

Thereupon the Spirit sent him away into the wilderness where he remained for forty days tempted by Satan. He was among the wild beasts; and angels waited on him.

Mark 1:12-13

That's all you get from Mark about Jesus' temptations. It's pretty brief. Why didn't Mark tell us more? Because Mark's always in a bit of a rush; he hurries over details. Recently Anneke commented on Mark's style, how he was always saying, 'immediately...immediately...immediately.' If we want a fuller account, we'll have to go to Matthew or Luke. Let's do Luke.

Luke says Jesus was led by the Spirit 'up and down the wilderness.' North-east of Jerusalem is to be found the Judean desert wilderness. It's utterly treeless, like a moonscape, littered with rocks and boulders, sandy, harsh, unforgiving, the geologically-rounded hills giving no hint of the precipitous ravines that cut into the landscape. It's a frightening, empty place, empty save for jackals, wild boar and wolves.

Luke tells us there are three temptations for Jesus. The first one he introduces with 'All that time he had nothing to eat and at the end of it he was famished.' The next Luke begins with 'The devil led him up and showed him in a flash all the kingdoms of the world'. The third temptation in Luke's telling opens with 'The devil took him to Jerusalem and set him on the parapet of the temple'. There's some details for us and we all of us know the story so very well.

Jesus' presence in the desert and his temptations hold a message for us. Through suffering and conflict the Son of Man becomes our human brother taking on the burdens which oppress us and doing more to shape our identity than anything else. He shows us how to recognise crises in our lives and where to seek help.

We're constantly on the point of becoming unfaithful to God, of making ourselves the reference point in our decision-making, of wanting to be free of God. The mystery of the world is that it hangs between God and Satan, between good and evil. This is the time of temptation. And we fear solitude, the desert experience. We have a vast fear of being alone with our guilt and we're called upon to pass judgement upon ourselves.

We all have our personal wildernesses with our personal temptations that parallel those that Jesus endured. Our generation and the following generations have been tempted by our possessions, the new car, the new house. We are tempted by our dishonesty to pretend all is well with us. We're tempted by the belief that the world will be a shining City of God. Because Jesus is our brother, though, we are not alone in our temptations. He alerts us to our temptations.

But what I want to focus on is where all this tempting took place, the wilderness itself. All of us have been there. Maybe it looked like a hospital waiting room or in a kitchen waiting for the phone to ring. Wildernesses come in all shapes and sizes. In our wildernesses there's no protection, only a Bible-quoting devil and a whole bunch of sand and rocks. Remember the Children of Israel in the desert? Their manna in the mornings, their worshipping of other gods, their trying to force God's hand for water? Just like us, they wanted to show off, to take the easy way out, to put their own needs before anyone else. The Devil knew the Scriptures. For each of the Israelites' temptations there was a Bible-verse. One: 'Man cannot live on bread alone but lives by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord' (Deut.8:3); two: 'You shall fear the Lord your God, serve him alone and take your oaths in his name' (Deut.6:3); three: 'You must not challenge the Lord your God as you

challenged him at Massa' (Deut.6:16). The Israelites tried to force God's hand and now the Devil in tempting Jesus is trying to do the same thing.

You see, the Devil has Jesus quarantined in the desert. Do you get it? Quarantined means (it's in the derivation of the word) detained for forty days. The people of Jesus' day would have found being in the desert pretty unnerving: over one-half of Israel is desert.

Being in the desert-wilderness is not a situation we would ever seek. We spend time and even money trying to stay out of it. We think we can fortify ourselves against the desert experience but we can never avoid it altogether. Sooner or later we get to do our wilderness exam, as one writer describes it, get to take our own trip to the desert. It may take the form of a financial problem that leaves us wondering if we'll survive. It may be the loss of someone very close to us, a partner, a parent, a child and our lives are suddenly darkened and we think we will never cope with their absence. Or it may be that awful sense that there is nothing beyond us, no hope, no God, even, and we are totally alone and the hot winds blow across the empty hills. The prospect of the wilderness comes to us as bad news.

