

# INTO THE DESERT

Lent 2011



*Stanley Spencer: The Scorpion*

By Anne Le Bas

## INTO THE DESERT

### SESSION 1: THE DESERT AND CHRISTIAN TRADITION

The Carthusian order of monks was founded in 1084 by St Bruno, who was seeking for a monastic way of life which was founded on solitude and silence, so that the monks and nuns who followed it could concentrate on a life of prayer. This kind of solitary life dated back in the Christian tradition to St Antony of Egypt, who had devoted himself to a solitary life of prayer in the Egyptian wilderness in the fourth century, and who was followed by many other men and women, now known collectively as the Desert Fathers and Mothers

St Bruno's first monastery was established in the Chartreuse mountains of France, near Grenoble in what was known as the "desert of Chartreuse". It is not a desert in the way we normally think of such things – hot and dry – but a desert in the sense that it was uninhabited and not easy for people to reach. There he built his monastery, which was a collection of individual cells, each with a small garden, where the monks could live with as much solitude as possible. Similar monasteries sprung up around the world, and took their name from this first one. They are called "Chartreuse" or "Charterhouse" in English. There is a Charterhouse at Parkminster in Horsham, West Sussex where monks still follow this ancient way of life. You can find out more at [www.parkminster.org.uk](http://www.parkminster.org.uk)

The monks come together three times a day for communal worship, but otherwise keep to their cells where they pray the other "offices" of the day (the daily round of prayer). Some of the monks work outside their cells to perform the various practical tasks that need to be done – cooking, gardening, making clothes etc.- and every monk tends his own garden and does practical things for a time each day within his cell, as well as studying. Once a week the monks go out for a walk together and are able to talk during this time. They also have a Sunday meal together, but in silence. Other meals are taken in their cells. The individual cells are also called "deserts" by the monks.

It is a tough life, and many monks who embark on it as novices drop out before they make their final profession of faith and commit themselves (it takes about 10 years to get to this point!). It is certainly not for everyone, and the Order is very clear about this. However, those who feel themselves genuinely called to it find great peace and meaning in it.

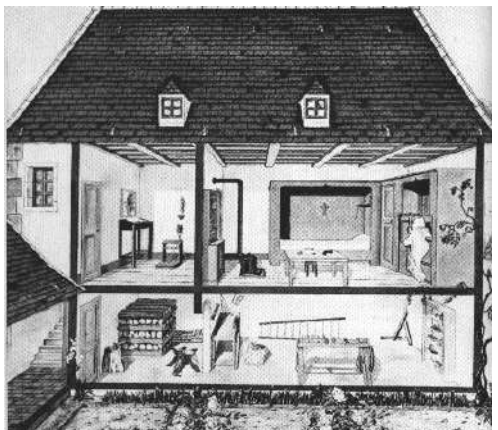
Here are some extracts from the Statutes of St Bruno, which form the basis of the Carthusian life, taken from the website of the Carthusian Order ([www.chartreux.org](http://www.chartreux.org))

***“Whoever perseveres without defiance in the cell and lets himself be taught by it tends to make his entire existence a single and continual prayer. But he may not enter into this rest without going through the test of a difficult battle. It is the austerities to which he applies himself as someone close to the Cross, or the visits of God, coming to test him like gold in the fire. Thus purified by patience, fed and strengthened by studied meditation of Scripture, introduced by the grace of the Holy Spirit in the recesses of his heart, he will thus be able to, not only serve God, but adhere to him. (Statutes 3.2)”***

***“The primary application of our vocation is to give ourselves to the silence and solitude of the cell. It is holy ground, the area where God and his servant hold frequent conversations, as between friends. There, the soul often unites itself to the Word of God, bride to the groom, the earth to the sky, man to the divine. (Statutes 4.1)”***

The illustration and description that follow also come from the website of the Carthusian Order

*The **Cell** is a hermitage arranged in such a manner as to assure the Carthusian a solitude as complete as possible, all the while giving him the necessities of life. Each*



*cell consists of a two story building surrounded by a garden, where the monk lives alone for most of the day, for the duration of all his life.*

- **What do you think about this way of life? What might be good about it, and what bad? Are there any aspects of it that appeal to you (or worry you)?**
- **How often are you silent, still and alone in your daily life?**
- **What do you feel about silence?**
- **How do you cope when you have nothing to do/no one to talk to/ on holiday/in retirement?**
- **Do you normally try to fill the silence with some sort of noise (music, radio etc.) or do you enjoy it?**

## **JESUS IN THE WILDERNESS**

The Christian tradition of seeking out the solitude of the desert is based on the story of Jesus, going into the wilderness to battle with the temptations that faced him at the beginning of his ministry. The desert was seen by most of the ancient world as a place of demons and danger, but in the Bible it is also often a place where people, to their surprise, encounter God. Moses met God in a burning bush in the desert of Midian. The people of Israel's experience of wandering in the desert on their journey from slavery in Egypt to the Promised Land shaped their faith and their community life profoundly. Later prophets like Elijah encountered God in the desert too.

