
And leaves elevated by grace.

You don't have to be good
Mary Oliver - Wild Geese

[T]he way of the desert teaches us how to pray: how to stand before God, how to speak to God, and above all how to keep silent before God. It reminds us that God is born in barrenness, where there is an absence of pride, of masks, of illusions and of false images. Paradoxically, God fulfils in emptiness. God appears when we are not too filled with other attachments and distractions, when we are not too full of ourselves.

John Chryssavagis
In the Heart of the Desert

Love is the extremely difficult realization that something other than oneself is real.

Iris Murdoch - The Sublime and the Good



A photograph of a tree trunk and its shadow on dry, reddish-brown soil. The tree trunk is dark and vertical, with several smaller branches extending from it. The shadow of the tree is cast onto the ground, creating a complex pattern of dark lines. The ground is composed of fine, reddish-brown soil with some small rocks and sparse, dry vegetation.

Pray

The tax collector's prayer has become 'the Jesus prayer', one of the great prayer traditions of the Eastern Orthodox church.

It is the discipline of meditatively repeating the phrase:

Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy upon me, a sinner.

Its regular use is considered a method of opening up the heart.

Rowan Williams practices this form of prayer for 30 to 40 minutes every morning.

Today try praying in this way for a few minutes at a time.

Day 26

Read Luke 15: 11-32

Reflect

While we are under the illusion that we are in control then we can't see God as God is, and we can't appreciate God's grace for what it is.

It is only when we realize how little it is we actually bring to the table, that we have any chance of experiencing the indescribable immensity of God's love for us.

The younger son has no comprehension of his father's love. Not when he takes the inheritance to find happiness elsewhere. Not when he is crafting his placatory speech to try to weasel his way back in. Neither does the older son.

It seems it is difficult for us limited humans to have even an edge of a sort of an understanding of the abundance of the love of God.

You could read the whole bible as God's painstaking attempt to tell us how much we are loved.

And we are put on earth a little space,
That we might learn to bear the beams
of love.

William Blake

There is an overwhelming temptation to duck the 'the beams of love' usually by shifting our attention to something ultimately trivial but pleasingly controlled by us.

All human nature vigorously resists grace because grace changes us and the change is painful.

Flannery O'Connor - The Habit of Being

Instead Jesus repeatedly tells his disciples to μένετε in his love. (John 15)

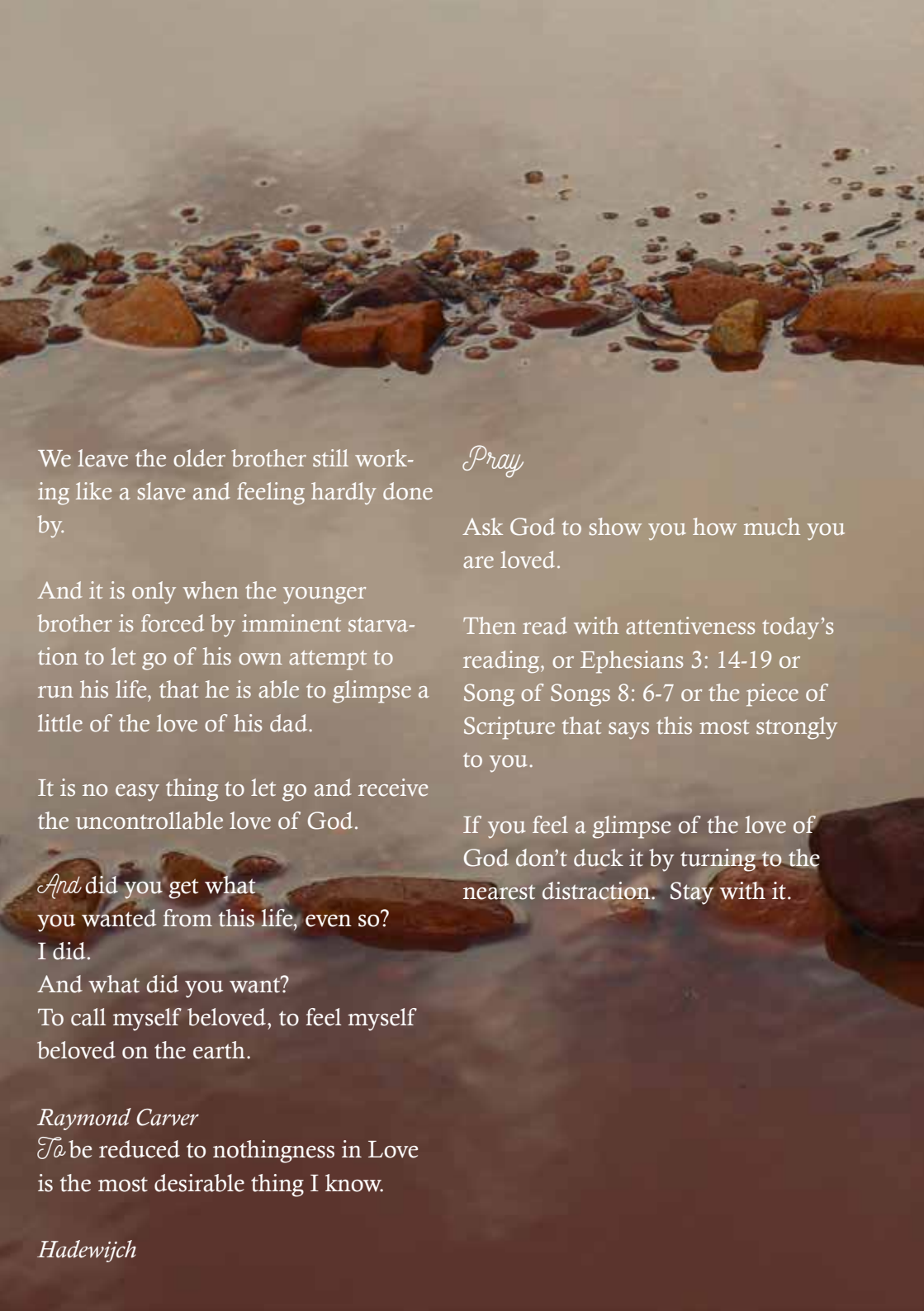
The Greek root μένω is translated using words like remain, abide, stay, wait and tarry.

This seems more than a little passive.

Moving Forward (destination unspecified) is a serious political slogan in Australia.

We value 'get up and go'. We are a bit light on the tarrying.

But in this parable both brothers have plenty of drive.



We leave the older brother still working like a slave and feeling hardly done by.

And it is only when the younger brother is forced by imminent starvation to let go of his own attempt to run his life, that he is able to glimpse a little of the love of his dad.

It is no easy thing to let go and receive the uncontrollable love of God.

And did you get what you wanted from this life, even so?
I did.

And what did you want?
To call myself beloved, to feel myself beloved on the earth.

