

“And the Spirit immediately drove Jesus out into the wilderness.”

During these days of lockdown I have been doing quite a bit of thinking about *wilderness* and its different forms. For many, these days of isolation have felt as though we have been cut-off from civilisation – from the noise, clamour, and busy-ness of our former lives – cast into a reality we’d rather not face. For some, these days have felt dry and arid, rocky and unrelenting – much like a Middle Eastern wilderness – with nothing new or extraordinary to stimulate, refresh, or invigorate; just monotonous. For others, these days have been scary, not fully knowing the dangers ahead, not certain what the future holds, not knowing if the predator Covid will strike like a ravenous wolf or some other beast of the wilderness. The wilderness is not an easy place – and these past months have not been easy either.

In today’s Gospel we learn that Jesus is driven out into the wilderness, by the Spirit. Like us, I suspect his sojourn in the wilderness was not entirely his choice. Circumstances led to this course of action. As we heard, Jesus had just been affirmed at his Baptism as the Son of God; he had heard God’s voice loud and clear; maybe for the first time (we don’t know) and he needed time and space to work it out. Of course he could have returned home to think about events, to listen for God, and to plan his future ministry but he didn’t. And I can fully appreciate why. Finding time to be alone when you have a family with young children has been impossible these last few months. There is constant noise, constant interruptions, constant busy-ness. Jesus’ family home would have had all the same distractions for him to contend with. The wilderness brought solitude, thinking time, listening time.

But the wilderness also brought temptation. In St Mark’s account we are only told that Jesus was tempted during this time by Satan. It is in Matthew and Luke’s gospels that we are provided with details of self-satisfaction, ego, and power – vices we are all prone to. But Mark makes no specific mention. Perhaps he doesn’t know what they were? Perhaps he assumes all humanity experiences the same temptations and therefore we intuitively know how Jesus was tempted? Or perhaps he has deliberately not listed them so that whatever temptations we face can be encompassed in the temptations Christ faced and overcame? And if that is the case, we are given strength to overcome our temptations knowing that it is possible since Christ has paved the way.

So the wilderness is a place of solitude but also of temptation. I wonder if we can relate to this in our pandemic wilderness? The opportunity to be silent and prayerful and yet the temptation to turn on the tele and make noise? The opportunity to tidy, decorate, clean and the temptation to stay in bed, have a nap, procrastinate? The opportunity to spend quality time with dependent family and the temptation to hide behind technology and disengage? Does any of this sound familiar?

Normally, at the beginning of Lent, I would be encouraging you to follow in the example of Jesus and explore the wilderness but I suspect we have all had enough of wilderness living. I would usually have been encouraging you in your Lenten fasts and disciplines since through them our minds turn away from selfish thoughts and desires and are able to explore divine truths and mysteries. We would normally submit ourselves to temptation in the hope that, with grace and endurance, we may overcome. But this year I’m not. This year I would like you to be kind to yourselves. This year I would like you to recall that while Christ was in the wilderness “the angels waited on him.” Despite Jesus seeking solitude God’s messengers were on hand to comfort and assist. I would like you to remember that you are not alone but rather that God, through his holy angels is with you – always. The angels waited on Jesus to give him life – that life is ours too if we choose to accept it.

Often in Lent we become consumed with guilt: we broke our fasts! We’re not doing anything this year! We couldn’t resist! – all things I hear each year. But this year let guilt be gone and instead of berating oneself, open your ears to hear afresh “the Kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.” For the Kingdom of God is near, and will far outshine any wilderness living we are currently enduring.