

Editorial

THE LURE OF THE DESERT

Chavara and the Attempted Flight from the World

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1. Introduction

In the modern world, even in the mist of all the meaning that modern life offers, there are several men and women who are lured into the desert to confine themselves to a secluded life either in a real desert or in a virtual desert, where they enter into the cave of their heart and meet God. One of those who longed for such life in the desert is St Chavara, who along with his elders dreamt of fleeing this *corrupt and corrupting world*. Looking at a few aspects of religious life today, we explore the reason for such a longing in any person of accomplishment, historically what it has offered a seeker and what it can offer a person today.

We feel really great when we are leisurely cruising along the calm lake of life on warm sunny days, with the gentle wind at our back filling the sail. When on the land it is also great when all the traffic lights are green and all modern systems on our palm top respond to our fingertips with the speed of lightning. We feel as though we are in the wonderland and have tapped into some kind of magical force and fruits of every choice we make, every action we take manifest at a level far beyond our expectations. These fruits that we or our ancestors produced have made life effortless for us. It is like finally we have learnt the intricate steps to the great cosmic dance of the universe. No more doubt and hesitation, no more confusion and uncertainty, just clear skies and smooth sailing ahead with no hint of clouds nor the tip of the iceberg showing. Our relationships in the world feel satisfying and nourishing; our work is satisfying as creative ideas flow, which in turn makes opportunities abound. Our life cannot be any better. Our cup is full and is overflowing. Life is like a dream and seems almost too good to be true.

It is during this uneventful but pleasant life that the interrogative thought crosses our mind: "How long this can possibly last?" And the accompanying temptation to brush the thought aside and dismiss it as the joys of life just keeps coming up and you are too busy enjoying the ride. On these occasions, there are two diverse possibilities looming in the horizon: one external and another internal that lead one to make a U-turn in life. Externally, even without you noticing them, subtle shifts occur in life. The person who was your mainstay in business begins to drift away, the joy of your personal life to whom you were so emotionally attached is no more, the partner that you depended upon proves to be untrustworthy, your own creativity takes a backward swing and new opportunities are hard to come by. Internally, you are fed up of the uneventful life that is positively monotonous.

For a while you rely on the revival mechanism in place. You switch on the set of good stories and excuses to entertain and distract your mind. You go to your business guru, your instructor on the art of life and spent your money on things that you already have or know. You do not feel alive any more. You begin to notice things that you had hardly noticed before. The sight of the poor and the underprivileged tug at your soul and gnaw at your heart. You want to do something, you want challenges, you long for a change. Either the external pressure or the internal impasse or the combined effect of both brings your life to a pause. Gradually, those green lights turn red and you come to a violent halt which catapults you and deposits you at the doorstep of what seems like a vast and endless desert.

Literally, the desert is a dry, hot, barren, hostile and often lonely place. In the early Christian spiritual tradition, the desert denoted this geographical terrain. Later, it assumed a figurative status. Figuratively, in the Christian spiritual literature, it refers to any place of retreat – a house of prayer, the seashore, the woods, a quiet room in one's home, or even one's heart – all these characterize the same kind of privation, which makes these places virtual deserts.

There are two possibilities in the desert both real and virtual. Either you embrace the change that you were longing for and the challenge that you were ready to face and you make the violent halt and the subsequent ejection a blessing in disguise, rise to the opportunity and begin a new life, because you had had enough of the uneventful and monotonous pleasant life. You find root in the arid desert, thrive against the odds and bloom in the heat. The other possibility is that you do not even notice your arrival in the desert. Your mind, in its infinite capacity to escape reality, helped by your gurus, still holds on

to the fantasy that everything is still working. The autosuggestion that you are taught to give yourself makes you believe that everything is in place. By and by, you catch the first draft of the wind that tells you that something is off, but you do not wake up, because you are hypnotised and are taught not to wake up. However, you cannot go on. Reality begins to dawn on you. You become aware that you are empty and dry. The autosuggestions do not work. Your attention is demanded by the reality that you had been hypnotized and you wake up to the reality with a start – a second violent halt. You are propelled into the deepest desert of awareness a vast interior terrain that appears to be an ominous territory, not the most exciting place to be.

