

## THE DESERT: A PLACE WHERE GOD HAPPENS

A desert island is in itself a contradiction in terms. The *desert* connotes aridity and desolation, an endless horizon of sand. An *island* speaks of water on every side stretching to the horizon in all your directions.

I feel the gravitational pull of these two invitations. I sink into the solitude of the desert, its silence punctuated by occasional gusts of wind rippling the sand. Simultaneously, I hear the pounding surf surging against the shore. I listen for the rhythmic cadence of the tides, sometimes fierce, sometimes lapping gently. In solitude, I feel presence. Alone, I am companioned.

I imagine myself as the prophet Elijah, standing at the door of his cave waiting for the Lord God who promised to pass by.

I feel the tremors of the earthquake. "But the Lord is not in the earthquake."

I am startled by the noise of a mighty wind. "But the Lord is not in the wind."

I see and smell the blazing fire. "But the Lord is not in the fire."

And after the fire, comes "the sound of sheer silence."

On the desert island, the earthquake, wind and fire of my daily life subside and I am left with the paradoxical sound of sheer silence. Does a moment of transcendence await me here too? How did I get here? Was I banished for some crime? Was this supposed to be a vacation? Or is this island a metaphor for my death, that one day I will be taken to a place I did not consciously choose, but which was part of my destiny?

As I write just now, I am aware that writing itself requires the desert, because it is a search for truth. In the desert, I am removed from the lies I tell to myself and to others. I am away from the easy speeches splashed around me in the culture, evasions and excuses I have adopted in order to portray myself in the best light. The desert gives me the courage to develop a ruthless eye for hidden weakness in the structure I have laid out for myself either in my life or in a piece of writing. Desert silence and solitude are conducive to developing the patience to "x-ray it for a hairline fracture" – as Annie Dillard says of writing, and "think about it for a week or a year and solve the insoluble problem."

"In the desert, the insoluble problem is myself," writes Rowan Williams in his book *Where God Happens*, a work probing the wisdom of the ancient "desert fathers". "The hairline fracture is the

elusive but fatal element of self-regard, inattention to the neighbor, which threatens to leave me eternally broken and at odds with God and myself.” The desert is a place “where God happens,” allowing me the space and time to listen to the truth of myself, for I am “a unique word spoken by God”. And I see my neighbor more clearly, who is also a unique word spoken by God. In that attunement with God, myself, and my neighbor, and only then, I can write or speak a word of truth.

Ah, now it comes clear. I have taken this island inside myself. It does not frighten me—either the solitude or the silence, or even the sound, for I go apart precisely in order to *listen*. So the island beckons me, and I visit this interior space as often as I can, finding it more and more my home.

Is this a trick I play with this writing exercise—to say I have taken the island inside, so that it obviates the need to jettison my computer, my books, my photographs, the miles of journals and writing projects that have occupied me? Or is it more true to say that I *have* all these objects and artifacts, but they do not *have* me, and therein lies the difference. So to the extent that my words and pictures are in me, they will be with me in any solitary space I inhabit. They are the part of me that will accompany me Home when I am called to cross over to that unknown future—a space and time where I will be fully known.

(Note: Parts of this piece relate to underlying ideas in *Where God Happens*, by Rowan Williams, Archbishop of Canterbury, to whom I give credit.)