

A Meditation on Psalm 143

The Seventh of the Penitential Psalms



'I stretch out my hands to you; my soul gasps like a thirsty land.'

Psalm 143.6

This Psalm speaks of *longing*, a deep spiritual yearning which is like *parched thirst*: not for the first time in these Penitential Psalms, the aridity of the *desert* is used as a vivid image of the experience of the heart and of the soul. We are reminded of the forty days spent by Jesus in the wilderness as a kind of moral and spiritual preparation for all which was to come. We too can find these experiences of dryness as part of the clarification of our hearts.

The desert can strike us as a place of *absence* and of *want*. It is because we *lack* something – even as basic as water to quench an aching thirst – that we know ourselves still to be in need. It is this kind of recognition which lies behind all yearning: the pangs of hunger, that we must find food; the pangs of thirst, that we need to drink; the pangs of spiritual longing, that we must continue our quest for God. One of the specially difficult things for us is that we live in a culture which has so numbed its sense of the spirit that we have begun to lose our capacity even to notice that we have a lack to begin with. It is one reason why many of us feel so restless and disaffected, not least by the challenges of the last year.

St John of the Cross wrote this: *'We will go by night to seek the source of life; thirst alone will be our guide.'* When rains fall in the desert, the ground soaks it up: John turns the image round as if we are the scorched ground which senses the coming of the water, and actively reaches out towards it. And if, in the desert itself, there can be an amazing and exquisite

blossoming of flowers after months – sometimes years – of drought, so, John thinks, can our own spirits be brought back to life in spectacular ways. We may have experienced ourselves to be spiritually dormant – like those seeds in the dry sand – but we were not dead. It is this *recovery of life* which we prepare for in these final days before Easter; and this is why we know it not to be in vain.

The great spiritual teachers describe the experience of spiritual dryness as a time of great *discernment*. It is a time when our priorities can be sifted, our core values reappraised. We can work out *what really matters*. It can be a place of great discovery – perhaps that we did not need all that we thought we needed, or that what we have depended on in the past is not what has been best for us; it is a place of reorientation – *metanoia*, or ‘turning back’ – a place of cleansing and renewal. This is why, even in the heart of what feels like ‘desolation’ (Psalm 143.4), the Psalmist is especially attentive to the signs of the Presence of God: *‘I remember the time past; I muse upon all your deeds; I consider the works of your hands’* (verse 5). It is why he is confident to end his prayer in a spirit of hope and expectancy: *‘Revive me, O Lord, for your name’s sake; for your righteousness’s sake, bring me out of trouble’* (verse 11). He awaits and prepares for the dawn, because he knows it will come: *‘Let me hear of your loving-kindness in the morning, for in you I put my trust; show me the way to walk in, for I lift up my soul to you’* (verse 8).

If life can emerge, exquisite, abundant, complete, in the most arid of places on earth, we know that something similar can take place in our soul. The Penitential Psalms prime us to notice this possibility, and with hope and with emerging joy – what Psalm 32 calls *‘songs of deliverance’* – to be ready when Easter Day dawns.



The Atacama Desert in Chile, after rain.

*Why restless, why cast down my soul?
Hope still, and thou shalt sing
The praise of Him who is thy God,
Thy health’s eternal spring.*