Miguel de Unamuno, the Spanish philosopher holds that the best way to move into the future is backwards. He insists that, instead of running toward an uncertain future that may be a disconnected fantasy, it is infinitely better to look back in time to glean the pearls of wisdom that we may have overlooked along our pilgrim way. It is following this suggestion that seekers in the modern world plumb the wisdom of the early Christian spiritual seekers who took to the desert between the 3rd and 5th centuries AD.

2. History of the Desert

Historically, many people went into the desert for various reasons. A few generations after the books of the New Testament were completed, the once-outlawed Christianity became an accepted religion, a considerable number of Christians who wanted to live exclusively for God, left the fairly enjoyable life of the urban centres for the deserts to follow and live the radical simplicity of the Gospel. Others went to the desert to escape Roman persecution. Paul of Thebes was one of them. The life of Antony and Paul attracted many followers. The eremitic trend spread like wild fire and by the fourth century, thousands of Christians were found praying in the deserts of Mesopotamia, Egypt, Syria and Palestine. They lived lives of prayer and fasting, but their spirituality was centred in the realization that intimacy with God meant being at peace with others.

By the end of the 3rd century AD, hermits like Antony (c 251-356) had paved a desert spiritual path, which made him the *Father* of the Christian desert dwellers, whose cell is still visited by pilgrims in the modern times. Following this path in various ways, in about a century, there emerged three kinds of Christian seekers in the desert: 1) Solitary hermits; 2) Those who lived in Sketes who are named after Scetis where they lived; 3) Monks who lived in monastic communities like he

one founded by Pachomius in Southern Egypt These were responsible for their own dwelling and livelihood, but they typically met together with others in the area at week-ends for fellowship, breaking of the bread, and to share their thoughts transparently with an elder of their choice. Most of them were celibates or widowed men. However, a few women lived near the settlements of the monks.

3. Biblical and Early Christian Desert-Roots

Desert spirituality has biblical and early Christian roots. The Old Testament has a desert image for God as the one who walks the road with his people, guides them in many ways and sustains them by various means so that they would not lose their way, that they may discipline themselves to reach their destination. Desert is a dangerous place and for anyone in the desert, to lose the way is to face the possibility of wandering without life-saving food, water or shelter. For the biblical people of Exodus, God had become their way for them to be called later 'the Way' for they were following the Way.

The desert experience is common to both the Old and the New Testaments. In Exodus, in the life of Elijah and the prophecy of Hosea desert is a major theme. It plays an important role in the history of the people of God. The Middle East, where the drama of the salvation history unfolded and where Jesus chose to live, die and rise, was a land of deserts. The Scripture, both the Old Testament and the New often refer to the desert, the wilderness, or a place of solitude where God summons those whom He loves away from the cares of the world in order to make them concentrate on His love and the meaning of their life.

In Deuteronomy, God walked the difficult desert road with them, not as in the Pillar of Fire and a Pillar of Cloud as he did in Exodus but in the Law, instructing and leading them. "Remember how the Lord your God led you in the desert these forty years... He led you through the vast and dreadful desert, that thirsty and waterless land" (Deut 8:2, 15). In Deuteronomy the revealed Torah was the way for it was the Teaching spoken directly by God: 'So be careful to do what the Lord your God has commanded you, do not turn aside to the right or the left. Walk in all the way that the Lord your God has commanded you.' (Deut 5:32-33). In the desert, for the liberated slaves, this instruction was not an image of the general progress of a journey that one undertook, but a matter of life and death. In the desert, continuity of life depends upon the choice of the right paths that is interspersed with water holes, which contain water that is potable and drinkable. In

the desert, in the light of the Lord, for his sake and for the sake of the people, Moses had to know accurately how to read the map that is often not there!

