

Bennochy church: 11th March 2018

Italian policeman Mauro Prospero was 39 when he took part in the Marathon des Sables in 1994. This is a 155 mile race across the Moroccan Sahara desert. Why do people do such things? Anyway, a violent sandstorm, lasting 8 hours, caused him to get lost in the desert. Amazingly, he survived 9 days, by drinking bat's blood and his own urine, and by eating lizards and snakes that he caught. He was eventually found by one of the local Berber communities who fed and watered him and helped him get home. It was only then that he realised that he had crossed into Algeria, and was 181 miles off course.

On the off-chance you find yourself stranded in a desert, here are some essential tips on how to survive. Planning is everything, don't just go off wandering aimlessly or you're more than likely going to end up in the middle of nowhere. Part of the attraction of adventuring is not having a plan, but the desert really isn't a place you want to get lost in. Take the right survival gear and tell people where you're going.

Keep yourself well covered from the sun and take plenty of water with you. That seems pretty obvious. When walking in sunlight and temperatures of 40 degrees Celsius, the average person loses 900ml of sweat every hour.

Pack the right foods but be careful when you eat. I did not know this. The more you eat, the thirstier you'll get, so only eat what you need to keep hunger at bay.

Travel at night if you can, but nights are very cold in the desert. Learn how to find water and beware of dangerous animals, like snakes and scorpions and finally, if you do get lost, stay calm, and don't panic!

Have I put you off? Maybe next year's holiday will be a desert adventure!

In our Old Testament passage we pick up the story of the people of Israel wandering through the desert. Egypt lies behind them. They are no longer slaves. and what drives them on, is the vision of the Promised Land, but life is getting tough and when that happens, what do people do, they start to complain, and Moses gets it in the neck! Patience is wearing thin. *'You drag us into this place. Where are we going to find water and food to survive?'* Can I say, a perfectly natural response! There was no plan, only a vision, and how do you feed and water so many people, with just a vision? What the people are rightly concerned about, is their survival.

We might say, come on, what you need to do is trust in God, but we are not in the desert. I think it is too easy to over spiritualise such passages and interpret them, as a picture our own 'desert' experiences. Those times when we feel far from God. It is

legitimate way of thinking about the story, but for now, let's stay in their world. Join them in the desert, try to tap into how these people are feeling and why they are reacting in such a way.

Here come the snakes. I have no doubt that during their journey, people will have been bitten by snakes and died. They were not experienced desert travellers, they had lived as slaves in Egypt for generations, and they would not have modern anti venom agents for snake bites. There is a theological interpretation going on here by the writer. For him and his readers, it was perfectly reasonable to say, this is how God would act. In their complaints, the people of Israel are displaying a lack of trust. They are doing something wrong and so they are punished by God.

In response to the prayer of Moses, the incident then transformed into one of healing, in the form of a bronze snake, placed on a pole. Interestingly, the WHO, Royal college of OTs and the London ambulance service, have, as part of their logos, a snake entwined around a pole.

The writer of John's gospel, picks up this story and applies it to Jesus. He draws parallels, between the desert experience of the people of God and what is to come in the life of Jesus. The story of Moses and the people of God is not here predicting the future. That is not how prophecy works. John in reading back into the ancient story of God's people. A story the people would

have known, and in hearing the words of John they would make the connection.

The words of John need to be understood, in two interrelated moments of history. The words of Jesus indicating what is to come for him, and, the understanding of John's readers who already knew the end of the story. Different theological threads are being connected together by John.

In the Easter story, the cross stands visible, and the movement of Christ is both one of pain in crucifixion, and, glory in resurrection. John's point here, is both mystery and miracle. As the bronze snake offered healing in the desert, so Christ offers new life.

To me, the judgement of God in the desert, seems severe in its response, to the people's complaints. I can only think I would have been part of that crowd. Fortunately, Jesus offers something different. *'I have come that you might have life, life in all its fullness'*. In life, is that not what we seek?

In Lent, we journey towards that cross. It is our desert experience. As the people of Israel did, we too will complain. But what is raised for us, is not a bronze snake, but a man. At Easter, God says, look to him and you will be healed. Amen.