During this Lent course we will be thinking about the specific temptations Jesus faced in the desert, but before we do, we need to look at the story as a whole.

**NB:** "SATAN" literally means "the accuser". He was originally thought of in the Bible as a member of God's heavenly court who had been given the specific task of testing God's followers, and wasn't necessarily viewed as the embodiment of evil (see the book of Job). By the time of Christ, however, many thought of him as the opponent of God, in rebellion against him, and this is the picture we often get in the New Testament.

Christians today hold a wide range of views on whether to think of him as a “real” figure, or as a symbol of the evil in the world.



*Ivan Kramskoy: Christ in the Wilderness*

**Read the story as it is written in the three Gospels where it is recorded.**

- **What are the differences between the versions?**
- **What things are the same in all of them?**

### ***Matthew 4.1-12***

*Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He fasted for forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. The tempter came and said to him, ‘If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.’ But he answered, ‘It is written,*

*“One does not live by bread alone,*

*but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.” ’*

*Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, ‘If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written,*

*“He will command his angels concerning you”,*

*and “On their hands they will bear you up,*

*so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.” ’*

*Jesus said to him, ‘Again it is written, “Do not put the Lord your God to the test.” ’*

*Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendour; and he said to him, 'All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.' Jesus said to him, 'Away with you, Satan! for it is written, "Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him."'*

*Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.*

*Now when Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee.*

### **Mark 1.12-15**

*And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness for forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.*

*Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.'*

### **Luke 4.1-15**

*Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished. The devil said to him, 'If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.' Jesus answered him, 'It is written, "One does not live by bread alone."'*

*Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. And the devil said to him, 'To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours.' Jesus answered him, 'It is written, "Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him."'*

*Then the devil took him to Jerusalem, and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, 'If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, for it is written, "He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you", and*

*“On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.” ’*

*Jesus answered him, ‘It is said, “Do not put the Lord your God to the test.” ’ When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.*

*Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone.*

- **What do you think was the point of Jesus being led (or driven) out into the wilderness?**
- **What difference might it have made to his ministry if Jesus had not spent this time in the desert?**
- **Sometimes we choose to go into the wilderness, taking time out to reflect and face up to ourselves; sometimes we are forced to do so by circumstances. Can you think of a time in your life when this has happened? What was the result?**

#### **DURING THE WEEK...**

- **Try to spend some time in silence and stillness. Don’t consciously try to pray or think; just be still.**
- **Note what happens when you do.**
- **What do you find yourself thinking and feeling?**
- **Is it hard or easy for you to do this?**
- **What helps you to do this, and what hinders you?**

## SESSION 2: STONES INTO BREAD



- What are your earliest memories of mealtimes in your childhood?
- What was your favourite food?
- What were mealtimes like?
- Was there enough to eat? Was there too much?
- Were you expected to clear your plate, or allowed to leave food?
- Have your family's attitudes to food affected you in later life?

Food is very important in the Bible. For many at the time, as today it was an unpredictable commodity. Hunger was an ever present threat. Feasts were often used as images of the goodness of God. The big incentive for the Hebrew slaves in Egypt to escape and make their journey across the desert to the Promised Land was that it would be a land “flowing with milk and honey”

- How many Bible stories can you think of that mention food?

### READ THE FOLLOWING THREE BIBLE PASSAGES

#### **MATTHEW 4.1-4**

*Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He fasted for forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. The tempter came and said to him, 'If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.' But he answered, 'It is written, \**



*“One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.” ’* *\*(Deut 8.3)*

### **MATTHEW 14.13-21**

*When Jesus went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick. When it was evening, the disciples came to him and said, ‘This is a deserted place, and the hour is now late; send the crowds away so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves.’ Jesus said to them, ‘They need not go away; you give them something to eat.’ They replied, ‘We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish.’ And he said, ‘Bring them here to me.’ Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. And all ate and were filled; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full. And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children.*

### **MATTHEW 6.25-26**

*Jesus said, ‘Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?’*

- **In the second reading, Jesus seems to be doing the very thing that he said he wouldn’t do in the first. Has he given in to temptation when he feeds the 5000?**
- **What is wrong with turning stones into bread if it feeds hungry people?**
- **Jesus says we need to live not just by bread, but “by every word that comes from the mouth of God” What do you think that means?**
- **How does the third reading help us to understand the other two?**

We know how easy it is to have an unhealthy relationship with food – eating too much or too little, or the wrong kind of food, hoarding or wasting it. Perhaps, though, our attitudes to food are a reflection of our attitudes to the other resources we need to live – not just physical resources, but emotional and spiritual resources too.

