

A MEDITATION FOR LENT

I - THE WILDERNESS

LUKE 4: 1-13

Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, 2where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished. 3The devil said to him, 'If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.' 4Jesus answered him, 'It is written, "One does not live by bread alone." '

5 Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. 6And the devil said to him, 'To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. 7If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours.' 8Jesus answered him, 'It is written,

"Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him." '

9 Then the devil took him to Jerusalem, and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, 'If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, 10for it is written,

"He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you",

and "On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone." '

12Jesus answered him, 'It is said, "Do not put the Lord your God to the test." ' 13When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time. (NRSV)

And so we begin the season of Lent with Jesus

as we recall these forty days and forty nights

He spent in the wilderness being tempted by the devil.

No doubt over the years we have conjured up images of what the temptations may look like;

the small black creature with a tail, cloven hoofs, trident in hand, sometimes wings,

reminiscent of the fallen angel he is sometimes thought to be.

But what of the landscape; the wilderness in which this prolonged encounter takes place?

What is the wilderness and why is the wilderness the place of Jesus's temptation?

Last February, for the second time,

I found myself gazing at the landscape that is the Judean Wilderness.

It is a landscape like no other I have encountered,

with strange, repetitive hills of dry earth and rock.

Apparently the Bedouins, or local shepherds,

know some of the mysterious pathways that meander around the hills –

But otherwise, it is an image of lostness, loneliness and confusion, indecision.

Margaret Whipp describes it as,

... a landscape so utterly devoid of form and familiarity that its very barrenness matches, by way of contrast, the overwhelming glory of a transcendent God.
(Margaret Whipp, 2017, *The Grace of Waiting*, Canterbury Press – and below)

In some places there are suggestions of green shoots, but by the beginning of Summer the whole terrain will be parched and barren under a harsh desert sun, so it is a place that speaks too, of thirst and hunger; living water and bread of heaven perhaps only in a mirage quivering above the hot dusty earth. This outer landscape seems to me to speak of the of struggle, the labouring, the unbearable effort of unknowing and the enticement of oases, the longing for relief: the temptations that might have been the inner landscape Jesus knew and experienced during the forty days he spent here wrestling with the devil.

Margaret Whipp, again, says,

Our wilderness times can be seasons of profound and unwelcome dis-orientation ... where we meet our fears face to face – fears of powerlessness, of insignificance, or loneliness, of sheer and utter dependence on God.

The Landscape from which Jesus had come could not have been more different. the rolling hills of Galilee, green and pleasant, fertile and abundant, gentle and peaceful leading down to the shore of the Sea. Although the Sea of Galilee can whip up unexpected storms, it is often still as glass and all that can be heard is the quiet rustle of the breeze in the trees and the birdsong.

Yet there is something that makes him leave this landscape, the place he has called home and grown in; the familiar villages and towns, the fishing communities, small synagogues, friends and neighbours who know Jesus of Nazareth; Son of the carpenter, Joseph and his wife Mary, the boy, the man who knows the word of God so well, who lives and breathes, seems to inhabit the very words of Scripture. What is it about him, I wonder?

Jesus is called from his home down to the Banks of the Jordan where there is a community centred around John the Baptist.

Through the wilderness he travels down to the waterside
and down again - into the water;
the dark, breathless deep and dreaming of death;
death in the waters of life – and he is washed clean.
And as he comes up out of the water, the Holy Spirit of God descends on him like a dove.
The voice of God speaks to him as he draws his first breath.
If there had been any doubt, any question, Jesus now knows who he is,
You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.

And so, filled with the Holy Spirit, Jesus is led into the wilderness.
Something has happened. Something has changed.
Jesus has heard his call and recognised the enormity of it
and he finds himself led to and wandering in the wilderness.
And of course, wandering in the wilderness, he finds himself;
not a lost self, but a self that must be stripped bare in order to receive,
a self he must surrender to allow it to be reshaped and remade by God.
Again, I turn to Margaret Whipp,

Wherever we find ourselves stripped down to the bare essentials, we have entered into the wilderness, a place where we can hear the whispers of God's voice in all their subtlety. Silent, solitary, seeking, surrendered, acutely receptive to the inviting word of grace, we come to a desert of holy waiting on God.

