

# Ways in the Wilderness: A Journey into Desert Spirituality

**St. George's College, Jerusalem, 28 February-15 March 2006**

## **The Course**

This course immersed me in studying the biblical texts of the Exodus, travelling from the pyramids near Cairo into the Sinai peninsula, climbing Mt Sinai and camping in the desert, before crossing the Gulf of Aqaba to pass through the biblical lands of Edom and Moab in present-day Jordan, visiting the Nabatean city of Petra and Mt Nebo, where Moses looked across to the Promised Land and died. All along the route we examined the historical origins, theological traditions and contemporary practice of monastic life in the deserts of Egypt, Sinai and Jordan, including visits to the cave and monastery of St. Anthony, the father of desert monasticism, who died in 356, and three of the Coptic monasteries in Wadi Natrun. We also stayed at St. Catherine's monastery at the foot of Mt Sinai. The course ended with the renewal of baptismal promises at the recently-excavated site of Jesus' baptism, followed by crossing the River Jordan and spending two days exploring the rise of early monasticism in Jerusalem and the Judean wilderness.

Being able to take part in this course was an immense privilege. It was ably and enthusiastically taught by Henry Carse, an American biblical scholar who has lived in and around Jerusalem since 1970 and is fluent in Hebrew, having studied at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. There were just seven students on the course, which gave it a very intimate feel. The number of students and pilgrims visiting Israel is just beginning to pick up again after five very lean years because of the second intifada. The atmosphere in Jerusalem itself felt safe and relaxed - although having said that it proved impossible to visit a Palestinian monastery in the occupied territories, as the Israeli army had laid siege to a prison in Jericho the previous day.

## **Some Personal Reflections**

### **Out of Egypt...**

The Great Pyramid was built around 2800 BC, so if Abraham saw the pyramids when he went to Egypt (around 1950 BC) they would have been as old to him then as Lichfield cathedral is to us today. Visiting Cairo Museum and the Pyramids has made me realise just what an important part Egypt plays in the narratives of the Bible – from Abraham's encounter with Pharaoh in Genesis 12, through Joseph and Moses to the holy family's flight into Egypt in Matthew 2 – not to mention the shifting alliances of Israelite kings who tried to play off Egypt against Assyria.

Before coming on this course I had been reading Tom Wright's latest tome, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*,<sup>1</sup> which begins by looking at beliefs about death and the afterlife in the ancient world. In Cairo museum, as we learnt about mummification and gazed at the thousands of precious artefacts discovered in the tomb of the comparatively insignificant Pharaoh Tutankamen, I was struck by the contrast with the utter emptiness of tomb of Jesus which I had visited in the Church of the Resurrection a few days before. The pharaohs believed they would rise again like the sun, but now thousands of years later people queue to see the beautiful remains of a hope unfulfilled. Meantime for two millennia pilgrims have travelled to Jerusalem to queue and stare at a bare, cold slab and be reminded of the foundation of our faith. 'He is not here; for he has risen.' 'In fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep.' (Matthew 28.6; 1 Corinthians 15.20)

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<sup>1</sup> NT Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (SPCK, London, 2003)

It was also fascinating to see how important the Flight into Egypt is in the tradition of the Coptic church. The journey accounts for just three verses in the Gospels, but in a Coptic monastery I was able to buy a detailed guide to the route taken by the holy family, listing seventeen places they stopped at on their journey, each of which is still a place of pilgrimage today.<sup>2</sup>

## Coptic Christianity

I didn't know much about the Coptic Orthodox Church before my visit, beyond the belief that it was founded by St. Mark when he came to Alexandria in the first century. Christianity spread rapidly despite severe persecution in the time of Diocletian, quickly supplanting the religion of the Pharaohs. However the Egyptian church was separated from the rest of the Eastern Church by its refusal to sign up to the Chalcedonian definition in 451. Traditionally accused of being monophysite, the monks I met were at pains to explain that Copts actually take a miaphysite position – that the union of the two natures in Christ resulted in a single nature which is both human and divine. The Arab conquest of Egypt in 641 AD introduced the Arabic language and Islam, gradually moving Coptic language and culture from the centre to the margins. Around 15% of the population are now Coptic Christians, compared with 85% who are Muslim.<sup>3</sup>

## Desert spirituality: the challenge to radical discipleship

St. Anthony's monastery is literally in the middle of nowhere. The father of desert spirituality, Anthony the Great was inspired to go into the desert in the third century on hearing the words of Jesus to the rich young ruler, 'If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.' His life is recorded by his famous contemporary Athanasius.<sup>4</sup> Like many of the desert fathers and mothers after him, he moved into the fringes of the desert in order to get away to the crowds, but people constantly sought him out for prayer and spiritual direction, driving him further and further into the inner desert. Eventually he left the monastery he founded and lived the last decades of his life in a remote cave high up the mountain, until he died at the age of 105. We climbed up to his cave, which is a place of prayer to this day.