Raymond Carver

To be reduced to nothingness in Love is the most desirable thing I know.

Hadewijch

Pray

Ask God to show you how much you are loved.

Then read with attentiveness today's reading, or Ephesians 3: 14-19 or Song of Songs 8: 6-7 or the piece of Scripture that says this most strongly to you.

If you feel a glimpse of the love of God don't duck it by turning to the nearest distraction. Stay with it.

Day 27

Read Psalm 30: 8-12

Reflect

It is tempting to go straight to the cheery bits of the bible.

We could read this Psalm as ‘mumble...gracious...mumble...faithful... God says he will give dancing and joy so let’s praise him!’

This reading is perfectly reconcilable with the voices around us that say that a life of perpetual happiness is both achievable and the aim.

However the bible is a stubbornly honest mix of sorrow and joy.

The writer starts on the edge of the pit, facing death and disintegration.

If we accept that the mere presence of sadness indicates we (or others) have done something wrong then it becomes unbearable. It adds guilt, shame, blame and the onus to fix it, to the burden of the sadness itself.

The psalms are clear that sadness is real and part of life on this earth.

The desert fathers say that somehow, strangely, tears are the way forward.

If sadness is a red light indicating we have stuffed up that is one thing.

If it is a part of life, perhaps even the next step along the path, then that is quite another.

Life is pain, highness. Anyone who says differently is selling something.

The Princess Bride

Suffering is the greatest teacher; the consecrated suffering of one soul teaches another. I think we have got all our values wrong, and suffering is the crown of life. Suffering and expansion, what a rich combination!

Religion has never made me happy; it’s no use shutting the eyes to the fact that the deeper you go, the more alone you will find yourself. Suffering can expand, suffering can contract.

La souffrance noble, la souffrance basse.

Grasp the nettle, my little old thing!

Religion has never made me comfy. I have been in the deserts ten years. All deepened life is deepened suffering, deepened dreariness, deepened joy. Suffering and joy. The final note of religion is joy.

Friedrich von Hügel -Letters from Baron Friedrich von Hügel to a Neice

It was said of Abba Arsenius that he had a hollow in his chest channeled out by the tears, which fell from his eyes all through his life while he sat doing his manual work. When Abba Poemen learned that he was dead, he said weeping: "Truly you are blessed, Abba Arsenius, for you wept for yourself in this world. One who does not weep here below will weep eternally hereafter. So it is impossible not to weep, either voluntarily or when compelled through suffering."



A saying of the desert fathers and mothers

Pray

In your prayer time today allow space for unpleasant feelings.

Ask God to be with you and give you the strength to bear them and then allow them to arise and just sit with them.

At the end take anything that has come up to God.



Day 28

Read Psalm 46: 1-7

Reflect

In this Psalm the world is in terrifying flux.

God doesn't seem to be acting around his chosen ones to make everything smooth.

It is tempting to think that if we get prayer right, if we are good enough, we can have a life without chaos and destruction.

But this means when things around us are in turmoil, clearly we are not God's chosen and God is not with us.

And if God's favour is evidenced by smooth and steady progress upwards then he must be on the side of the prosperous, the victorious, the colonizer and the strong.

Here the sea surges, the land is no longer stable, governments totter.

It isn't that God is absent. God's voice is causing this mayhem.

Yet even amidst this we are ok. For the same voice speaks to us of help, strength and refuge.

It doesn't mean that what is happening around us is not real.

It means our security is grounded in something greater than everything that appears secure in this world.

This frees us from clinging to the



illusion of earthly security by avoiding the difficult places and huddling together with the strong.

We can go where we are sent, even into chaos and destruction, with our peace secure in God.

I came here to study hard things – rock mountain and salt sea – and to temper my spirit on their edges. “Teach me thy ways, O Lord” is, like all prayers, a rash one, and one I cannot but recommend.

Annie Dillard - Holy the Firm

How does peace come about? Through a system of political treaties? Through the investment of international capital in different countries? Through the big banks, through money? Or through universal peaceful rearmament in order to guarantee peace? Through none of these, for the single reason that in all of them peace is confused with safety.

There is no way to peace along the way to safety. For peace must be dared. It is the great venture. It can never be made safe. Peace is the opposite of security.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer - DBWE 13

Pray

Where do you see mountains quaking and the sea surging in your own life? In the world?

Bring the chaos and destruction before God.

Then stay awhile with the image of God in the midst of the city that shall not be moved.



Day 29

Read Isaiah 49: 8-15

Reflect

We can choose to go where we see the good stuff already is.

Or we can follow the God who calls things that are not as though they are.

Here we see a glimpse of what happens when we are with God.

The desolate heritages, aren't. The prisoners are freed. There is light to see in darkness. Pasture appears on bare heights and springs of water in dry places. Sun and wind are no longer a threat. The mountains become a road. The suffering are comforted.

This is not a novel list.

These themes stretch like a vast underground reservoir throughout the bible, bubbling up to the surface over and over again.

We can live our life within the limits of what we can see is already there.

Or we are free to leave the well-marked road, trusting that there is an entire other unseen reality, visible only through promise, that is worth staking our life on.

Everything will be okay in the end. If it's not okay, it's not the end.