- **What do you think people need in order to live satisfying, happy, healthy lives?**
- **How might we hoard, waste, or be stingy with these sort of resources?**
- **Have you always felt you had enough of these resources, or have there been times when you have been anxious that you would run out?**
- **Where do you turn for spiritual and emotional refreshment?**

#### **DURING THE WEEK**

- **Try to continue to find time to be still.**
- **Think about your relationship with food, and about where you get your spiritual and emotional food.**

### SESSION 3: PUTTING GOD TO THE TEST



“On Wednesday, 7 August 1974, shortly after 7:15 a.m., Phillipe Petit stepped off the South Tower of the World Trade Centre and onto the steel cable he had rigged up between the Twin Towers. He walked the wire for 45 minutes, making eight crossings between the

towers, a quarter mile above the sidewalks of Manhattan. In addition to walking, he sat on the wire, gave knee salutes and, while lying on the wire, spoke with a gull circling above his head.

As soon as Petit was observed by witnesses on the ground, the Port Authority Police Department dispatched officers to the roof to take him into custody. One of the officers, Sgt. Charles Daniels, later reported his experience:

*I observed the tightrope 'dancer'—because you couldn't call him a 'walker'—approximately halfway between the two towers. And upon seeing us he started to smile and laugh and he started going into a dancing routine on the high wire....And when he got to the building we asked him to get off the high wire but instead he turned around and ran back out into the middle....He was bouncing up and down. His feet were actually leaving the wire and then he would resettle back on the wire again....Unbelievable really....Everybody was spellbound in the watching of it.*

Petit was warned by his friend on the South Tower that a police helicopter would come to pick him off the wire unless he got off. Rain had begun to fall, and Petit decided he had taken enough risks, so he decided to give himself up to the police waiting for him on the South Tower. He was arrested once he stepped off the wire. Provoked by his taunting behaviour while on the wire, police handcuffed him behind his back and roughly pushed him down a flight of stairs. This he later described as the most dangerous part of the stunt.

His audacious high wire performance made headlines around the world. When asked why he did the stunt, Petit would say, "When I see three oranges, I juggle; when I see two towers, I walk." "  
(Wikipedia)

- **What do you feel when you read this story?**
- **Was Petit incredibly brave or incredibly stupid?**
- **What other kinds of risks do people take in their lives?**
- **What is your attitude to risk – “better safe than sorry” or “nothing ventured, nothing gained”?**

**Read the following passage (Matthew 4. 5-7)**

*Then the devil took Jesus to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, ‘If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written,*

*“He will command his angels concerning you”,*

*and “On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.” ’*

*(Psalm 91.11,12)*

*Jesus said to him, ‘Again it is written, “Do not put the Lord your God to the test.” ’*

*(Deut 6.16)*

- **Why might Jesus have been tempted to do what Satan suggested here?**
- **If Jesus had thrown himself off the temple and been caught by angels what would that have proved?**

As Jesus hung on the cross dying, the crowds mocked him saying; *“If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross!...He trusts in God; let God deliver him now, if he wants to...” (Matthew 27.40 &43)*

- **Jesus says nothing in answer, but if he had answered them, what do you think he would have said?**

Satan is, essentially, inviting Jesus to make a bargain with God. Bargaining with God is a risky business.

**READ THESE PASSAGES FROM THE BOOK OF JUDGES** – in one, the bargain works out fine; in the other it doesn't.

**Judges 6.11-16, 36-40**

**Judges 11.29-40**

- **Imagine you could talk to Gideon and Jephthah about these bargains they made with God.**
- **What would you want to ask them?**
- **How do you think they would justify or explain their behaviour?**
- **Have you ever made a bargain (with God, with yourself, with someone else) which you later regretted?**
- **If you “do your bit” for God, do you expect that he will “do his bit” for you?**

**DURING THE WEEK:**

- **Try to continue to find time to be still.**
- **Think about your relationship with God. Do you believe that he loves you? If so, why do you think that? If not, why do you doubt it?**

## SESSION 4: “ALL THESE I WILL GIVE YOU, IF YOU WILL FALL DOWN AND WORSHIP ME...”

### Who pulls the strings in your life?

We would probably all like to think of ourselves as free and independent, but in reality we are often controlled and limited by others who have power over our lives. Sometimes we have no choice about this, but sometimes we choose to give power over us to others. We can't just do what we want with our lives completely.

