Lent 1 2021

I had longed to visit Jerusalem, it was the place my parents met, I grew up hearing stories about their time there, my dad brother and I had often spoken about going as a kind of family pilgrimage to remember my mum together, sadly that never happened.

My time came about 10 or11 years ago when I had the opportunity to go on a pilgrimage/study and spend Holy week in Jerusalem, it was with a small group of 15 university chaplaincy colleagues from across the country. What an precious opportunity it was, to be in those places that are in all of these accounts of Jesus life leading to his crucifixion.

 My time also to be the places I had had grown up hearing about and to walk the streets my parents had walked and be reminded that they, in their day had taken the opportunities to live their wild and precious lives.

When reading this Sunday’s gospel my thoughts focused on Jesus being driven by the holy spirit into the wilderness. I was not driven in such a way but I was definitely drawn to it.

As we travelled back from an overnight stay in Nazareth, we stopped on the edges of the Judaean desert for a period of prayer. The enormity and desolation of the space was incredibly moving. It was an all to short visit, I mentioned this to one of my colleagues he agreed, as we had a free afternoon on Maundy Thursday, we asked if it might be possible to go for a longer period. This caused some issues, mainly around our safety and security. Thankfully, a trusted taxi driver was found so off we went with litres of water, high factor sun lotion, head coverings cameras and notebooks.

I found a place to sit and meditate that was in a bit of slight shade, in the 2 hours I was there the sun beat down, I drank 2 litres water and had my head covered and stayed in my semi shaded area…… Although I ended up with sun stroke and can remember how ill I felt, the awe and wonder of that place remains, I would love to revisit.

 The photos inserted at the end of the sermon are of that visit.

Then Jesus departs into the desert, the place of wildness and wonder.

What stories or experiences do you have of Wilderness?

Think about all the biblical stories of wilderness— like Israel passing through the wilderness toward liberation.

In the same way, Jesus is liberated from the world and we are with him.

Preparing for this liberation is a journey and involves struggle.

We miss the point of the journey into the wilderness if we see it as a story of superficial triumph over Satan, good v evil etc

Why?  Because we *need* the Jesus of the desert.

We need to know that he wrestled with real demons and real dangers during those forty days of temptation.  As alluring as it might be to cling to a divine superhero, we need the Jesus who endured a terrain where the Holy Spirit, Satan, the wild beasts, and the angels resided *together.*  Alone, we’ll never survive such a dangerous place.  With a companion who knows the way, though, we will.

Unlike his counterparts, Matthew and Luke, Mark offers us no colourful details about Jesus’s experience in the wilderness.  We don’t learn what Satan’s specific temptations were, or how Jesus responded to them.  All Mark gives us are a few terse sentences: “The Spirit immediately drove Jesus out into the wilderness.  He was in the wilderness for forty days, tempted by Satan.  He was with the wild beasts, and angels waited on him.”

As I reflect on Mark’s version of the story, three details stand out to me:

To begin with Jesus didn't choose the wilderness.

He didn’t decide to go on some spiritual cleansing retreat or to ‘find himself’ plan a desert marathon to improve his physical fitness and test himself. The Holy Spirit drove hm into the desolation of a wild and unsafe place. Maybe it’s strange that I find this detail is comforting, but it rings true to life.

Most of the time, we don’t choose to enter the wilderness. We don’t volunteer for pain, loss, danger, or terror.  But the wilderness happens, anyway.  And maybe just maybe living our wild and precious lives is about experiencing pain danger and temptation.

Whether it comes to us in the guise of a devastating pandemic, a frightening hospital stay, a broken relationship, a bereavement, a hurting child, or a loss of faith, the wilderness appears, unbidden and unwelcome, at our doorsteps.  And sometimes it is God’s own Spirit who drives us there.

Does this mean that God wills bad things to happen to us?

That God wants us to suffer?

No no and thrice no!  that is not the God that I believe in.

Does it mean that God is ready to teach, shape, and redeem us even during the most barren periods of our lives?  Yes.  In the wonderful nature of God, even a dangerous desert can become holy and be a place of grace.

Even our wilderness wanderings can reveal the divine. This is not because God takes pleasure in our pain, but because we live in a chaotic, fragile, and broken world that includes deserts, and because God’s modus operandi is to take the things of shadow and death and draw out of them resurrection.