Fernando Sabino

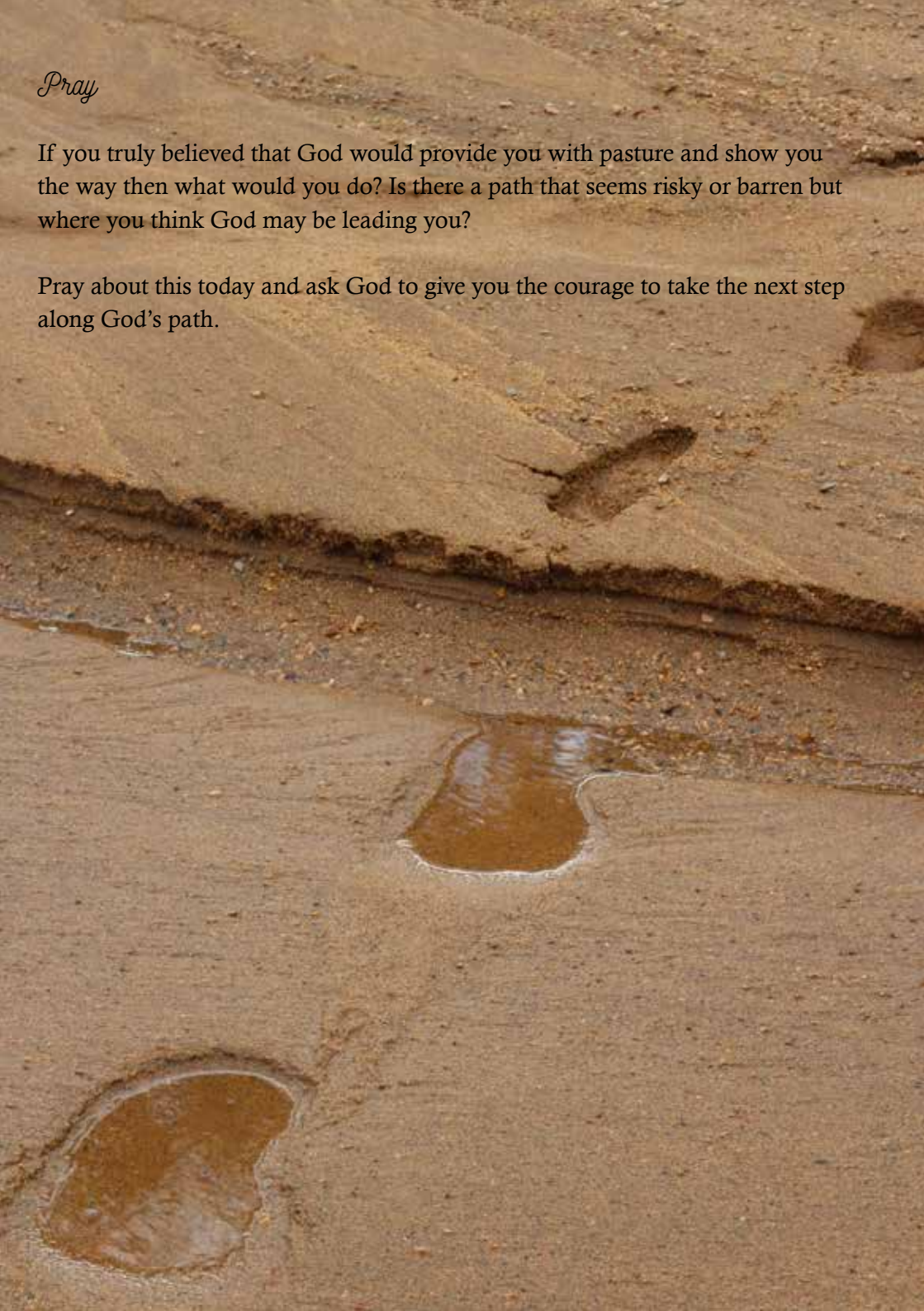
One moment last night can be described in similes; otherwise it won't go into language at all. Imagine a man in total darkness. He thinks he is in a cellar or dungeon. Then there comes a sound. He thinks it might be a sound from far off – waves or wind-blown trees or cattle half a mile away. And if so, it proves he's not in a cellar, but free, in the open air. Or it may be a much smaller sound close at hand – a chuckle of laughter. And if so, there is a friend just behind him in the dark. Either way, a good, good sound. I'm not mad enough to take such an experience as evidence for anything. It is simply the leaping into imaginative activity of an idea which I would always have theoretically admitted – the idea that I or any mortal at any time, may be utterly mistaken as to the situation [we are] really in.

C S Lewis - A Grief Observed

Pray

If you truly believed that God would provide you with pasture and show you the way then what would you do? Is there a path that seems risky or barren but where you think God may be leading you?

Pray about this today and ask God to give you the courage to take the next step along God's path.



Day 30

Read Exodus 32: 7-14

Reflect

The Israelites were endearingly abysmal at sitting in desert spaces where they lacked things and waiting in trust on God.

There was a time when they faced an absent Moses on Mt Sinai talking to God where they couldn't see him and a wait.

They couldn't bear it.

They coveted a god that would appear on cue and lead them now and they seized control.

They pressured Aaron into producing a golden calf.

They made a fake god when the real God was in the process of guiding them in words that still echo around the world.

Sometimes following God means sitting with a space where we think God should be.

The temptation to fill it with something of our own making is overwhelming.

It is to be resisted.

If we do it will be, by definition, not of God.

It will be an idol.

Which is the technical term for a god that is created and controlled by us.

All sins are attempts to fill voids.

Simone Weil - Gravity and Grace

The emptiness of the interior of Australia can be overwhelming to those used to a livelier field of vision. To me, this emptiness is liberating. The view in an urban street changes from one moment to the next. Its time is measured in fractions of a second. A stream of impressions bombards our consciousness. In the desert, there is little to see apart from geological formations that have been shaped over millions of years and take centuries to change. The heart of the desert beats at a different pace. Geology can't be rushed. When it occupies your whole field of vision, you feel first impatience, then oppression, and finally that sense of calm that only a blank space can create. The stillness that only the absolute provides.

Sven Lindqvist - Terra Nullius

Pray

Worry is one of the main ways we fill up space.

Give up worry for today.

John Cassian (360 – 435 AD) suggested interrupting unwanted thoughts by turning to God using a phrase from Psalm 70:1

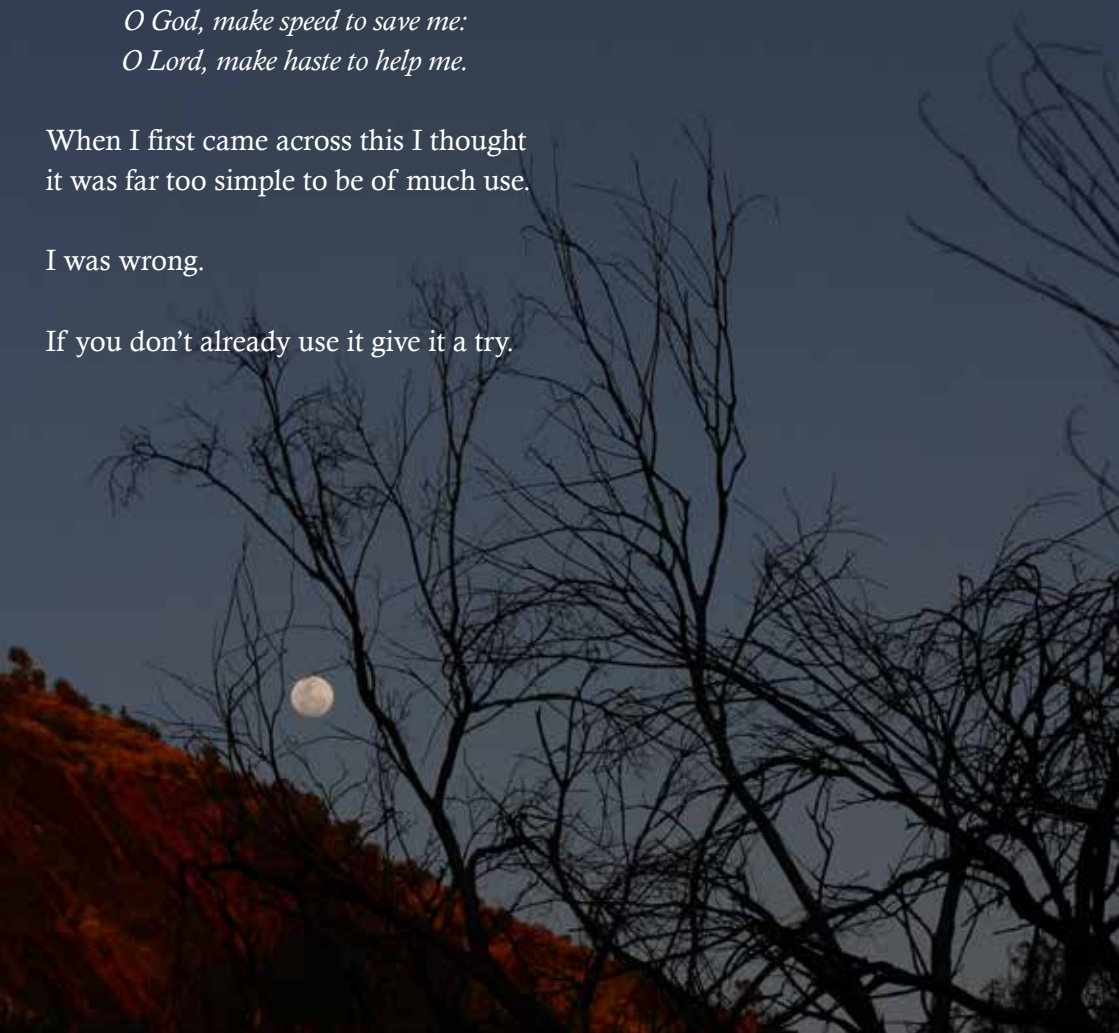
O God, make speed to save me:

O Lord, make haste to help me.

When I first came across this I thought it was far too simple to be of much use.

I was wrong.

If you don't already use it give it a try.



Day 31

Read Psalm 34: 15-22

Reflect

God is close to the broken-hearted.

God saves those whose spirits are crushed.

Surely Jesus had this in mind when he taught 'Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven' (Matthew 5:3).

It is only when our heart is broken that God can come in.

It sounds painful because it is.

We would far rather fix the cracks ourselves and then fortify our heart against any chance of breaking open than endure the pain of it.

The desert is the journey from the closed mind to the open heart.

Do we want to be close to God?

The broken-hearted already are.

If we are not broken-hearted ourselves just now, perhaps we should head towards people that are.

For it is at the broken places in this world that God is to be found.

There is a crack, a crack in everything. That's how the light gets in.

Leonard Cohen

How else but through a broken heart
May Lord Christ enter in?

Oscar Wilde

Ballad of Reading Gaol

Pray

Today spend some time listening to someone who is broken-hearted and crushed in spirit.

It isn't a public service.

The privilege is all ours because it brings us closer to Christ.



In the Desert

In the desert
I saw a creature, naked, bestial,
Who, squatting upon the ground,
Held his heart in his hands,
And ate of it.
I said, "Is it good, friend?"
"It is bitter—bitter," he answered;

"But I like it
"Because it is bitter,
"And because it is my heart."

Stephen Crane



Day 32

Read John 7: 40-52

Reflect

Some people who hear Jesus think it may be the voice of God.

For the very good reason that it sounds like the voice of God. Then the experts enter the scene.

“None of the powerful or important people are convinced” they pompously explain to the temple police “only the common crowd and what would they know?”

For more expertise, more knowledge, more books even, may at times be a path away from God, not towards him.

Reason is a wonderful thing but if we enthrone it above God then what we in fact worship is our own understanding.

And we may miss God altogether.

Time in the desert takes us away from the important and the powerful, from the received wisdom and set criteria about what is and isn't the voice of God.

As these voices slowly fade we may start to hear a new voice.

Their love is not yet ardent enough to overwhelm their reason.

Therese of Avila - Interior Castle

I can still hear my grandfather's voice: "There will, of course, always be someone to tell you that a certain tale cannot, could not, be objectively true. That is of no importance. An objective Hasid is not a Hasid".

Elie Wiesel - Souls on Fire

I would not sacrifice a single living mesquite tree for any book ever written. One square mile of living desert is worth a hundred 'great books' - and one brave deed is worth a thousand.

Edward Abbey - Desert Solitaire

Pray

Never has anyone spoken like this!

The monastic practice of lectio divina is one way of opening our ears so, over time, we too find God's word as compelling as the temple police did.

Today ask God to speak to you.

Listen to today's reading read three times (or read it slowly three times).

Then stay with whichever bit grabs you.

After a while pray to God about it.

Resist the temptation to escape into further research or the distraction of the next thing.

If it is uncomfortable, lean into the discomfort.

And let it change you.

Day 33

Read Isaiah 43: 16-21

Reflect

In the desert we slowly start to see differently.

It is as though we have been wandering around with thick cataracts in both eyes and now they have been removed and we can see what is really there.

It is hard to describe this sort of seeing. Isaiah gives it a good go.

It is something like the defeat of an entire Egyptian army being as easy as snuffing out a candle.

It is something like an impassable sea becoming a road.

It is something like finding a fast moving deep stream where hours before there was a bone dry ditch.

It is something like a desert full of bright flowers after rain (Isaiah 35:1).

It is hard to describe because it is a new thing.

It isn't deducible from the old, from where we used to stand, from what we used to know.

We couldn't have thought our way into this.

It isn't a grand new logically impregnable system for understanding everything.

And thus these desert people, when they talk at all (many of them are silent types), lapse into story and metaphor and poetry and analogy.

And so it appears to those busy folk back in crowded in Egypt that these wild stories of tracks and streams and flowers are merely the desert mirages of someone who is surely slowly dying of thirst.

The elders of Israel came out of Egypt and into the desert where they 'saw the God of Israel. Under his feet there was something like a pavement of sapphire stone, like the very heaven for clearness' (Exodus 24:10).

If what God wants to show us is something like a sapphire footpath in the wilderness and we are in Egypt asking him to resolve a doctrinal dilemma or to advance our career, then something may need to shift.

Probably us.

"Launch into the deep," says Jacques Ellul, "and you shall see". The secret of seeing is, then, the pearl of great price. If I thought he could teach me to find it and keep it forever I would stagger barefoot across a hundred deserts after any lunatic at all. But although the pearl may be found, it may not be sought. The literature of illumination reveals this above all: although it comes to those who wait for it, it is always, even to the most practiced and adept, a gift and a total surprise.

*Annie Dillard
Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*

Though I came to forget or regret all I have ever done, yet I would remember that once I saw the dragons aloft on the wind at sunset above the western isles; and I would be content.

*Ursula K. LeGuin
The Farthest Shore*

In this part of the world you have to circle into truth through stories.

*John Paul Lederach
The Moral Imagination*

Pray

Reason can testify only inadequately to things of which it has no experience. The brilliance of this vision is like that of infused light or of a sun covered with some material of the transparency of a diamond, if such a thing could be woven.