In New Testament times it is likewise it is in order to discern God's will and prove his obedience that Jesus retired to the desert after his baptism (Mk 1:12-13; Mt 4:1-11; Lk 4:1-13). Before the commencement of the public ministry of Jesus, he spent a considerable number of his days in the wilderness in fasting and prayer. During his ministry, periodically he retreated to the desert to pray and to find peace and tranquillity. John who had come to usher him in, appeared in the desert. Paul's ambiguous presence in Arabia (Gal 1:17) points to the possibility of time he spent in the desert.¹ All these are instances of the attraction that the desert offers because God is the source of this attraction. "I am going to allure her and lead her out into the wilderness and speak to her heart" (Hosea 2:16).

God gave *formation* to his people keeping them wandering in the desert for 40 years. The desert was a testing ground, where they experienced a change of heart. From time to time, *confirmation* of their faith was called for. *Reformation* happened to them as they proved themselves obedient to his way of life. Finally, conformation took place when the people recognized again their Creator as also their Lord.

4. Life in the Desert

Life in the desert was simple. There was silence, silence and more silence. The only activity that broke the monotony of the silence and solitude of the cell was manual labour that was done mostly in silence. In addition to the *distraction* that the labour provided, it enhanced asceticism. Many of the desert seekers did manual work making baskets out of palm leaves and sold them in markets in the oasis settlements a few times a year. It was also a means of their sustenance. The ascetics of the desert saved a bit of the meagre produce and *indulged* in almsgiving, which was a luxury in the desert.

The very purpose of the *flight from the world* was to have something that they lacked there. Life in the desert was spent looking inward doing soul-searching. Continuous prayer was the focus and silence that they maintained sacred, created a congenial ambiance for various forms of prayer. The desert dwellers spent their time in *lectio divina*,

¹Tradition has it that he spent three years in the Arabian desert in preparation for his work for the Lord.

recital of the psalms, celebrating liturgy, and exercising the prayer of the heart. Thus the predominant features of the desert spirituality were *ora et labora*. However, they prioritised work on their inner life in order to move from the false ego to the true God-centred self. They analysed the destructive human passions, learnt to deal with them and developed methods of stillness, meditation and practice, which enabled them to replace these passions with their opposite virtues.

Scripture was the cornerstone of the monastic movement begun in the 3rd century by Christian men and women who lived in the deserts of Egypt. They read the Scripture, held it in memory and in the heart, used it as a means of prayer and meditation and followed scriptural precepts. Through the discipline of simple daily prayer, the seeker grew into a habit of deep listening to the Spirit, the Mystery dwelling within but is beyond themselves. There the seeker learnt to speak from the heart, out of silence, awe, wonder and wisdom, words that are different from the verbosity of advertisements and propaganda. Such words transmitted generative and regenerative power.

Stories of their holy lives leaked out to the public in the villages, towns and cities and attracted many seekers who searched them out, sought their guidance, or attached themselves to them in a similar way of life. They received the spiritual nourishment from the experienced ones. Strange were the ways of the desert that a disciple might ask for 'a word' and take weeks or even months to live that word and *on* that word until the disciple asked for another one. The depth of a word was explored in such intense a manner that the disciple entered the core of the word and remained there enjoying the silence that the concentration on the word facilitated.

5. The Fundamental Counsels

Three fundamental demands of the desert spirituality are to flee, to silence, and to pray. These actions of *flight*, *silence*, and *prayer* were a mature response to a human condition, which Thomas Merton compares to a shipwreck. It is not selfish to swim for help instead of drowning in solidarity with the fellow victims. This *swim*, according to him, is a purifying pilgrimage into the humbling revelation of our human brokenness and a transforming encounter with forgiveness. Negatively, it is an escape from a fruitless painful situation and positively, the escape is in view of moving to a fruitful, humanizing and healing suffering.

In a world that focusses on religious lives, which are in turn, centred on doctrines and dogmas and are driven by study and talk

about God and the problems of life, *silence* was an alternative. Productive as these exercises are, talk and thinking did not seem to lead them through the fire of transformation to waters that were still. In silence, the spiritual seekers of the desert addressed the heart, the whole person and explored the person and beyond in silence.