The next detail I noticed is that our wilderness journeys can last a long time, I might have been on silent retreats and even in a lockdown isolation we can still be in contact with each other but I’ve never spent forty days in solitude and silence, and I don’t think any of us have, much less in a state of physical deprivation and danger.

The sense I get from Mark’s gospel is that Jesus despaired of that grim place filled with wild beasts. That he experienced each day as a battle of mind, spirit, and body.  Maybe the hours stretched into years, and the nights felt endless.  Maybe the landscape itself mocked his weary senses, its unvarying bleakness breaking his heart. I only sat for 2 hours in the wilderness but it felt much longer .We tend to live in impatient, quick-fix cultures, so the aspect of the wilderness is daunting, because we tire and despair so quickly.

Why, we ask, is this pain not ending?  When will restrictions end?

Why are our prayers going unanswered?  Where is God?

Maybe, we need to ask a harder question: why did Jesus need the wilderness?

Why do we?

Mark begins with an account of Jesus’s baptism.  When Jesus rose from the waters of the Jordan River, the heavens tore open, and God announced Jesus’s identity loud and clear: "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.

But what happened to that certain sense of identity and belonging as Jesus’s wilderness wanderings stretched into week two, week three, week four?

 Did it waver?  Did the Son of God have to keep reminding himself of who he was?

Did he have hours, or days, or weeks when he forgot?

At his baptism, Jesus heard the absolute truth about who he was.  That was the easy part.  The much harder part came in the desert, when he had to face down every vicious, mocking assault on that truth.  As the memory of God’s voice faded, and the isolation of the wilderness played tricks on Jesus’s heart and mind, he had to learn that his belovedness would still hold. That God’s deep and unconditional delight would never depend on external circumstances.

If those forty days in the wilderness was a time of self-creation, a time for Jesus to decide who he was and how he would live out his calling, then here is what the Son of God chose: deprivation over power.  Vulnerability over rescue.  Obscurity over honour.  At every instance in which he could have reached for the certain, the extraordinary, and the miraculous, he reached instead for the precarious, the quiet, and the mundane.

Of course, there is nothing easy about affirming Jesus' choices.  Indeed, I find them challenging to say the least.  How often I, like many of us would prefer the miraculous intervention, the dramatic rescue, the long-awaited vindication.

How often we find ourselves echoing the demands of the tempter: Feed me!  Deliver me!  Prove yourself to me!  How often I find the restraint of God offensive.

Sometimes we, like Jesus, need long stints in the wilderness to learn what it really means to be God’s children.  Because the unnerving truth is this: we can be loved and uncomfortable at the same time.

We can be loved and vulnerable at the same time.  In the wilderness, the love that survives is flinty, not soft.  Salvific, not sentimental. Learning to trust it takes time.

And finally, I observe there were angels in the wilderness.  Even in the land of barrenness and starvation, even in the place where the wild beasts roamed, God’s agents of love and care lingered.  This, too, is a startling and comforting truth, that we can recognize if we open our eyes and take a good look around. Even in the grimmest places, God abides, and somehow, without reason or explanation, help comes.  Rest comes.  Solace comes.  Granted, our angels don't always appear in the forms we prefer, but they come.

I wonder what Jesus’s angels looked like, what form dd they take?

What do your angels look like?

Do you recognize them when they show up?

Do you allow them to help you do you let your guard down and let them in?

When they care for you, hold you, steady you, do you hear a new version of God’s voice, calling you “beloved?”

 If yes, then you can understand what it can be like to enter into someone else’s wilderness, and become the angel for their journey?

I know how many of you are those angels within your families, amongst your friends and within our benefice. Quietly praying, going around supporting and caring in so many practical ways also, which I thank you for.

As we begin our journey into Lent, may we experience the companionship of the Christ whose vulnerability became his strength.  May we enter with courage the deserts we can’t choose or avoid and abide in them with hope.

May our long stints amidst the wild beasts teach us who we really are — the precious and beautiful children of God with a wild, life to live.  And when the angels in all their secret guises whisper “beloved” into our ears, may we listen, and believe them.

We will often find ourselves surrounded by darkness. We may find ourselves amid despair. We might somehow turn up on a road that we never intended to travel. In fact, sometimes we may find ourselves in a place that feels like hell.

But these are never the final word. Even when tales of a place called Golgotha begin to swirl around us, there is always something more. When we come to the end, God will be there to beckon us into the arms of grace that we might begin again. God has promised recreation.