But there are other whispers, another voice in the wilderness.
Jesus is confronted with the temptations that face us all as human beings
as they are breathed into his ear on the deathly breath of Satan;
the temptation to amass worldly riches and goods,
the temptation to gain power and authority, status and recognition on our own count,
the temptation to rely on our own judgement and not to rely on God,
The temptation to not let God be God;
to try to control God and to justify our actions
by the outcome *we* want, the agenda *we* set.
We have a human tendency to try to determine, to shape our own outcome without God;
to decide for ourselves what kind of people we ought to be.

Genesis tells us that we are made in the image of God –
but so often we try to make God in the image we would like him to be;
to make him in the likeness of us, rather than accept that we are made in his likeness.

To some extent, it's about having confidence in God to shape us;
confidence and trust to surrender and to let God shape us.
And so we find ourselves in this strange place of indecision and lostness, searching for a path.
Which one do we take?
Some lead deeper into the wilderness.
Some lead us to oases of physical pleasure;
places that are easy to be in, comfortable and *comforting*,
they feed our body, they quench an immediate thirst,
but they don't feed our soul. They don't provide that other water -
the water that wells up like a spring inside us, giving us eternal life.
Some paths lead nowhere – they are a dead end.
Others lead round in circles and we find ourselves going round and round.
And always on the path, standing in the way is the devil, offering temptation - another way
leading us on into these places of worldly riches and power and spiritual desert.
'Try this path.' he says, 'and I will reward you.'

That Jesus finds himself here in this wilderness shows us his complete humanity.
Even God – even God made man – is tempted.
He could quietly go back to the peacefulness and gentleness of Galilee.
He could make furniture with his father.
He could fish for a living.
Or he could pursue his calling to be a Rabbi, towing the party line.
He could join the other leaders teaching the Law, lining their pockets,
misrepresenting his Father – keeping the poor, the diseased and disabled,
the sinners, the tax collectors, the prostitutes and adulterers – keeping them at bay;
keeping the less than pure away from the Temple; away from his Father's forgiving love.

But his calling is not to that kind of life.
His life is one of challenge, bringing the mighty down from their seats
and exulting the humble and meek,
filling the hungry with good things and sending the rich away – because they *are* empty
and so they will remain – until the camel passes through the eye of the needle.

His calling is to walk among the unclean and cleanse them.
His calling is to love the sinners away from their sin.
His calling is to heal the sick, to rehabilitate the sinner,
to draw all the lame, the blind, the deaf, the frail and failed

to draw them from the highways and byways and take down the veil of the Temple for them – and show them their God and his.

Walking in the wilderness – Jesus is vulnerable – exposed.

His choice, simple, between one way or another,

becomes a meandering, complex path, forking, branching, separating, deep in the desert.

and for forty days and nights he toils and sweats and wrestles and struggles

until he is sure who he is;

until he is sure who – he – is.

Until he has cut through the veil of worldly delight;

cut through the promise of power and glory in this alien and finite kingdom.

It's easy to be walking in the wilderness and not to realise that's what it is.

The oases, the attractive pathways, the temptations and the lures

can be such a distraction that we don't recognise our lostness.

Facing that lostness can be frightening.

It means allowing ourselves to be vulnerable.

We are often at our most vulnerable in times of trial,

when other things are pared away,

those things that protect us: that veil the truth from us –

that stop us seeing who we really are

when they are taken away and we are left exposed, open and raw

and faced with the truth of who we might be and what we are called to be

or with the truth of what someone else determines we should be.

Who are you? Who are you called to be?

Jesus doesn't allow the devil to determine who *he* is.

Jesus *knows* who he is –

If you are the son of God, says the devil

I am the Son of God and this is who I am, that I do this and this.

There are many things that can call us; send us out into the wilderness.

A decision we have to make, perhaps, like Jesus.

It could be a loss – loss of a loved one, loss of a job,

loss of a relationship, loss of a purpose, a future, a diagnosis we weren't expecting

all these things can take us out into that dry and barren place.

We can't come out of the wilderness without going through it,

without being affected by it, taken apart by it, even broken down by it.

but in that brokenness, in that vulnerability, that rawness,
we hear the voice that calls; the voice that says,

I am the voice of one who cries in the wilderness.

Make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

Every valley shall be exalted,

and every mountain and hill shall be made low:

and the crooked shall be made straight,

and the rough places plain:

Then the pathway is clear for us.

The destination is in sight.

Jesus returns to Galilee, filled with the Holy Spirit
and begins the slow journey towards his final destination,
Jerusalem, the Cross and the Father.