Christian Meditation is that unique prayer of the heart described by John Cassian, the historian of desert spirituality who brought the wisdom of the desert of Egypt and the Middle East out of the desert for others to marvel at. *Centering Prayer* has its provenance in the much celebrated *Cloud of Unknowing*, a work of an anonymous monk of the 14th century. The work enshrines the contemplative traditions of the desert that hinged on prayer, which is one of the fundamental demands of the desert spirituality.

6. Contrasting Monks of the Desert

It is deceptive to assume that life in the desert was monolithic and those who lived there were naval-gazing introverts who had nothing social in them. The aptitudes of contrasting personalities who came out of the society and went into the desert to embrace life in the desert were noteworthy. Archbishop Rowan Williams' *Silence and Honey Cakes: The Wisdom of the Desert* published in 2003 hinges on the contrast between the social aptitudes of the desert seekers. The theological probe that he makes into the life of the desert dwellers of the early Christian era is both demanding and inspiring. First of all, there was the introvert, silent, ex-imperial tutor Arsenius. Like him, most of the desert dwellers held high the principles of silence and solitude and employed them as a means to make their interior journey. Gradually, these traits became accepted and conventional as the authentic way. The deeper meaning of silence and solitude, as understood by the desert dwellers, was more about an attitude of hearing the inner differences between that which is false and true within. This discernment required some distance from both the humdrum of external and internal voices. Hence, the above-said flight and silence!

Complementing rather than contrasting the silent desert dwellers, there were others of a more affable and extrovert nature. The vivacious Ethiopian bandit Moses was one of them. He was positively talkative – a surprising trait in a desert seeker. Although these were of a later origin, they delighted in the company of those like-minded seekers who were committed to the same quest in a very different way. This lively way is the metaphorical and literal reality of *honey cakes* that

Rowan Williams refers to in contrast to *silence*. The metaphor of the honey cakes speaks of the nourishment and sweetness of being with others despite the possibility of mistreatment or opposition, misunderstandings or caricatures, conflict or tensions that arise within a community that impels one to flee from the desert spiritual arena.

Some of the seekers hopped like crickets from one hermit or community to another either because they were challenged or because they did not want to be challenged or still because they felt that they were *not* challenged enough. Sticking with one hermit or with one community gradually impelled the seeker to face himself/herself at a deeper, more demanding and transformative level. The commitment to stability and sticking to a person or place for consistent spiritual guidance were demanding. It was a temptation even in the desert to use the language of spirituality to serve one's ego rather than allowing the meaning of spirituality to transform the ego into a new person within community – the phenomenon is universal.

Perhaps some of them were emaciated on account of their austerities, which themselves were often eccentric. Some of them gave up the experimentation because they did not understand the strange ways the desert worked on human beings as they began to explore themselves in the new light of their faith, which itself was only in its nascent stage. These desert cells were the first monastic test beds where strange and unique God-experience and God-talk was happening. It is these experiences and their verbalization that even after the lapse of about two millennia speak to people at a profound level, which is neither dogmatic, doctrinal not theological.

7. The Coming of Age

Desert is the place where we confront the truth. That is where we deepen and expand our idea of who we are, as a result of which we begin to contribute to the transformation of the collective human spiritual experience. The desert is where we moult and let go of our limiting beliefs about who we are and why we are here. That is where we confront a self that is part of us, but hitherto hidden from us. Gradually, we undo the chains that bind us to whatever false notion of truth that hurled us into the desert in the first place. In all humility, we are led to stand face to face with the truth and make a commitment to become the servant of the truth, and that truth ultimately sets us free. Free of the strings and unencumbered by the baggage that we used to carry when we were cruising and camping, gradually, we come to feel

right at home in the desert – in the deep, quiet, dark places in the desert, far from the noise and distraction of life in the fast track.