Teresa of Avila - Interior Castle

Take your favourite 'I wish it were true but it is a bit hard to believe' metaphor or story about the things of God and sit with it for a while today.

Day 34

Read Psalm 23

Reflect

Millions have been drawn to this short poem in their most difficult times.

I have seen it bring inexplicable comfort to someone I love (who wasn't at all sure that there was a God) as they lay dying.

Sometimes we get stuck on what we think people should find helpful.

There is a lot to learn from what people actually find helpful.

Particularly people who haven't got the energy to muck around with fake sources of water.

This Psalm isn't much use in shoring up doctrinal points of difference.

It talks about the basic things. Guidance. A home. Comfort. Rest. Restoration.

We are frail creatures. God knows we need this stuff.

It could seem all too dependent.

The people I have met most tethered to God live the freest lives.

If we are freed up from worrying about the baseline stuff then we are free to go wherever God leads.

And we may be sheep. But we follow a wild God.

A visitor to an Australian outback cattle station was intrigued by the seemingly endless miles of farming country with no sign of any fences. He asked a local rancher how he kept track of his cattle. The rancher replied, "Oh that's no problem. Out here we dig wells instead of building fences"....

The question we need to consider is this: If Christian disciples were no longer defined in terms of fences, but only according to their movement towards Christ the centre, where does that leave you and me?

*Sheila Pritchard - Wells or Fences?
A Paradigm for Spiritual Growth*

The would-be believers who sometimes ask me for help with prayer (still a comic notion) often say it seems hypocritical to turn to God only now during whatever crisis is forcing them towards it – kid with leukaemia, say, husband lost in the World Trade Centre. But no one I know has ever turned to God any other way.



As the adage says, there are no atheists in foxholes (although reason suggests there are probably a couple). Maybe saints turn to God to exalt him, from innate righteousness. The rest of us tend to show up holding out a tin cup.

Mary Karr - Sinners Welcome

Pray

If you haven't already done it, memorise this psalm in any version of the Bible.

It is hard to go past the beauty of the King James Version.

Day 35

Read Numbers 21: 4-9

Reflect

This is another rough-edged desert story.

We could maybe politely pretend this story didn't exist except that Jesus clearly thought it captured something about his death.

And Jesus on the cross is no more pleasant or easily explicable.

Illness and death are terrifying. - Who could blame us if we took refuge in positive thinking?

Look only at the good. Skip over the bad.

But we may end up living in a world that is not in fact real.

This strange desert healing required looking at something hard, painful and inexplicable.

For those dying of snakebite probably the one thing they least wanted to see.

But we have the promise of life where all we can see is death and loss. So we are free to look at what is.

Modern spiritual consciousness is predicated upon the fact that God is gone, and spiritual experience, for many of us, amounts mostly to an essential, deeply felt and necessary, but ultimately inchoate and transitory feeling of oneness or unity with existence. It is mystical and valuable, but distant. Christ, though, is a shard of glass in your gut. Christ is God crying I am here and here not only in what exalts and completes and uplifts you, but here in what appals, offends and degrades you, here in what activates and exacerbates all that you would call not-God. To walk through the fog of God toward the clarity of Christ is difficult because of how unlovely, how 'ungodly' that clarity often turns out to be.

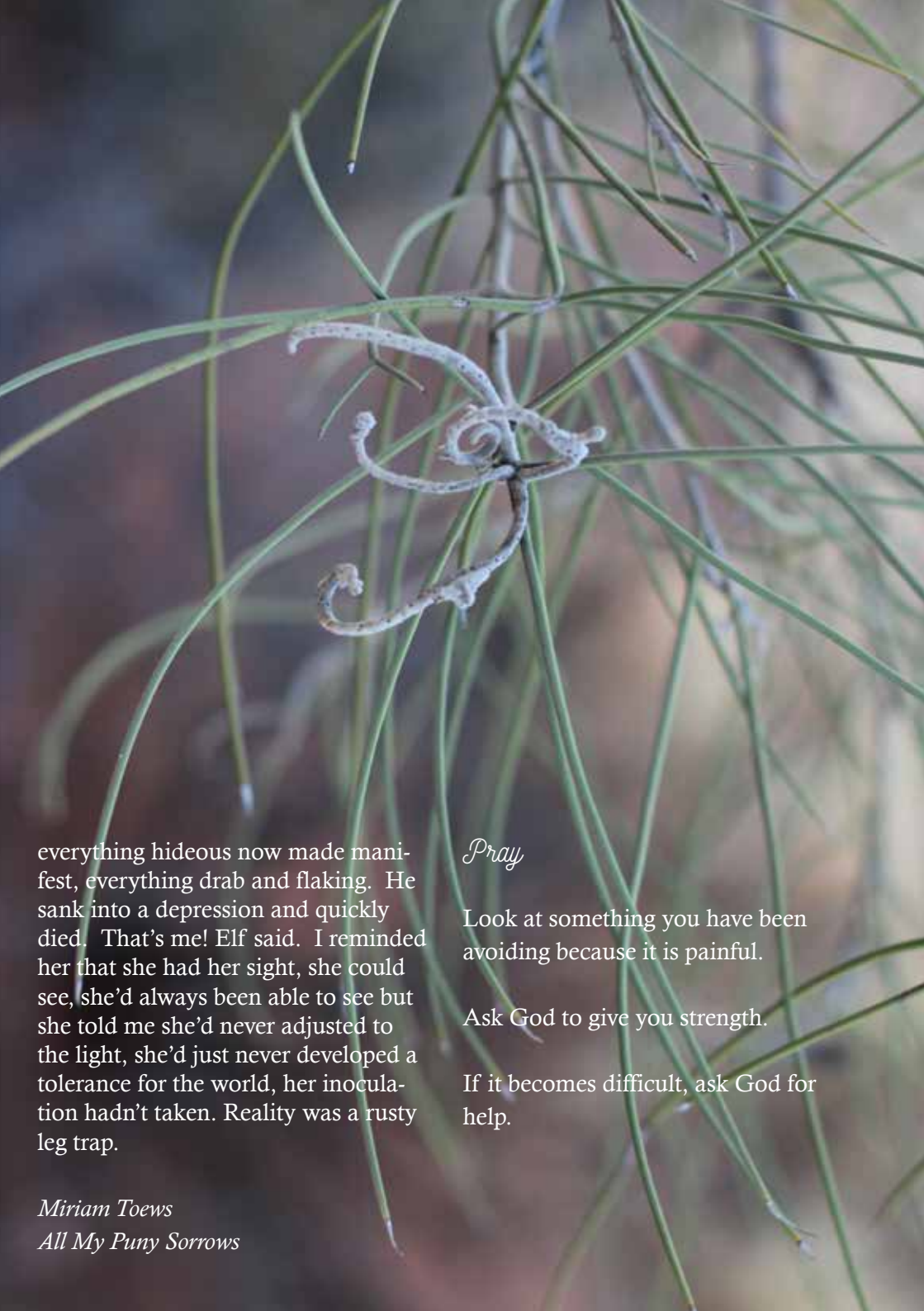
Christian Wiman - My Bright Abyss

Prayer

Whatever happens. Whatever
what is is what
I want. Only that. But that.