Having studied the *Rule of St. Benedict*, which shaped Western monasticism in the middle ages, it was fascinating to visit some of the desert monasteries which inspired Benedict to adapt monasticism in a more moderate and gentle form for Europe in his famous *Rule*. I have come home challenged by the way in which we tend to water down Jesus' call to radical discipleship today. Perhaps we are not inspiring the young because we are not challenging them to be sufficiently counter-cultural. If our challenge is not to 'Go, sell all you have and give to the poor' but rather, 'Follow Jesus and be slightly less selfish and slightly more generous than your friends', then perhaps it is not surprising if we evoke a less than passionate response.

However despite their own awe-inspiring response to Christ, the Desert Fathers and Mothers refuse to become self-righteous or judgemental of others. I found two anecdotes from Abba Poemen particularly challenging:

A brother questioned Abba Poemen, saying, "If I see my brother sinning, should I hide the fact?" The old man said, "At the moment when we hide a brother's fault, God hides our own. At the moment when we reveal a brother's fault, God reveals our own."

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<sup>2</sup> *The Escape into Egypt According to Coptic Tradition* (Lehnert and Landrock, Cairo, 1993)

<sup>3</sup> A book I have found to be a valuable recent academic study of the Coptic Church is Jill Kamil, *Christianity in the Land of the Pharaohs* (American University in Cairo Press, 2002)

<sup>4</sup> Athanasius, *Life of Saint Anthony* (reprinted Cairo, 1992)

Some old men came to see Abba Poemen and said to him, “We see some of the brothers falling asleep during divine worship. Should we wake them up?” He said, “As for me, when I see a brother who is falling asleep during the Office, I lay his head on my knees and let him rest.”<sup>5</sup>

## Fathers and Mothers

Alongside the well-known stories of the Desert Fathers, it was exciting to hear some of the less well-known but equally impressive stories of intrepid holy women who inspired others to go out into the desert to pursue the religious life. Catherine of Alexandria was a highly-educated woman who tried to dissuade Maximianus from promoting the worship of idols, and was beheaded for her pains. Later in our travels we visited the place where Mary of Egypt, a prostitute from Alexandria who in the 4<sup>th</sup> century joined a pilgrimage to Jerusalem and was converted, then chose to live the rest of her life in repentance and prayer in a lonely place beyond the river Jordan. Often we found ourselves in the footsteps of Egeria, the much-travelled fourth century Spanish nun, as we read extracts from the diary of her pilgrimages to Jerusalem and the Sinai.

## Surviving under pressure

Each ancient monastery we visited in Egypt had a high wall round it for protection from the Berbers, and also a fortified inner keep with drawbridge in which the monks could take refuge. In spite of these precautions each monastery had seen some or all their monks killed at different times in their history, but each time new monks have come to take their place – proving again that axiom of church history, ‘The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church.’ Today physical attacks are rare, but Christians we met spoke of all sorts of restrictions and pressures from the Muslim government – for example St. Anthony’s is embroiled in an ongoing dispute after the government tried to confiscate all the desert land around the monastery ‘for military use’.

## Resurgence of monastic life

There is a remarkable renaissance of Coptic monastic life taking place at present. In each of the four monasteries we visited the story was the same – thirty years ago they were down to a dozen monks or fewer, but since then each has grown to well over one hundred, with a steady stream on new applicants, many of whom are not selected. Prospective monks are required to complete their education (and army service) before they apply. We were struck by the highly educated monks we met, many of whom had professional qualifications, for example as doctors, pharmacists or architects. Each monastery had some form of building project going on – either a new church for pilgrims or a new accommodation block.

This renewal has been partly inspired by Pope Shenouda, who lives part of each week at the St. Bishoi monastery and has encouraged the Coptic faithful to visit the monasteries regularly. These visits enable the monks to teach the faith, inspire vocations and receive gifts for the upkeep of the monasteries. I can’t help feeling that we in the Church of England need to rediscover our own monastic communities in a similar way before we lose them altogether.

