

## Into the Wilderness

Today, on this first Sunday of Lent, we travel with Jesus into the wilderness. It's not always an easy place to be. It can test us physically and psychologically. It can be exhausting and uncomfortable, dangerous and frightening. And for these reasons, as my family will tell you, I have not always been the most enthusiastic of campers. However, even I have to concede that some of the most profound and transforming experiences of my life have occurred in places far off the beaten track, under broad skies, worlds away from the complicated life-support systems that I have carefully assembled for myself. Despite—or perhaps even because of—the sore muscles and blistered feet, I have had the experience, in these wild places, of feeling more alive and more connected to the earth and my true purpose; of being closer to God. And so sometimes, when I'm running late for the train, or trying to stem a never-ending tide of emails, or asking a child for the umpteenth time to set the dinner table, I crave the simple, raw experience of being alone on a walking track or of sleeping under the stars.

And I want to know: why is this? When life becomes too busy or overwhelming, what is it that draws us out of our comfort zones and into the wilderness?

The first couple of sentences of our gospel this morning I think give us some clues.

First, we read that Jesus is led into the wilderness by the Spirit. This is part of God's plan. There is something there that God wants Jesus to see and experience, but there is also something for him to resolve. This passage appears immediately after the account of his baptism, which marks the beginning of his public ministry, and of his long journey to the cross and beyond. And so, we are told, Jesus is led into the wilderness to be *tempted*. He has to make some difficult and important choices about his priorities, about his relationship with the Father, about who he is going to be, and how he is going to follow his calling. These are choices we also need to make in response to our own baptisms, our own callings.

The next sentence gives us another important clue. And it also contains what someone described to me recently as one of the most wonderful pieces of understatement in all of the Bible. Jesus fasts for an extraordinary forty days and forty nights and after that, Matthew tells us, he was very hungry. Well I live with two adolescent boys, and sometimes they don't seem to be able to go forty *minutes* without complaining that they're very hungry. Matthew wants us to understand that this is no walk in the park for Jesus. He is exhausted and starving, and has been tested to the limits of his endurance, both physically and spiritually. His time in the wilderness has shown him what it means to be human, to be needy, to be really, really hungry.

And this is what can happen to us too in the wilderness: we become more aware of our own bodies and their needs: for food and water, for warmth and shelter, for companionship. Out in the wild, exposed to the elements, we experience ourselves as small creatures in a very big creation. It is hard to avoid the fact of our own human vulnerability. Our own mortality. Our limits and finitude. Our dependence on God for the very breath in our lungs. In the

wilderness, we can no longer deceive ourselves. Hungry and tired and footsore, but also awestruck and inspired, we find we are not little gods after all—not the independent, self-sufficient beings we thought ourselves to be—but creatures, placed in a wild and beautiful creation by a wild and loving and utterly trustworthy God. In the wilderness—the metaphorical wilderness we find ourselves in during times of crisis, as well as the literal, physical wilderness—often we feel closer to our creator; our prayers become deeper and richer and more heartfelt. We are reminded of the need for humility and compassion and care. We see how everything is connected. We see also that our creatureliness and dependence on God are not things to be regretted and fought against but gifts to be accepted gratefully, and to be embraced as the conditions for our true fulfilment as humans.

Regrettably, though, while we might occasionally glimpse this truth on the hiking trail or at a camp fire or even in a hospital emergency room, most of the time we are apt to forget it. Instead we put our trust in ourselves: in careers and possessions and reputations; even in good causes. We embrace countless distractions to keep us from candid self-examination or quiet contemplation of our need for God. As Rowan Williams has observed, ‘Being a creature is in danger of becoming a lost art.’

I ran into someone this week who used to teach Sunday school to our children many years ago. She told me a story about our daughter Mary that I hadn’t heard before. The children had been discussing the parable in which the rich man asks all the bigwigs in his community to a wedding feast, only to receive excuse after excuse. The children were asked why they thought these people didn’t come to the feast. Mary, who would only have been a preschooler at the time, replied simply, ‘Maybe they weren’t hungry.’ Which struck my friend as both very funny and particularly profound. Too often, we don’t *want* to feel hungry, so we fill ourselves and our lives with all sorts of things that temporarily stave off the hunger but that fail to truly nourish us.

Someone said to me recently that what he likes about Lent is that it doesn’t rush us to the happy ending; it doesn’t take easy shortcuts, or try to avoid the pain and difficulty that often go hand in hand with the joy of being human. It takes us right into and through the wilderness; it makes us face our humanity and takes it seriously, with all its heartache and brokenness and beauty; it shows us our hunger, our dependence on God, and in so doing, it reveals that the way through to new life is via the path of humility and trust.

The temptation that Jesus faces in the wilderness—and that he rejects—is to take a shortcut, to deny or avoid his humanity and mortality, and to jump straight to an easy but fatally compromised ‘happy ending’. He is tempted to choose power and self-sufficiency over trust in God. To choose the ‘quick fix’ rather than embark on a more difficult and costly path. Just as the Israelites did over and over again during their own forty years in the wilderness. Just as Adam and Eve did in our first reading this morning. Just as we do today. But unlike them and us, Jesus recognises that everything he needs, and everything worth having, comes from the hand of God. In the face of an uncertain future, he chooses instead to trust.

So as we embark again on this Lenten journey, travelling with Jesus deep into the wilderness, may we experience our own hunger and profound need of God. And may we listen attentively to the quiet voice of the Spirit in our lives, so that we might learn to trust the God who created us and who longs to give us all that we need. Amen.