

Wilderness experience

Sermon by the Rev Derek Lightbourne, St James Lower Hutt, Lent 1 2018

Keynote Bible passage: Mark 1.9 -15

The season of Lent is now upon us. Perhaps you have given thought to how you might observe this time. Traditionally it has been a time one might give up something enjoyed, deriving as it does from the custom of fasting. It is noteworthy Jesus didn't say 'if you fast' but 'when you fast.' This goes back in his ministry to the time he was in the wilderness; some forty days Mark tells us. A time when for him there was scarcity of food, and Luke tells us Jesus was famished.' We are unlikely to get into that extreme, and yet there are considerations for us arising from that experience of Jesus. Mark's gospel devotes just two verses to this time so the selection of the gospel passage sets this in context. Preceding it is the account of Jesus' baptism and following it is of Jesus coming into Galilee and proclaiming the good news has come. Then there's the calling of the fishermen disciples.

The sermon is entitled *wilderness experience* and even though its only two verses there's aspects worth taking into account. This includes differences from the other two accounts, in Matthew and Luke.

Note Mark doesn't record the nature of the temptations Jesus encountered. Uniquely also Mark says 'The Spirit *drove* Jesus into the wilderness. The other two say he was 'led by the Spirit'. And only Mark tells us Jesus encountered wild beasts. In those days it would have been wolves, leopards, and hyenas. Not pleasant company.

What can we glean from Mark's account?

1) There was a *sense of immediacy* in Mark, following on from the peak experience of the baptism and of God voice being heard, 'this is my beloved son, with whom I am well pleased.' My understanding of what we call the temptations in the wilderness is that it was a *time of preparation* of Jesus, for the ministry in which he was soon to engage. God was allowing him to be tested, so as to overcome all that would assail him in his earthly ministry. And it would be for all as later writers reflected: 'We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathise with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect was tempted as we are, yet without sin.' (Heb 4.15). Note also it wasn't the Devil who took Jesus out into the wilderness it was '*the Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness*'. It was in God's purpose that this had to be. The message for us then is that in times we are tested or tempted, we can know Jesus is still there, and he can help us overcome or work through such times.

2) Second with there being no specific temptation mentioned as in the other two accounts. In the Greek Mark uses the present continuous tense, and this would imply that Jesus was *constantly being tempted*, so there wasn't need to be specific. Hence it must surely have helped Jesus to know that angels were there to minister to him. In that aspect Mark is different from Matthew – Matthew records angels came at the end of the temptations. Mark – during this time. Over the 40 days. Luke omits this aspect. For us there's the suggestion that these times of testing can come at any time. Sometimes unaccountably they happen upon us. I remember back to being in burnout in ministry. It was upon me and I knew things weren't going well, but couldn't pinpoint it. Not until someone suggested I needed to take some time out, as in taking study leave. That's why sabbatical times for clergy in ministry are so necessary. And not only clergy – sometimes we just need a break, to re-create, and reflect, and be restored physically, emotionally and not least spiritually. We can encounter 'dry

periods' when the scriptures don't seem so alive. Sometimes that's 'plateauing', one's needing to explore different aspects of the Christian life. I've found it helpful to use the internet where there's numbers of writers who contribute daily or regular readings and focus on scripture. Henri Nouwen has been one such for me. We might this Lent delve into the daily scripture readings provided in Newslink, or join a study group being offered. My counsel is that in such times of dryness to get to regular devotional reading – of scripture or the prayer book devotions services and gradually meaning and spiritual vitality returns.

3rd in the theme wilderness experience I come back to the *connecting of a positive spiritual experience* and then as it were coming down from a mountain top experience. This might be noted as the experience of the people of God in Scripture. Moses for example after being on Mt Sinai, came down and discovered the people of Israel were into worshipping idols. Then Jesus being transfigured and receiving his Father's affirmation comes down from the hill and discovers the disciples unsuccessfully trying to cast out a spirit from a boy. Then in Acts the early Christians experiencing the presence of the Holy Spirit, then experiencing persecution. And then today's account of the baptism and then the wilderness experience. Its perplexing when it occurs personally. Perhaps it's a message we have to live daily life as it happens and not live from spiritual high to spiritual high. What these spiritual experiences do is to encourage our faith in the living Lord Jesus ever present, or the wonder and awe of God.

For me, when taking retreat times or times of be-ing, then back 'into the world' and things go wrong, I need to take extra care in driving the car, and to be extra aware of what's around. Sometimes not feeling like entering every day conversation, when one wants to just think back to the experience. Needing to remember Jesus is with me in the valley as well as on the mountain-top. It's been somewhat like that coming back from the voyage to the Southern Ocean back in early January. So, it was for Jesus after the high point of his being baptised.

4) There's a fourth aspect we might also note from this event and that is of the nature of the wilderness. At first sight it looks despairingly barren. Yet in the desert there's a stark beauty, in the heat of the day and the cold of the night, of the starry skies when away from population centres, of the silence, of the little desert flowers eking out an existence, of the creatures which survive. And spiritually too, as for Jesus. From this has flowed a tradition of spirituality. Certainly, for the first thousand years of Christianity holy people went to live in the deserts, both alone – hermits and in small communities like the Essene community in John the Baptist day – remember that remarkable finding the Dead Sea Scrolls in a cave in the desert. The letter to the Hebrews summarises these people of great faith: 'they wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and in holes in the ground.' (11,38). I remember a few years back being drawn to a devotional book by Carlo Caretto: 'Letters from the Desert'. It's not so common now as I understand it as in North Africa there's less tolerance of Christians in Muslim countries. But suffice to say there's an attraction in a number of ways of the desert or wilderness.

Finally, to make the most of Lent, perhaps we might regard not so much of the 40 days length. Rather it being a time to 'be' with God and God with us. Thus, it will be a further step on our spiritual walk. Thus, those mountain top times, and the wilderness times, places for inner growth. Thus, they are a positive affirmation as we come to celebrate the resurrection of Jesus. It will be as the Eucharist invites: 'Draw near and receive the body and blood of our Saviour Jesus Christ in remember that he died and lives for us. Let us feed on him in our hearts by faith with thanksgiving.'