

Reflection for 18th August

Lockdown – Oasis or desert?

For all of us lockdown, in whatever format it hit us, has been and continues to be a unique experience. For some it has been like an oasis in a desert: a time for more quiet reflection and prayer, a time to get closer to the Creator through creation in back gardens, on country walks or forest walks. We have been blessed to live in an area where such things are readily available. The break from modern constant noise, activity and busyness has brought welcome relief.

For others it has been more like a desert: cut off from friends and family, finding that even loved hobbies can pall if you get too much of them, a feeling of hopelessness, no light at the end of the tunnel; and even victimisation if the only reason they have been so tightly locked down has been their birthday.

But the desert can also be a strengthening and renewing experience. How often do the gospels tell us that a great while before day, or late at night after a very busy day, Jesus would go out to pray. After his baptism and before his ministry began the Spirit drove him into the wilderness to fast and pray for 40 days. Moses and Elijah experienced similar fasts, and John the Baptist spent most of his time in the desert. St. Antony lived in what is now the Egyptian desert and people went out to him there for help and advice

One of the photographs Kyla shared with us last week reminded me of the land around Laredo, Texas, where we were stationed with the US Air Force for three years. The view from our front window was of desert sand, stunted mesquite bushes and little else. If you left Laredo to the east there was a notice at a petrol station on the edge of town "Last gas for 66 miles". That's three times the distance from here to Norwich. And you had better believe it. On either side of the road you would see acres and acres of desert sand, prickly pear cactus and a few other small cactus plants. No sign of any human presence or activity. The only wildlife we ever saw on that road were road runners (little white birds with long legs that cannot fly. They put their wings back to look much like a modern jet fighter plane and run. We paced one at almost ten miles an hour.) The only other wildlife I ever saw on that road were large tarantula spiders, the size of a small crab. That was the Texas desert between Laredo and Freer, en route from Laredo to Houston or Corpus Christi. And that brings me to Isaiah's promise in chapter 35

"The desert and the parched land will be glad;
The wilderness will rejoice and blossom.
Like the crocus it will burst into bloom;
it will rejoice greatly and shout for joy."

Once a year in late spring someone would drive into Laredo from Freer and word would quickly spread around town "the desert is in bloom" and everyone with a vehicle it seemed would go for a drive into the desert during the next fortnight. The cacti were in glorious bloom and it was an amazing sight. But if you waited too long you would have to wait another year because it was only in bloom for two weeks. I once dug up a small cactus with a lovely purple flower and planted it against the wall of our house. As the carpet grass grew closer to the wall it was surrounded and many times my husband chopped its top off when mowing the lawn, but still it flowered again the next year. Desert plants are tough; they have to be; but they endure despite the hardship of their environment and they promise relief and joy such as Isaiah describes.

If lockdown has been an oasis for you give thanks and continue to appreciate all the lessons you are learning. If it has been a desert think back and look for a spring flowering moment and cling to it; it is a symbol of hope, a promise of future joy. Give thanks for it.

You might like to look up some Bible references to desert and wilderness. If you don't have a paper concordance try a google search for those words in the Bible..

Isaiah continues

"The glory of Lebanon will be given to it,
the splendour of Carmel and Sharon;
they will see the glory of the lord,
the splendour of our God.

Strengthen the feeble hands,
Steady the knees that give way;
Say to those with fearful hearts,
"Be strong, do not fear;
Your God will come,
He will come with vengeance;
With divine retribution
He will come to save you."

May you all find blessings this week, even in lockdown and wearing a mask. Rejoice and give thanks for all those blessings.