- Who or what has power to dictate to you how you live your life?
- Who or what has power over you whether you like it or not?
- Who have you willingly given power to?
- If you are asked, required or compelled to do something which you don't want to do, how do you react?
- How many of the forces that control you are external and how many come from within you somewhere – your own habits, instincts and hang-ups?



The people of Israel were often tempted to worship other Gods, and often gave into the temptation, handing over the strings of their lives to idols rather than acknowledging the authority of God and living by his laws. The prophets are constantly rebuking them for doing this, and telling them that this is the reason why things are going badly for them, but this seems to be a temptation they find it almost impossible to resist.

### READ EXODUS 32:1-29

- As you read this story, be aware of your reactions to it.
- What do you think and feel?
- Who do you feel most sympathetic towards – Moses? Aaron? The people? God?

### **Matthew 4. 8-10**

*Again, the devil took Jesus to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendour; and he said to him, 'All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.' Jesus said to him, 'Away with you, Satan! for it is written, "Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him." ' (Deut 6.13)*

- **If Jesus had given way to this temptation, how do you think it would have changed his ministry?**
- **Why might he have been tempted by this offer?**
- **“Power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely” (Lord Acton, in a letter to Bishop Creighton, 1887 – usually misquoted as “all power corrupts...”) Do you think this is true?**
- **Who or what do you have power over in your life?**
- **How do you feel about having power?**
- **In real practical terms in your life, what does it mean to “Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.”**

### **DURING THE WEEK:**

- **Try to continue to find time to be still.**
- **Think about the people and things that have power over you. Be aware of those influences you need to resist.**
- **Pray for those who have legitimate power over you, and those over whom you have power in your turn.**

## SESSION 5: OUT OF THE DESERT

Jesus is in the desert for 40 days and 40 nights, but he is only in the desert for 40 days and 40 nights. He doesn't seek to live there permanently. Most of us aren't called to live in the desert either. We are not called to be like St Antony or the Carthusian monks we learned about in our first session. Our calling is to live among others, in the mess and muddle of families, workplaces and local communities. This is no less holy or challenging a calling, however, than that of the monk.

- **What challenges do we face which a monk might not?**

Jesus' time in the desert prepares him for a very active ministry among the people around him, teaching, healing and preaching. He will come into conflict with people, be besieged by crowds, and ultimately find himself in a head-on collision with the power of the Jewish and Roman authorities which will lead to his death. His retreat into the desert isn't an end in itself, but serves to make him ready for this.

Read the ending of the Gospel accounts of his time in the desert.

- **How are they the same and how do they differ?**
- **What picture do they paint of what Jesus thought his life and ministry were about?**
- **What are his priorities?**

### **Matthew 4.11-12**

*Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.*

*Now when Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee. He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the lake, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, so that what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled:*

*'Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali,  
on the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles— the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death light has dawned.'*



*From that time Jesus began to proclaim, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.'*

### **Mark 1.14**

*...and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him. Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.'*

*As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the lake—for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, 'Follow me and I will make you fish for people.' And immediately they left their nets and followed him. As he went a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets. Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him.*

### **Luke 4.14-21**

*Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone.*

*The Rejection of Jesus at Nazareth When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:*

*'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,  
because he has anointed me  
to bring good news to the poor.*

*He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives  
and recovery of sight to the blind,  
to let the oppressed go free,  
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.'*

*And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, 'Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.'*

Luke's account of the beginning of Jesus' ministry shows Jesus, in the synagogue declaring what might be called his "manifesto". He reads a passage from the prophet Isaiah and declares that he has come to fulfil the mission it describes, a mission which was widely believed to be that of the promised Messiah. He doesn't just say "I'm the Messiah" though. It isn't claiming the title or the status which is his priority, but doing the work, bringing good news to the poor, release to the captives and so on. His time in the desert has warned him of the dangers of meeting his own needs for glory and acclaim instead of serving those he has been sent to. In Mark's Gospel he calls others to share in this mission with him

- **If you could declare your manifesto – what you think your life is “for”, what would you say?**
- **What would you like to be remembered for? What would you like to feel, as you lay on your deathbed that you had achieved?**

### **1 Corinthians 12.4-11**

*Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the discernment of spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. All these are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses.*

St Paul says that we all have a “manifestation of the Spirit for the common good”.

- **What is your gift and how do you use it?**
- **Do you think of yourself as having a “ministry” of some sort, a calling – within the church or outside it?**
- **What do you think the “manifesto” or mission of our church as a community might be? What does St Peter and**

**St Paul, Seal, bring to those around it? What are we here for as a church?**

**TO THINK ABOUT AS YOU GO ON FROM HERE**

- **What will you take away from this course?**
- **What might be different in your life because of it?**
- **What might you need to do next to make sure you keep on growing?**



**The calling of St Peter and St Andrew  
James Tissot 1836-1902**