## St. Catherine’s Monastery

It was a privilege to be able to stay at St. Catherine’s, a Greek Orthodox monastery at the foot of Mount Sinai, which dates back to the visit of Helena in the 4<sup>th</sup> century. By the time the monks were beginning their liturgy at 4am, we had already left the monastery on camels, trudging up the mountain by starlight. We arrived in time for an unforgettable sunrise eucharist near Elijah’s plateau, where the prophet is believed to have sheltered from the earthquake, wind and fire. Climbing further to the summit, graced by both a mosque and a church, we recited the Ten Commandments together and pondered why this austere peak should have

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<sup>5</sup> Quoted in Rowan Williams, *Where God Happens* (New Seeds, Boston, 2005) p.21

been chosen for a revelation sacred to all Jews, Christians and Muslims, who between them encompass the majority of the world's population today.

Later, inside the library of the monastery we were shown some of its treasures, though not of course its greatest, the 4<sup>th</sup> century Codex Sinaiticus, the earliest complete manuscript of the New Testament, which now lies in the British Museum. The monks agreed to lend it to a Russian scholar in the 19<sup>th</sup> century who promised to return it, but instead reneged and gave it as a gift to his master. After the Russian Revolution, Stalin, desperate for money, sold it to the British Museum. When Prince Charles visited the monastery the monks asked for the return of the manuscript, but without success.

The 'discovery' of St. Catherine's as a world heritage site is saving the fabric and treasures of the monastery, but at the cost of weakening its spiritual life. A whole tourist village has grown up outside the walls of the monastery, and on the day of our visit the basilica was jammed solid with tourists on day trips from the new Red Sea coastal resorts. This puts pressure on the remaining 24 monks, and has led them to decide to close the monastery to visitors for part of Lent.

It seems to me that St. Catherine's needs help not just in managing visitor numbers but also in taking the opportunity to explain the Christian faith and the challenge of the monastic life so that tourists can become pilgrims. Some churches in our own diocese, balancing the same competing demands of conserving heritage and enabling contemporary worship, have produced creative literature which uses the history, architecture and art to explain what Christians actually believe and to teach people how to pray. With so many historic icons jostling for space on the walls of St. Catherine's basilica, it would have been so appropriate (and I guess popular) if the bookshop sold simple suitably-illustrated guides on how to use icons in prayer – especially as contemporary surveys show that the majority of people pray regularly, even if they do not go to church.

## The burning bush

St. Catherine's monastery was built around the burning bush where God spoke to Moses. The bush is still there. A 13<sup>th</sup> century icon in the monastery museum particularly spoke to me – it shows Moses taking off his sandals with his gaze fixed on the burning bush. Having got Moses' attention in the desert, God then commissions him to go back to Pharaoh and demand the release of his people. This is a job Moses does not relish at all ('Please send someone else' – Exodus 4.13) and yet it is something that the whole of his life up to that point – being brought up in the royal court and learning to survive in the desert – has been preparing him for. As I prayed about the picture I felt God asking me three questions: How easily can God get my complete attention? Am I always ready to take off my sandals and acknowledge his lordship? Am I ready to say 'Here I am' to whatever tasks God might have in store for me when I get back home?

## In the footsteps of the Exodus

After climbing Mt Sinai we spent three days hiking in the desert, sleeping in the open and recalling the wilderness wanderings, during which a bunch of rebellious slaves became a nation in their own right, disciplined by God and ready to enter the Promised Land. Gazing up at the stars in that harsh landscape was awe-inspiring, and reminded me of Abraham's night-time conversation with God in Genesis 15.5 'count the stars...so shall your offspring be', and Jacob's vision as he lay down to sleep with a rock for a pillow in 28.11.

Going off in different directions to spend time in prayerful solitude in the desert, as we were encouraged to do, was a wonderful opportunity to 'be still and know that I am God'. In the desert self-reliance and self-importance is stripped away, and I felt a new sense of utter dependence upon God and upon the community I

was with. As I drank from my ever-present water bottle I felt a new thirst for more of God in my life, and the parched landscape brought all the biblical imagery about streams of living water vividly to life.

Talking around the campfire to those who live in the desert really brought the details of the Exodus stories to life in new ways, as did Feiler's book, *Walking the Bible*, which was my constant companion.<sup>6</sup> On one of our hikes we saw water seeping from a crack in the rock in the corner of a dry wadi. This natural feature, caused by water sinking through porous sandstone until it reaches a seam of granite and is trapped, is well-known to the local Bedouin, who know that sometimes they must strike or scrape the rock at this place because the crack gets blocked by minerals in the water. (Cf. Numbers 20.8)

## Bedouin

The importance of water in the desert was summed up for me in a Bedouin saying, 'We do not carry water, the water carries us.' Bedouin have a sacred duty to offer hospitality in the desert – any visitor in need in that harsh landscape will receive water, food and lodging for three nights, but the visitor must be gone on the fourth day or face being 'as welcome as a scorpion'. The arrival of tourists is changing the life of the Bedouin – from a laid-back subsistence lifestyle in which money played little part, the Bedouin in the more visited parts of the desert are now beginning to need money as they aspire to having a mobile phone and a jeep instead of camels. This leads the women to make and sell handicrafts and the men to get part-time paid jobs.