It is in the desert that we come of age. It is there that we wriggle until we break the protective chrysalis and force ourselves to get out of ourselves and ascend to a realm where we are at home. It is extremely painful, because we give birth to ourselves. The pain teaches us much about our vulnerability and our beauty as human beings. Away from the glitter that distracts, the desert makes us aware of our value and worth. We become adults and take off to the immensity of the vast blue infinitude.

8. The Legacy of the Desert

What the desert dwellers found in the desert depended very much on what they were seeking for or what they were prepared to see. Out of the several significant results of the flight into the desert, two lasting legacies that have left their mark on Christian Spiritual tradition are the Christian Meditation and the centering prayer. Indeed, these come out of early Christian monasticism, which is only a further development of the early desert spirituality.² It was in the womb of the desert that the monks of the East and the West developed their unique spiritual lifestyle and contemplative prayer was at the heart of their life. One form of this prayer has one meditate on a single, sacred word to draw the believer closer to God by withdrawing from the usual compulsive infatuation with particular sensory objects, rituals and conceptual constructions. No other communities delved as deep into the desert and its spirituality as the Benedictines and the Trappists to whom these forms of prayer are attributed.

The desert offered them a stark and free setting for a life of penance and prayer. Its emptiness, silence and solitude were inviting and they had spiritual adventures of experimentations and improvisations. They had prepared themselves to face the demons in the open combat in the desert where they were supposed have inhabited, for the common belief was that the demons infested the wastelands. Perhaps it is in course of this preparation that the desert seekers came to

²Christian Meditation and centering prayer are two popular forms of contemplative prayer, designed by John Main, the Benedictine and the Trappists at Spencer, Massachusetts, respectively, the former promoted by the World Community of Christian Meditation under Laurence Freeman OSB and the latter by Contemplative Outreach, whose leader is Thomas Keating OCSO.

realize, in the bright light of the desert, that the demons were within them and not out there in the desert. They had to be engaged on the battleground of each one's soul. The eremitic vocation has the same purpose, as the name *hermit* applied to those who embrace such a life indicates. These spiritual experiences that the early seekers had in the desert in the 3rd and 4th centuries AD was developed into a coherent spirituality which touched various aspects of one's life.

There are many gems of sayings that the desert dwellers have left for the posterity to contemplate. 'Go to your cell and your cell will teach you all things,' they would tell their disciples. 'Place your head in your heart and stand before God all day' was the advice given to the novices in the desert. To the advanced ascetics they said: 'The one who abides in solitude and is quiet, is delivered from fighting three battles - those of hearing, speech, and sight. Then that person will have but one battle to fight - the battle of the heart.'

9. The White Martyrdom

The desert is a powerful symbol of the emptiness of life and the transcendence of God, which incessantly leave you feeling empty and longing for what can fill you in reality. This emptiness always left behind the possibility of a plenitude of the immaculate. The emptiness was translated into purity of heart, a heart that is free of immoderate attachments and sinful affections to centre itself on God. Becoming pure of heart, they saw God.

One of the reasons that dragged some of the desert dwellers to the desert was the lack of opportunities to suffer persecution and martyrdom, which was considered to be the red sanctity that opened the doors of the paradise. The Edict of Milan shut the doors of the red sanctity. A replacement of the bloody and externally violent martyrdom was made with a bloodless but equally violent martyrdom that involved one's interiority. The replacement that gradually evolved in the desert it came to be called white sanctity, a white martyrdom. In place of the physical end of life in death, white martyrdom involved a total giving over of one's life to God, which was the end of the life that the martyr led in the society. In place of shedding blood, the martyr had to shed all self-indulgence in favour of a single-minded search for God.

10. The Return to the World

Later, the desert tradition became a bridge between spirituality of the city and the desert. Having looked at the present reality of the world coloured by all its predicaments, the desert seeker makes his/her way into this silent wilderness either literal or figurative, and there touches the mystery of the future, the Kingdom of heaven. Having looked at the reality from God's perspective, he/she returns to the broken world's problems, tragedies, and hopelessness. The desert experience galvanizes him/her to a great extent that he/she feels neither impotent nor overwhelmed.