Galway Kinnell

Eff explained to me that she was exactly like this guy she'd read about in the paper, a guy who was blind from birth and then at the age of forty-something he had a corneal operation and could suddenly see, and although he was told that life would be amazing for him then, after the operation it was awful. The world depressed him, its flaws, its duplicity, its rot and grime and sadness,



everything hideous now made manifest, everything drab and flaking. He sank into a depression and quickly died. That's me! Elf said. I reminded her that she had her sight, she could see, she'd always been able to see but she told me she'd never adjusted to the light, she'd just never developed a tolerance for the world, her inoculation hadn't taken. Reality was a rusty leg trap.

Miriam Toews
All My Puny Sorrows

Pray

Look at something you have been avoiding because it is painful.

Ask God to give you strength.

If it becomes difficult, ask God for help.

Day 36

Read Daniel 3: 14-28

Reflect

Bushfires terrify Australians as they regularly cause death and destruction.

The extraordinary documentary Putuparri and the Rainmakers shows the Wangkajunga elders lighting the spinifex in the Great Sandy Desert to care for and rejuvenate country. Due to extreme variations in rainfall the Australian desert is a rare thing – a desert that burns.¹

The footage of the desert filled with flame is a thing of wonder.

For fire is not straightforwardly good or bad.

Moses once turned aside to see a fire that burned but did not consume a desert bush.

At Pentecost flames of something similar were seen over people's heads.

If the desert fathers and mothers are right there are normal looking people wandering around this earth alight with the fire of God.

Fire is not safe. It comes at high cost, as it does to the stubbornly faithful three in today's reading.

Or it signals a costly commissioning, as it did for Moses and the early Christians.

It is a wild image of danger and beauty and power and renewal.

Where we are and who we are is the furnace where the Son of God walks. When we begin to discover what contemplative faithfulness means, we recognize that we are in that furnace; very, very occasionally, around an unexpected corner or with an unexpected person, we catch a glimpse of the fire, the desert filled with flame.

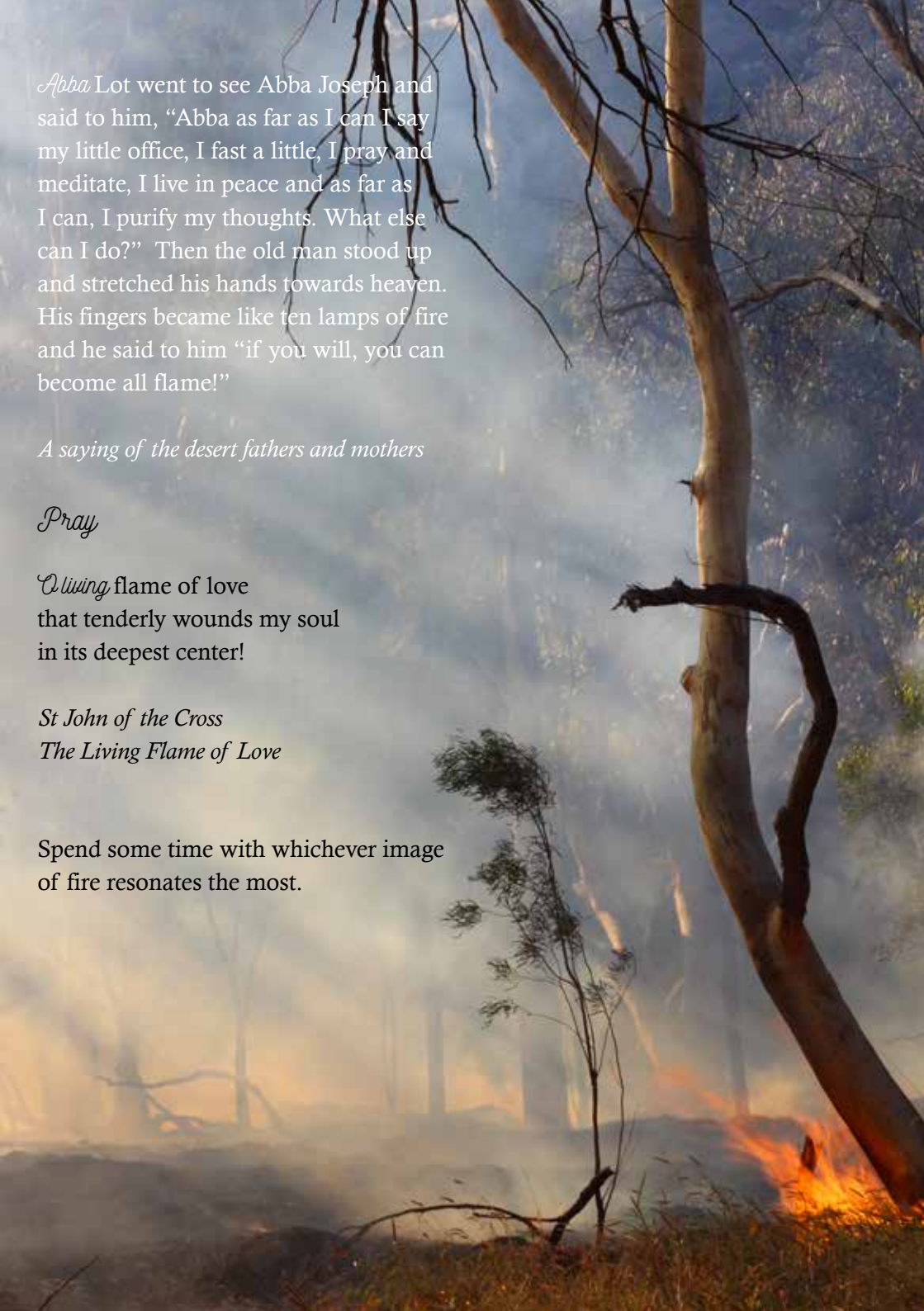
Rowan Williams

Silence and Honey Cakes

It has seemed to me sometimes as though the Lord breathes on this poor grey ember of Creation and it turns to radiance – for a moment, or a year, or the span of a life. And then it sinks back into itself again, and to look at it no one would know it had anything to do with fire, or light... Wherever you turn your eyes the world can shine like transfiguration. You don't have to bring a thing to it except a little willingness to see. Only, who could have the courage to see it?