## Mount Nebo

After leaving the Sinai we crossed to Jordan and followed the ancient desert highway north to Mt Nebo, site of a Franciscan monastery. At the place where Moses gazed out across the Dead Sea to the Promised Land before he died, we wrestled with the seeming unfairness of Moses not being allowed by God to enter the Promised Land – all because he might have lost his temper a bit in Numbers 20.9-13. We also recalled Martin Luther King's last speech the night before he died – 'I have seen the promised land. I may not get there with you, but I have seen the promised land.' Above us stood a beautiful modern sculpture of a serpent mounted on a pole in the shape of a cross, and as we looked at it we read the words of Jesus from John 3.14, 'Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.'

## Palestinian monasticism

From Mt Nebo we crossed the Jordan river into the Judean wilderness, a bleak landscape that was once teeming with Christian monks and hermits. The growth of Judean monasticism was inspired both by the monasteries of Egypt and by proximity to the holy sites. Palestinian monks travelled vast distances through the desert to visit Anthony in Egypt. Many individuals went off into the Judean desert, inspired by the story of Jesus' temptation after his baptism, and gradually they linked up with each other and communities began to form. They were often attacked by Bedouin raiders and many were killed, but the movement continued to grow and gradually they began to dialogue with and covert the raiders. Eventually there were 40 monasteries in a relatively small Judean desert, with another 20 in Jericho, totalling 10,000 monks. Today there are just four functioning monasteries left (3 Greek Orthodox and one Trappist), each under great pressure, and none of them has any Palestinian monks – all are from abroad.

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<sup>6</sup> Bruce Feiler, *Walking the Bible: A Journey by Land through the Five Books of Moses* (William Morrow, New York, 2001)

## **Collapse of Byzantine Christianity**

Back in Jerusalem it was sad to learn that Palestinian monasticism was destroyed not so much by the invading armies of the Persians as by internal schisms and theological disputes over the Chalcedonian definition, which made the monasteries so weak that they were easy prey. This has challenged me to work and pray for Christian unity today with greater earnestness.

## **Anglican numbers shrinking**

In Jerusalem I was struck by the fact that the local Anglican presence seemed significantly weaker than when I was last there thirteen years ago. We had a long talk with the Anglican Bishop, Riah, who shared with us his pain at the continued exodus of Palestinian Christians, many escaping from the political traumas of living in the Occupied Territories. The regular congregation at the Arabic service in the cathedral is down to an average of around 30. How can we support the beleaguered Christian community in the Holy Land? One practical way is to encourage the return of more pilgrims, and to encourage those who do come as pilgrims to go out of their way to meet local Christians through the agency of the diocese and St. George's, instead of being entirely in the hands of Israeli guides and hotels. The retired dean of the cathedral also encouraged me to be visible as a Christian pilgrim as I went around the city, either by wearing a cross or a clerical collar, as this means a lot to local Christians who feel more isolated and alone.

## **Conclusion**

There were plenty of other highlights during the course, which space does not allow me to cover, including an unforgettable day hiking around the ruins of Petra, and a morning spent at the small and atmospheric St. Mark's Basilica in Jerusalem, which Syriac Christians believe is built over the house of Mark's mother, and which they believe to be the true location of the Last Supper.

My only regrets are that we did not have another night in the desert and that we were not able to worship with any of the monks in the Coptic monasteries we visited. I think that staying overnight in a monastery and having the option to get up early and join the monks for some of their daily prayers - even though they are quite long and in a foreign language - would have really helped me to sense the heartbeat of these living, praying communities of faith.

All in all, I have received so much from taking this course at St. George's College, which is a unique and under-used resource for the Anglican Communion. The course as a whole has been a rich educational experience, filling in many of the gaps in my knowledge of the geographical setting of the Exodus narratives and of the origins of Christian monasticism. It has also refreshed me spiritually and shown me some new pathways in prayer. I would strongly recommend the course, and believe we should explore ways of making this course more affordable and more widely available to clergy in the diocese, perhaps through seeking sponsorship from Ecclesiastical Insurance or another such body to provide bursaries for several students a year, or by negotiating with St. George's College to provide a bespoke course for us.

Mark Ireland  
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