

## Song

'Desert Song' by Hillsong Worship

Jill McCloghry © 2007 Hillsong Music

## Gathering Prayer

We come to you, faithful Father,  
slowing down, taking a deeper breath.<sup>[L]</sup><sub>[SEP]</sub>  
Thank you that we do not need to earn our way  
into your presence,  
but that we can come simply, through Jesus,  
by your Holy Spirit.  
We pause.  
We acknowledge your presence.  
We trust you to feed us by your Word. **Amen.**

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## Psalm

[Psalm 63:1-8](#) with soundtrack

## Reflection

[Luke 4:1-13](#)

One of the regular moans I always used to hear in churches was older people complaining that younger people lacked discipline. It used to be accompanied by comments regretting the abolition of National Service. Well, the latter is fading into distant memory now – even I am too young to have been 'called up'.

But what strikes me is that a place where we really could do with more discipline is in the Church. I would say that discipline is a required characteristic of a Christian disciple. I say that because Jesus in his life exhibited serious discipline. And we are called to imitate him.

Nowhere is the discipline of Jesus more apparent than in the story of the wilderness temptations. On a day when in our series we're thinking about the simplicity of the wilderness journey, I want to show you how spiritual discipline is at the heart of that simplicity.

Those who teach about spiritual disciplines such as Richard Foster and the late Dallas Willard talk about 'disciplines of engagement' and 'disciplines of abstinence'. The disciplines we see in Jesus' forty days in the wilderness are very much disciplines of abstinence, where he puts aside something for a season to concentrate on God.

Here, then, are three disciplines of abstinence that helped Jesus focus on his Father and which also help us to focus on our God.

The **first**, then, is *simplicity* itself.

Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, left the Jordan and was led by the Spirit into the wilderness (verse 1)

Jesus leaves behind civilisation with all its trappings to go to a stark place where he will concentrate on his Father. In church history, we've seen the Desert Fathers, monks, and nuns, and especially hermits, do something similar.

Sometimes the cares of this world and its trappings get in the way. People make demands on us. Possessions distract us. Money worries or tempts us. It can be good to put these things to a side for a limited period to focus on prayer. And by doing so we are making a radical statement: 'Lord, you are more important to us than money, work, and possessions. You are Number One in my life.'

How do we do it today? It can be helpful as part of our simplicity to travel to somewhere else so that we don't have those material distractions in front of us. There aren't too many deserts around here, but we have plenty of heathland.

For those of us who have a smartphone, then it is probably a good idea to turn off all the notifications and perhaps put it on Airplane Mode.

Clear your diary for a few hours, or a whole day if you can. Get as far away from material clutter as you can. Take a Bible. Listen to God and read the Scriptures. Pour out your heart to God about all things large and small. Have a notebook so that you can write down your impressions of what God says to you in your conversation.

Amazingly, you will still have distractions! Your mind will run off on all sorts of tangents. At that point, it is worth remembering the Apostle Paul's example when he said 'We take every thought captive to make it obedient to Christ' (2

Corinthians 10:5). Do that either by writing down the thought in your notebook so that you can return to it at a better time or turn the thought into prayer.

The **second** discipline of abstinence for a simple journey is **solitude**.

It's apparent from the story that Jesus went alone into the wilderness. Leaving the Jordan also meant leaving people behind.

Solitude is different from loneliness. Solitude is where we lay aside the distractions of people (even loved ones) with their requests, requirements, needs, and demands, to put God first and foremost in our life. Solitude is thus a clear choice, whereas loneliness is more something that happens to us, and is usually experienced as something unwanted and not chosen.

We have experienced a lot of aloneness this last year due to the pandemic. Some of us have experienced that as deeply unwanted loneliness. Others of us, especially those of us who get energised by being alone, have managed to make it into an experience of solitude, even solitude with God.

The last thing I want to do in talking about this is to diminish the sense of loneliness that many people have experienced in the last year. But I do want to challenge those of us who love our social lives and maybe even like to be the centre of attention. For the discipline of solitude is one that says we are willing temporarily to put aside the people who energise us and the people we love to concentrate on our Father in heaven. Solitude is a time when I confess that I am not the centre of the universe and I am not to be everyone's centre of attention. Rather, our God is to be the centre of our attention. The act of prayer in solitude is thus an act of worship, acknowledging that God the Father is on the throne, not me.

Yes, as I said, you may need to have your smartphone with you when you go off for your time with God in case there are family emergencies, but the discipline of solitude is there to emphasise by physical act that our God comes first before every single other person, even those we love the dearest.

A married couple I know only committed themselves to Christ and to Christian faith in their adult life, several years after they had married. The point came when, a few years after becoming Christians, one day the wife confessed to the husband: 'There is someone I love more than you.'

After the shocked silence she added, 'It's Jesus.' Her husband was thrilled.

I am not suggesting we neglect our loved ones. But relationships have been so elevated in our society to the point where people expect their spouse or partner to provide for their needs in a way they can't, namely in a way that only God can. We need to redress that imbalance, that idolatry. Solitude with God is one way of doing that.

The **third** discipline of abstinence practised by Jesus in the wilderness is, of course, ***fasting***.

Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, left the Jordan and was led by the Spirit into the wilderness, <sup>2</sup> where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing during those days, and at the end of them he was hungry.

This is the one we expect to hear about in Lent. It's the discipline on which all our 'giving up something for Lent' is based. And although these days that has also been turned around into a positive idea of taking up something good for Lent, I suggest that taking up something rather misses the point of giving up something.

For one thing, maybe we want to take up something because we can't face giving up something. If we recognise that tendency, we should be concerned.

But for another, taking up something overlooks the whole idea of disciplines of absence, which is to say that God is more important to us than our possessions, than people, and – in the case of fasting – food.

That's why fasting is connected so much to prayer in the Bible. When we fast and pray we are saying to God, you matter more to us than even the food that keeps us alive. And what's more, it is more important to us to hear you speak and see you do something about this issue we are bringing to you in prayer.

Now I am aware that there will always be people for whom it is medically questionable to fast. I am not going to ask anyone to do something that their doctor would say was inadvisable or dangerous.

But fasting does say something important to a society like ours that is so obsessed with consumption. Because of that, I do support the idea of extending the notion of fasting from food to other things. What has gained too much of our affection in place of God and needs to be put back where it belongs? Do we need to fast from Netflix or Spotify? What is that thing of

which we say, 'I can't get enough of this,' and which therefore needs putting back in its place below the throne of God by fasting from it?

To **conclude**, the purpose of spiritual disciplines is to cultivate in thought and action the core Christian confession that Jesus is Lord. The disciplines of abstinence we have thought about today are ways of doing that.

This is not about being a killjoy. And it is not about expecting everyone to become a hermit. It is about pursuing disciplines that put created things and people in their right place under the reign of Christ, and cultivating those disciplines so that they become ingrained as virtuous habits in our lives.

May God grant us the grace to live a disciplined life of love and faith in his Son.

### **Song**

Matt Redman, 'The Heart of Worship'

Matt Redman © 1999 Thankyou Music

### **Sending Prayer**

God, as we go from this place make us a people who are content in all circumstances:

in crowds or alone,

with much or with little,

well-fed or hungry.

May your presence, your provision<sup>[L]</sup><sub>[SEP]</sub>

and your bread of life be enough for us.

In Christ's name we pray,

**Amen.**

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### **Song**

Rend Collective, 'Simplicity'

Gareth Andrew Gilkeson, Christopher Dean Llewellyn © 2014 Capitol Christian Music Group