

Year C Lent 1

What makes wildernesses so attractive? Our best holiday was going to three wildernesses – first to Chile’s Atacama Desert, the driest place in the world, and down to Patagonia and finally to the Falkland Islands for a wedding.

They were all very different kinds of wildernesses. While each was breath-taking, all three are very testing places to live.

As indeed is the wilderness where Jesus was led by the Holy Spirit. The terrain between Jerusalem and the Dead Sea is as inhospitable as anywhere I have seen.

In today’s Gospel reading the Holy Spirit took Jesus there immediately after the spiritual high of his baptism where he was declared to be God’s beloved son. Isn’t that how it so often happens – success immediately followed by a really hard time? Take Elijah, one day he triumphs over all of Baal’s prophets and the next he is fleeing for his life and wants to die.

As the Ash Wednesday service reminds us, we come from dust and to dust we shall return. Yes, we are beloved by God and yes, one day will die. They are both true statements and they are not mutually exclusive.

Our television screens this week have been filled with images of buildings and people being reduced to dust and ashes, of people being tested to their very limits, just as Jesus was tested in the desert and again in Gethsemane

When the Spirit led Jesus into the desert, Jesus was tested as to the sort of Son of God he was going to be. Was he going to be a superficial showman out to satisfy his own ego who could turn stones into bread for his own benefit, who could safely jump off the top of the Temple without coming to any harm, a man who would compromise for the sake of power and status? Or a man who would be faithful to his calling to reveal God in all his glory, who would show us the way to live full and abundant lives, how to be the people God made us to be.

In those 40 days, which I suggest should be taken symbolically as representing a very long time, rather like the Israelites wandering 40 years in the wilderness, Jesus had to learn how to discern God’s presence in difficult times and places, that God’s spirit was within him, to accept the paradox of being beloved yet famished, valued yet vulnerable all at the same time.

The devil gave him three opportunities to ignore the key truth that Jesus had learned – that God is with us even in the barren places. It’s quite easy to trust God when things are going well, much harder when we are really facing tough times. And the last two years have been really tough.

Just as we emerge from the COVID pandemic, with all the immense stresses and strains it imposed on us all whether or not we actually caught the virus, we are now faced with the sight of war that, bad as it is for all those involved, could get many, many times worse for the whole world.

So we may be in the wilderness for a while longer yet. Wilderness times can last a long time, years if not decades. We live in a broken world, but the good thing is that God knows that we live in a broken world and works with our brokenness to heal us.

Many of you will be aware of the Japanese art of kintsugi, which uses powdered gold, silver or platinum mixed with lacquer to repair broken pottery. Kintsugi is a powerful metaphor for our faith. It shows the power of creation, death and resurrection in Christ

The aim is not to make an invisible repair. Far from it, the fracture is highlighted but with the aim of making the object more beautiful than it was before. And that's how God likes to work with us – Christ is both the gold in our brokenness, and also the artist who binds us back together. God makes our brokenness a point of strength, not something to be hidden away or be embarrassed about. He makes us more beautiful than we were before.

Underneath the idea that Jesus should turn stones into bread is the suggestion that unmet desire is an aberration. Yet many of us deliberately give up something for Lent, whether it's food, drink, television or whatever. It's deliberate self-deprivation, a decision to sit with our hungers and desires and see what they have to teach us.

One thing we can learn is that we can sit with hunger and desire and still be loved. God still nourishes us, even if it's not with the nourishment we would necessarily choose for ourselves.

Satan's appeal to Jesus' ego by offering him power and authority speaks to our own need to be liked, to be noticed, to be powerful, a trap that many Christians have fallen into over the years. Yet the question is do we trust God enough to be content to live lives that are unsuccessful in worldly terms and that take place in obscurity?

And then the challenge to our willingness to be vulnerable, the idea that if we are beloved of God then God will keep us safe, safe from harm and hurt. Yet God has never promised to do that, what he has promised is to be with us in our vulnerability, not to protect us from life's slings and arrows by putting an impenetrable shield around us.

Each of the three temptations put in front of Jesus – and there may have been more that we don't know about were designed to sow doubts in Jesus's mind at a time of maximum weakness about his identity and his purpose.

In the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve were asked Can you be like God? Do you want to know what God knows? And they answered Yes because the serpent had played on their insecurities that maybe God hadn't told them everything.

On the face of it the temptation didn't seem that dangerous to Eve, because that's just how Satan works, very insidiously. As C.S. Lewis put it brilliantly in *The Screwtape Letters*, when Screwtape advises his nephew Wormwood about the best way to secure the damnation of a young man.

Doubtless, says Screwtape, like all young tempters, you are anxious to be able to report spectacular wickedness. But do remember, the only thing that matters is the extent to which you separate the man from the Enemy.

It does not matter how small the sins are provided that their cumulative effect is to edge the man away from the Light and out into the Nothing. Indeed, the safest road to Hell is the gradual one—the gentle slope, soft underfoot, without sudden turnings, without milestones, without signposts.

Do you know what one of Satan's most successful strategies is? It's to cast doubt in our minds that God is present. And there are all sorts of ways of doing that. I'm not good enough, God's got more important things to think about. I can't hear God, so he can't be there. All very effective lies.

In contrast to Adam and Eve, Jesus was asked, can you give up power, can you accept hunger, can you bear to be mortal? It was as if the questions were the other way round. And Jesus chose emptiness over fullness, obscurity over honour, vulnerability over rescue, because he knew he was a beloved child of God.

It's worth noting that each of the three temptations is conditional – the devil twice says if you are the Son of God and the third time if you worship me.

In response twice Jesus says it is written, and the third time he replies it says, each time standing on Scripture, quoting Deuteronomy. There are no ifs, buts or maybes about Jesus and we can stand on that truth amidst all our own doubts and uncertainties

It was precisely because he had that security that he could choose to stay in the desert until the work was done, even if he hadn't chosen to go there in the first place. We don't choose to go into the wilderness either, but the wilderness comes to us in so many different ways, the loss of a loved one, the loss of a job, anxiety, someone close to you going off the rails. Each of us will have our had our own times of wilderness and know what it looks like.

But that doesn't mean that God wills bad things to happen to us or wants to suffer, but it does mean that the God who redeems everything can make our desert places holy even when they are dangerous.

Lent may be a time when we need to admit that meeting our desires and feeding our ego are actually quite appealing, and then decide who we are and whose we are.

Lent is not a time for apologising for being human, rather it's a time to acknowledge we can be human and hungry, human and vulnerable, human and beloved – in other words be human in all its fullness.

One final point – when Jesus came out of the desert, sent there in the first place by the Holy Spirit, he came out strengthened by the Spirit. And so too can we emerge from our desert experiences better equipped to face the world, if we are prepared to let the Holy Spirit do his work.