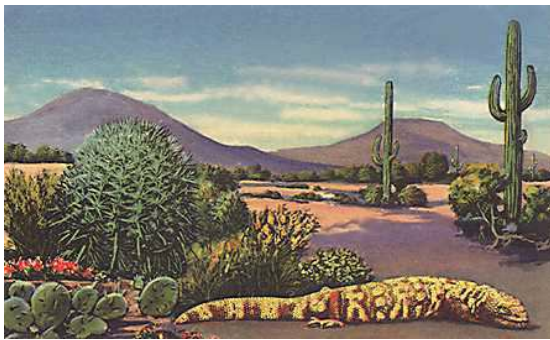


The Athletes of God

Over the next months we will share some thoughts on the desert place. Don't think for a minute that all will be doom and gloom, on the contrary the wilderness is a place where we encounter God.

Israel's prophets looked back to the desert years as a time when Israel was closer to God. They knew that only in the wilderness would her faith be re-kindled and purified, not the physical desert but distress, suffering and captivity. In this wasteland, the Lord spoke tenderly, calling his people, "I am now going to allure her, I will lead her into the desert".Hos.2:14



Sometimes we find ourselves in the wilderness, a place where all familiar landmarks have gone, our life and sometimes our faith has fallen apart, the future is unknown and frightening, and most terrifying of all, we feel utterly alone. Israel's sojourn in the wilderness "humbled" her. Deut 8:3. So it is with us.

From the 4th to 7th century there were those called by others the Desert Fathers and by themselves, "the Athletes of God", who when persecuted in the cities fled into the Egyptian desert. They were solitary hermits but as their numbers grew, they gathered into groups. Pilgrims sought them out and communities formed until eventually there were tens of thousands of men and women uncompromising in their obedience to the Lord, living in the desert. They had discovered that the wilderness, chosen or inflicted, is the place of encounter with God.

We can only guess the chastening that came in that barren place. The lives of the Desert Fathers bear the imprint of those who have been humbled by God. They were gentle and kind, even the wild animals approached them without fear and responded to their touch. One Brother planted a vegetable garden to feed the many pilgrims who visited his community. It must have been back-breaking work in such an arid place. One night, a gazelle discovered the vegetables with the inevitable consequences. This athlete of God must have been athletic physically as well as spiritually because he managed to catch the gazelle. He reprimanded her gently and lovingly, set her free and she never disturbed the vegetables again!

This story may be apocryphal but the patient humility of the saints through the ages has caused even animals to love them. Francis of Assisi is not an isolated example. One day an angry mob let loose an irate bull directing it to the place where John Wesley was preaching. As it approached Wesley put out his hand, turned the bull's head gently to one side and carried on speaking.

"Blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the earth." Matt 5:5.