Marilyn Robinson - Gilead

¹Peter Latz, The Flaming Desert



Abba Lot went to see *Abba* Joseph and said to him, “*Abba* as far as I can I say my little office, I fast a little, I pray and meditate, I live in peace and as far as I can, I purify my thoughts. What else can I do?” Then the old man stood up and stretched his hands towards heaven. His fingers became like ten lamps of fire and he said to him “if you will, you can become all flame!”

A saying of the desert fathers and mothers

Pray

Living flame of love
that tenderly wounds my soul
in its deepest center!

St John of the Cross
The Living Flame of Love

Spend some time with whichever image
of fire resonates the most.

Day 37

Read John 8: 51-59

Reflect

Jesus is infuriating.

He is saying that the way his audience understands death, time, their own history and identity are wrong.

His comments on death remain cryptic after 2000 years of people pondering them.

What does he mean 'never see death?'
He died. So did his audience.

To follow him his listeners have to accept a massive change in how they understand the world.

He still calls us to the painfully insecure process of stepping out of the smaller place where we have things pretty much pinned down into a bigger, stranger place where we are not at all sure where we stand.

You can see why it would be much easier to just get rid of Jesus and his perplexing words by stoning him.

There is still the overwhelming temptation when faced with something strange to destroy it or avoid it, anything but stay with the discomfort of not understanding.

Why do you have to be so difficult? people sometimes say to writers; the answer is that a lot of the time only being awkward saves you from being stupid and egotistical.

Rowan Williams

Silence and Honey Cakes

I would like to beg you dear Sir, as well as I can, to have patience with everything unresolved in your heart and to try to love the questions themselves as if they were locked rooms or books written in a very foreign language. Don't search for the answers, which could not be given to you now, because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps then, someday far in the future, you will gradually, without even noticing it, live your way into the answer.

Rainer Maria Rilke

Letters to a Young Poet

We have perhaps more than our fair share of shoreline miracles, of visitations and wonders and, happily, we haven't destroyed them all yet. In our hunger to control and know everything humans break and spoil. We trash offerings, burn prophets, snub the strange and wonderful. As a school-boy in Albany I saw this clearly for the first time. A true wonder was dragged up on a flensing deck and dismantled like a machine in a wrecker's yard, all so it could be rendered into oil and fertilizer. I saw that day what the ocean could produce and was amazed; I realized what humankind was likely to make of such creations and was dumbfounded.

Tim Winton - Land's Edge

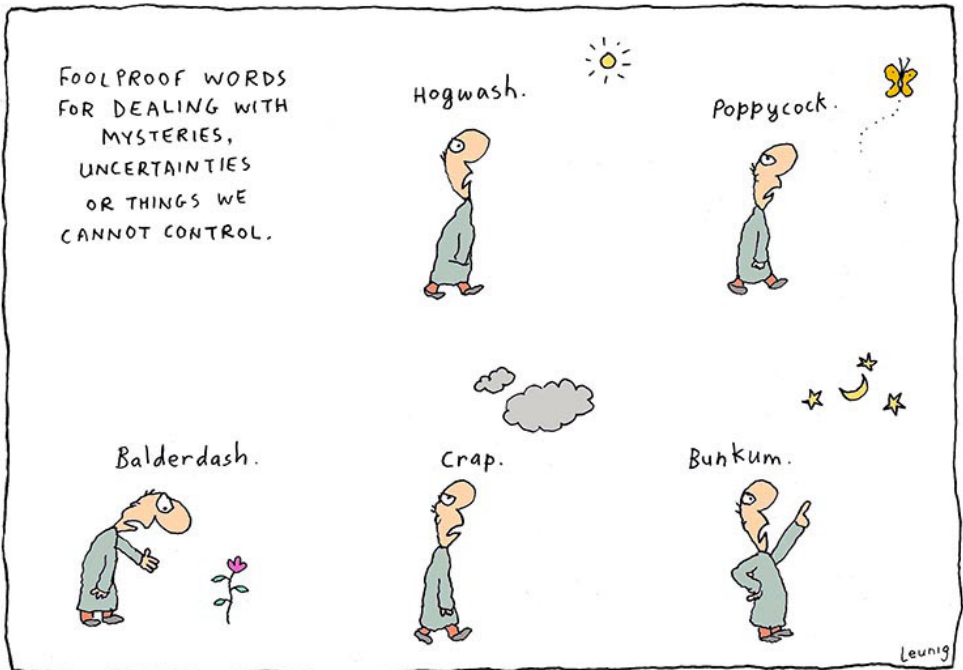
Pray

The Desert Fathers and Desert Mothers received visitors who asked 'Give me a word, abba or Speak a word, amma, how can I be saved?'

There are modern Desert Fathers and Mothers. If you are blessed enough to know one, seek them out and ask them for a word.

Otherwise ask God to give you a word.

It is something you hold and slowly grow into over weeks or months or years (Luke 2:19).



Day 38

Read Psalm 18: 1-7

Reflect

I once spent an afternoon sitting in the Markham valley in Papua Guinea talking to a local who loved God.

He told me every built thing we could see - the village houses and the gardens and the dirt road - would be gone in 40 years. Only the things made by God lasted longer than a lifetime.

He said that the great concrete cities of the West gave the illusion of permanence and tempted us to rely on ourselves.

He thought this made it much harder for us to follow God.

God as rock is one of the great biblical themes.

There is something vastly strong and almost outside time about rocks.

Yet in this reading the mountains, the most secure thing in all the known world, are unable to stand firm in the presence of God who is truly outside time and truly strong.

Everything we do in this country is still overborne and underwritten by the seething tumult of nature. An opera house, an iron bridge, a tinsel-topped tower – these are creative marvels, but as structures they look pretty feeble against the landscape in which they stand. Think of the brooding mass and ever-changing face of Uluru. Will architects ever make stone live like this? Consider the bewildering scale and complexity of Purnululu, otherwise known as the Bungle Bungles. It's like a cryptic megacity wrought by engineers on peyote. Humans are unlikely ever to manufacture anything as beautiful and intricate.

Tim Winton - Island Home

I am here not only to evade for a while the clamour and filth and confusion of the cultural apparatus but also to confront, immediately and directly if it's possible, the bare bones of existence, the elemental and fundamental, the bedrock which sustains us.

Edward Abbey - Desert Solitaire

The stones were all of rusty colour, and ponderous.

William Dampier

A Voyage to New Holland 1698



Pray

Spend some time with this Psalm and the ancient Australian rock formations (in person if you can, in photo or by memory if you can't!)

Day 39

Read Romans 4: 13-22

Reflect

I once thought that if God promised something, say humility or wisdom, it would be delivered painlessly under a sort of heavenly general anaesthetic the next night as I slept.

I have a friend who says God always gives her some sort of answer to prayer but it takes 8 hours.

In the way Genesis tells it, Abraham had to wait 25 years.

Here Abraham is at the 24-year post-original promise mark.

He could be forgiven for being sceptical.

