

The Revd Jonathan Aitken Advent Sermon for Sunday 7 April 2019
St Matthew's Westminster, 20 Great Peter Street

THE REVD JONATHAN AITKEN SERMON

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ST. MATTHEW'S WESTMINSTER

ISAIAH 43: 16-21

PHILIPPIANS 3: 4-14

JOHN 12: 1-8

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We have spent these five Sundays of Lent reflecting on our challenging but perhaps slightly too imaginative theme of "Dancing in the Desert".

From my one and only experience of spending an unbearably long week in *Rub' al Khali*, the vast Empty Quarter of the Arabian desert, I would say that having any sort of fun there, like dancing, would be an extremely improbable activity.

Although poets, prophets and preachers including Father Philip two Sundays ago, sometimes strike romantic notes about the peace and beauty of the unending sand dunes, for those who work in them, deserts tend to be unpleasantly

Enervating

Oppressive and

Swelteringly hot environments

which sap energy and debilitate morale.

The best that any dancer there might manage would be a ploddingly slow, weary waltz.

However, when I was preparing this sermon there tumbled out of the attic of my memory an authentic *Dancing in the Desert* episode.

I spent my week in the Empty Quarter some 45 years ago when I was working as a consultant for a telecoms company, Philips of Holland. Their team were laying fibre optic cables deep below the desert in order to create a new

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telephone network for Saudi Arabia. Suddenly and unexpectedly the Philips Engineers drilled into an unknown aquifer about 40 feet below the sand line.

Astonishingly, water began bubbling up to the surface – streams of fresh, cool water in abundance.

The local Bedouin tribesmen went wild with excitement
cheering,
ululating,
waving their hunting knives in the air,
and yes dancing!

Those tribesmen were celebrating because they realised that a new life transforming oasis had been discovered. Great was the ecstasy of their rejoicing!

Our reading today from Isaiah Chapter 43 reflects such a spirit of ecstasy when it exults in verse 19:

“See, I am about to do a new thing
Now it springs forth!
Do you not perceive it?
I will make a way in the wilderness
And rivers in the desert.”

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Reverting to the dancing metaphor, this is roughly the equivalent of the MC at a Scottish Ceilidh announcing "Take your partners for The Eightsome Reel".

But before we start reeling or dancing on this 33rd day of Lent, let's be a little cautious.

Isaiah's prophecies often took a long while before they were fulfilled.

And we should note that most of this chapter before we get to the joyful verse 19 consists of negative warnings that the people of Israel will have to pass through fires, flames, floods, lamentations and other severe tests with their God.

Last Sunday, Fr Jamie eloquently highlighted the "Via Negativa" of many spiritual journeys through the wilderness emphasising particularly the long dark night of the soul of St John of the Cross.

His spiritual crisis and his mystical, gloomy descriptions of it can strike deep chords with anyone who has endured periods of struggle on their journey towards God.

Personally, I prefer the more upbeat recommendations of how to cope with this lonely spiritual experience from St Teresa of Avila who was St John of the Cross's contemporary and spiritual director.

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St Teresa offered her Carmelite followers this practical pithy advice:

"God gives us the water of life but we have to haul it up in our own buckets".

Perhaps what St Teresa of Avila and St John of the Cross were both saying is that crossings of the desert and journeys through the wilderness are hard work.

This can be true of the secular as well as the spiritual world. Of all the portrayals of Winston Churchill on screen the one his daughter Mary Soames thought captured him best was Albert Finney playing the lead role in a BBC series about his pre-War *Wilderness Years*.

That was a bleak period in the great man's life.

For most of the 1930s Churchill was a despised rejected figure. Disgraced over Gallipoli,
dismissed from office,
relegated to the backbenches,
mistrusted by many of his Parliamentary colleagues who often shouted him down in the House of Commons when he made speeches warning about the dangers of German rearmament, in his wilderness years Winston seemed to be a failure without a future.

Nevertheless, he persisted with his warnings. He kept going through his crossing of the desert.

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There was one poignant scene in the BBC Series, brilliantly played by Albert Finney when Churchill was at a particularly low ebb. After a row with Clemmie he went out on sulky walk in the woods around Chartwell with his friend Brendan Bracken who asked him:

"What are you going to do in the next session of Parliament Winston?"

Churchill, kicking at the leaves in frustration replied despondently "Oh KBO I suppose. I'll just KBO!"

This acronym, suitably sanitised for a church congregation stands for "Keep Blundering On".

It's what many great saints as well as great statesmen do when they can't see the way ahead amidst the encircling gloom. They keep going. They continue struggling to haul up the water of life in their own buckets. They keep blundering on. They persevere through the pain.

Now Courageous Perseverance is an important Christian virtue, personified by our Lord.

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Some of you may know the beautiful 16th century prayer for perseverance written by Sir Francis Drake:

O Lord when thou givest to thy servants to endeavour any great matter, grant us also to know that it is not the beginning but the continuing unto the end until it be thoroughly finished which yieldeth the true glory. Through him who for the finishing of thy work laid down his life. Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen".

Perseverance is a doubly relevant theme today because this is not only the 5th Sunday in Lent. It is also the beginning of Passiontide.

It is a time to turn away from looking backwards at the desert and to start looking forwards to the cross. It is the time when the active Christ becomes the passive, suffering Christ.

Our Gospel reading reminds us that Jesus at that supper in Bethany knew that his passion was beginning and that the day of his burial was coming near.

He knew that the road ahead of him was going to lead to Gethsemane, Calvary and the agony of the crucifixion.

He knew that he would be deserted by many of his followers.

* * *

As we journey towards Easter through the remainder of Lent, through Passiontide and through Holy Week we should ask ourselves:

Will we persevere with Jesus through his darkest agony "until it be thoroughly finished?"

It is a challenge thrown down to us across the centuries by Thomas à Kempis in *The Imitation of Christ* – Still the bestselling book in all Christian literature after The Bible. Thomas à Kempis wrote:

"Many follow Jesus to the breaking of the bread but few to the drinking of the cup of his Passion".

So, when we survey the wondrous Cross, singing today Isaac Watt's holy and haunting hymn, will we recognise that our journey through the Lenten wilderness now requires extra perseverance and extra commitment. So are we going to stand with the few who drink the cup of Our Lord's Passion?

That cup will be full if we know in our hearts that His

"Love so amazing, so divine

Demands my soul, my life, my all"

Amen