The desert seekers offer a message of both profound simplicity and depth. Before the development of academic Theology, these desert dwellers gleaned bits of truth about God and let them pass through the portals of the soul into the depths of their being. They asked all sorts of probing, transformative and discerning questions that kept them preoccupied in the desert in the first few Christian centuries.

From this solitary seeking God of in the desert, which is the earliest form of monasticism, the monastic life in community emerged, although the eremitic vocation continues as a distinct way of seeking God even today. In practical terms this spiritual quest is pursued through prayer in solitude and asceticism.

11. Conclusion

St Chavara had his companions had to settle for a virtual desert because their authorities judged that the provision for a real desert made for them would cause a brain-drain in the community. The authorities objected: "If those of you who are of some essence leave for the desert, who will be left to give leadership to the people of God?" It is this objection of the authorities that caused a turning point in the life of St Chavara and his companions. They looked for alternatives. When considered the pastoral exigencies of the Church, their dreams had to be materialized in such a way, which also would be beneficial to the people.

Gradually, they realised that the lives of the God-seekers in the desert have a contemporary meaning, as they point to the fact that each human being is called to be a contemplative, and to see God in the vocation that he has received and in the circumstances of his or her daily life. Moreover, on account of the promise of Jesus regarding his constant presence with us, it is not required to run off to the mountains or to the desert in a literal way to pray and to achieve

sanctity of life. Hence, following the suggestion of the authorities, St Chavara and his companions brought the desert into the city and lived in the virtual desert, still being in touch with the people in such a way that the desert and the city became mutual beneficiaries. *Their fervent, recollected prayer life activated their apostolate and their apostolate enriched their prayer life.* In this way, the realization of their dreams and the work for the salvation of the people found a *happy blending* in the community that they caused to be.

The present volume is titled, *To the Desert and Back*, which points to the desire of Chavara and his companions for a secluded religious life in the desert (*vanavasa*), but had to be settled for the same life in a desert that was virtual. In effect, they went into the spiritual desert and brought to the people in the city all that was good in the desert that the people might benefit from what they had found.

The volume has four entries that are directly related to the *desert life in the city*. The entry that opens the discussion is a contribution from Fr Paul Kalluveetil who is an authority on the life and mission of Chavara. As biblical scholar, he is looking at the religious vision of Chavara, mainly from a biblical point of view. He considers religious house as *tapasbhavanam* and *darsanavîdu*, a virtual desert that Chavara longed for. Followed by the vision of Chavara, we have an entry on the visionary himself. Fr Thomas Kochumuttom portrays Chavara as a mentor in the desert whose inspiring life has challenged many a seeker to found joy in life in the desert. In detail, Fr Thomas Kochumuttom delineates the contributions of Chavara both towards the Church and towards the Indian Carmelites.

The third entry of the volume is the second part of the interpretation of *Atmanutapam*, a poetic work of Chavara. Fr Jojo Parecattil explores the advaidic desert spirituality of Chavara as portrayed in the poem. He analyses the work in a staurological perspective and finds parallels in *tattvamsi*, which is one of the Indian *Mahavakyas*. Staurology is closely related to asceticism of the desert. The fourth and final entry of the volume is an investigation into the pitfalls of the modern desert life that is lived in the city. Fr James Thayil looks into the unwarranted infiltration of the elements of the city into the desert in the form of modern media, one the one hand, facilitating the dissemination of the good that is found in the desert among the city dwellers and on the other hand, hampering the serene life of the desert, which produced the good results.

The first and the last entries are papers presented at a conference organized by Abraham Puthukulangara, a friend, confrere and fellow

traveller in the *desert*, a conscientious mentor who lighted the path of many a young desert seeker as the Novice Master at Vinayalaya, the CMI Mission Novitiate at Bhanpuri, Jagdalpur. The conference was held on the occasion of its Silver Jubilee celebrations of the Novitiate. I thank him for the permission to make these two entries part of the volume.