

Life in the Desert

Last Sunday and today the Church invites us to think about holiness in the desert. Holiness in the desert must be immensely important for the Church to take it as the culmination of Great Lent, the last two Sundays before Holy Week.

The whole world has been experiencing a sort of desert for over a year because of the pandemic. The desert is never a pleasant place. It is filled with physical dangers, and the psychological dangers can be even more severe, because in a desert people are not surrounded by the normal bustle of life. How can the desert be a school for holiness?

One answer to this question can be found in the life of an exceptional Orthodox priest, Father Sergei Ovsiannikov, who was born in Leningrad in 1952 and died aged 65 on a visit to Russia in 2018. He died of pulmonary fibrosis which had plagued his life for many years.

Father Sergei had a degree in physics, a doctorate in theology, and was a biblical scholar. He was a translation consultant for the Bible Society. He was married to Aliona, the sister of Father Alexis Voogd*, a Dutch priest who has visited our parish a couple of times. For 28 years, Father Sergei led the Orthodox multilingual parish of Saint Nicholas in Amsterdam, which grew to a congregation of three hundred. He is mainly remembered for his ability to be attentive to the present moment, to love and to admire. He wrote *Journey to Freedom*, one of the most important books I have ever read.

What did he have to say about turning a desert experience into a road to holiness? He had been raised a Soviet atheist. During his two years of military service, he was arrested twice on charges of criticising the Soviet system to one or two fellow soldiers. He spent months in solitary confinement in an unfurnished cell except for blaring electric light. He could not lie down on the wet concrete floor and the light also made sleep impossible. He tried to occupy himself by reciting all the physics he had learned but eventually ran out of thinking material. So he began

to think about freedom. This is when he heard in his heart, *God is freedom.*

This puzzled him because he did not believe in God and knew nothing about God. He was confused about that thought but then he experienced a great joy and lost the fear he had felt. Much later when he thought about that joy he realised it was the joy of Easter night. Meanwhile, while he was still in the army he decided he must find out something about God. When he left the army, in the early 1970s, the very few functioning churches were under the Soviet authorities' strict supervision. In libraries and bookshops there was not one book about religion. Somehow he found his way into one of the Patriarchate's theological schools. Then he emigrated to London in the 1980s, married and became a deacon at Ennismore Gardens. Metropolitan Anthony spent much time preparing him for the priesthood, emphasising the centrality of freedom. The goal of life is to find freedom with the help of Christ. Inner freedom is what transforms any desert experience. When he was made priest in 1990 and sent to Amsterdam, freedom became the main theme of his sermons. Together with freedom, making peace between people is what restores God's image in us. And also broadening our heart, so we see beauty in people and around us. Freedom, peace and seeing beauty depends on us. It cannot be achieved without a lengthy effort. That effort is what transforms any desert.

*Voogd is pronounced voakht