Surely if God was going to do it, it would be done already.

But Abraham 'grew strong in his faith' over a long, slow time of trusting.

It is what John Coleman refers to as 'the slow action of love'.

Luke described Jesus' 40 days in the desert and writes that after Jesus returned to the cities 'he would withdraw to deserted places and pray'.
(5:16)

Luke uses the same Greek word for desert both times, *ξηριμος*.

It seems Jesus was not done with the desert after 40 days.

Chances are, neither are we.



The great tragedy of speed as an answer to the complexities and responsibilities of existence is that very soon we cannot recognize anything or anyone who is not traveling at the same velocity as we are.

*David Whyte - Crossing the Unknown Sea:
Work as a Pilgrimage of Identity*

How can we hope, after all, to see a tree or rock or clear north sky if we do not adopt a little of their mode of life, a little of their time?

Robert Adam - Why People Photograph

*Nothing can be loved at speed.
God lead us to the slow path;
To the joyous insights of the pilgrim:
Another way of knowing:
Another way of being.*

*Michael Leunig
When I Talk to You:
A Cartoonist Talks to God*

Pray

Consider carving out a space in your life for the slow action of the love of God.

You could consider a weekend or a week-long retreat at regular intervals.

Or taking up the Jewish and Christian practice of keeping a Sabbath where a 24 hour period each week is set aside, free from work.

There is a Russian Orthodox practice of regularly spending time in a Poustinia (the Russian word for desert), a sparsely furnished space devoted to prayer.

In your prayer time today ask whether there is a particular way God would like you to do this.



Day 40

Read Luke 22: 24-30

Reflect

When I first left the big cities for Australia's north someone said 'that's great, you can stay for a year and it will look excellent on your CV'.

For successful folk can't spend too long out of the main game.

Anywhere else is to be travelled through briefly to mine for experiences that can be used to benefit us back in the real world.

'A packaged tour of the absolute' to steal Annie Dillard's term.

However if we duck the tour bus mentality and spend long enough in the desert the seemingly unchanging surroundings force a massive change in us.

We let go of the illusion that we are somehow more special than others. Surprisingly, one day, we are even glad to be rid of it.

For we are free like we have never been before.

Earth's crammed with heaven,
And every common bush afire with God;
But only he who sees, takes off his shoes,
The rest sit round it and pluck
blackberries.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning

If the ordinary things are now shining
with the glory of God, then we live
among unimaginable riches.

Everything has turned on its axis.

Jesus says the gentiles call those in
authority benefactors, literally 'the
ones who do good' in Greek.

We too look upwards for models of a
good life.

However the grand adventure is often
downward, in the eyes of the world.

It is into what seems ordinary and
everyday.

A group of grumbly Israelites wander-
ing around a backwater desert has had
more lasting influence than any of the
centres of power and importance at
that time.

Jesus came out of the desert and set
out on the path to the cross.

He hung around with the ordinary people, he told stories about ordinary things, and he died the most ordinary of deaths.

Teresa of Avila ends her description of the sublime joys of the interior mansions of the soul with the prosaic:

The devil sometimes puts ambitious desires into our hearts, so that, instead of setting our hand to the work which lies nearest to us, and thus serving Our Lord in ways within our power, we may rest content with having desired the impossible.

Interior Castle

And so we are sent out to do whatever is at hand.

For what may appear ordinary is life in the kingdom, right now, if only we have eyes to see it.

Do not forget that the value and interest of life is not so much to do conspicuous things...as to do ordinary things with the perception of their enormous value.

Teilhard de Chardin
Letters to Two Friends

[The Desert Fathers and Mothers] insisted on remaining human and “ordinary”. This may seem to be a paradox, but it is very important. If we reflect a moment, we will see that to fly into the desert in order to be extraordinary is only to carry the world with you as an implicit standard of comparison.

Thomas Merton
The Wisdom of the Desert



Pray

The hardest thing in the world, they say, is to be where you are.

Rowan Williams

Christ on Trial: How the Gospel Unsettles Our Judgement

It can be very hard to live in the ordinary.

A daily prayer practice is one of those ordinary things that have power beyond imagining.

If you don't already have one, take the Lent practices that have been most helpful to you and combine them into a regular prayer practice.

Set aside a time every day, show up, stick with it through boredom, confusion and doubt, and God will teach you how to pray.

May God lead us kindly through these times, but above all, may God lead us to himself.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer

Letters and Papers from Prison



Aknowledgments

This resource is dedicated to Sue and David Woods in love and gratitude

Location of Photographs

Cover: Devil's Marbles

Day 1: Lake Ballard, WA

Days 2,3,17, Acknowledgements page: Ormiston Gorge, NT

Days 6, 38: Redbank Gorge, NT

Day 14: The old quarry, Alice Springs

Days 15, 31, 40: Simpson's Gap, NT

Day 20: The Todd River in flood, Alice Springs

Day 25: By the side of Larapinta Drive, west of Alice Springs

Day 28: Mount Gillen, Alice Springs

Day 29, 34: Honeymoon Gap, Alice Springs

Day 36: Trepkina Gorge, NT

Day 37: Lake Eyre in flood from the air

Day 39: Undoolya Hill, Alice Springs

All remaining photos taken in or around Campfire of the Heart, Alice Springs

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The daily scripture readings are the set reading for Lent in *An Australian Lec-tionary 2016*. Bible verses are taken from the *New Revised Standard Version Bible*, ©1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Church-es of Christ in the United States of America.

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About us

Into the Desert was written by Celia Kemp. She is ABM's Reconciliation Coordinator. She has previously worked in medicine, criminal and coronial law and research. She is currently studying theology. She lives at Campfire in the Heart in Alice Springs.

ABM is the national mission agency of the Anglican Church of Australia working with overseas and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities.

We have a holistic view of God's mission. We work with Anglican Church partners and others to see lives empowered and transformed spiritually, materially and socially.

We help the Anglican Church and the wider community realise and respond to the invitation for all to be a part of God's hope for the world.

ABM believes in a world where all people enjoy God's promise of love, hope and justice. We work to see this belief become a reality.

Additional Resources

The content in this booklet is available as a free App which has music, hyperlinks to multimedia resources and additional written content.

Deep calls to Deep, another free ABM bible study App for iPhone and Android written by Celia Kemp, is available for Easter 2017.

Search for 'Into the Desert ABM' or 'Deep calls to Deep ABM' on iTunes or Android stores or go to the ABM website at www.abmission.org/apps



Abba Lot went to see Abba Joseph and said to him, Abba as far as I can I say my little office, I fast a little, I pray and meditate, I live in peace and as far as I can, I purify my thoughts. What else can I do?"

Then the old man stood up and stretched his hands towards heaven. His fingers became like ten lamps of fire and he said to him, "If you will, you can become all flame."

A saying of the desert fathers and mothers



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