What we might call popular religion focuses so hard on spiritual success that we don't know the first thing about the spiritual fruits of failure or loss. When we look in our lives to see what has changed us for the better, a lot of those times would be wilderness times when our safety net has torn and our resources apparently gone, such sudden exposure can be frightening but also revealing. So is it then all bad news, this wilderness experience?

Bad news? No. It's good news. Because the wilderness is one of the most reality-based, spirit-filled, life-changing places you could be in. You think I am being religiously naive, romantically susceptible, evangelically simplistic in saying that? But no. Listen. Consider what that long, famishing stretch in the desert did to Jesus: it freed him, it liberated him from distraction from his true purpose, it focussed him, separated what really mattered in life from the superficial things of this world.

Wisdom about wilderness is almost lost in our culture. Society tell us that life is meant for having fun, that we are to live for the long weekend, that we are to amass stuff, clothe the new generation smart phone, to do restaurants, to follow in magazines the lives of celebs, to yield to every craving or desire that comes into our heads, seize the day for ourselves and don't worry about anyone else.

Today is the first Sunday in Lent: we are forty days out of Easter in Lent. The word itself comes from an old English word meaning the lengthening of the days after Winter, a word that also means 'Spring.'

As believers we've been dealt a bad hand being born and/or brought up in the Southern Hemisphere. We miss out on 'the bleak midwinter' (as the carol has it) at Christmas time, that in the darkness of Winter shines 'the everlasting light'. The richest meanings of Christmas are lost on us. So, too, it is with Easter. Our Autumn takes us into our Winter, whereas our believers north of the equator see Lent very differently. It heralds the coming of Spring, primroses and crocuses coming into bloom, bluebells in woods where soft green leaf-buds begin to adorn tree branches. Spring has come there with the Lenten days.

Lent, however, in our consumerist society has become associated with giving things up, cutting back on our chocolate intake or walking instead of taking the car, anything to indicate that we are willing to give up or sacrifice something that we feel is important to us. It's our rather pathetic symbol of Jesus' quarantine. See, we can give up things, too. A couple of my Anglican friends take

the 'giving up for Lent' seriously or at least seriously in the way that they persist in their abstinence for the full forty day period: they even give up things like coffee. Church people give things up because they think this means they're being sacrificial in their preparation for Holy Week and all it stands for.

I wonder, though, whether these acts of self-denial aren't really acting like some religious anaesthetic. Think about giving up things like re-runs of the Antiques Roadshow or a favourite tippie. It's not that these are awful things and we'd be better without them, but it's that they're distractions. They calm us down, they block things out when we're too tired, too sad, too afraid to enter the wilderness of the present moment, even.

Think of the three temptations that faced Jesus in the stone-strewn slopes of his desert-wilderness. Reduced to single words, they are about bread, power and protection. God said to Jesus, 'Take my love to men and women and give them hope' and Satan said, 'Use your power to punish men and women.' God said to Jesus, 'Set up a reign of love', and Satan said, 'Set up a dictatorship of force'. Jesus' choice was between the way of God and the way of God's adversary. God said to Jesus, 'Welcome men and women into the saving arms of my grace' and Satan said, 'Let them all go to hell'.

Jesus was to give us in his ministry glimpses of this God: this was a God who feeds five thousand rather than just one, a God who elevated the powerless rather than grab power for himself, a God who showed his identity through self-giving on the cross and beat death rather than saving himself by flying above death on angels' wings.

The wilderness and our experience of it in our lives makes us vulnerable to negative thoughts about God. We are inclined to hear (though not listen to) the voice of Satan. We hear Satan saying, 'Why doesn't God do something about your problem, your loss, your fear?' Because in the desert there's no shelter, no shade under which you can catch your breath and it's the self that gets in the way when we're in a desert place. Why me? Why is this happening to me?

We have forty whole days in Lent for finding out what life is like without the usual painkillers, the usual distractions. We think the howling wilderness is a sign that things have gone seriously wrong. But if we remember to breathe, remember to pray, that is, then most of us will make it through.

The German theologian Helmut Thielicke tells how he first set his baby son in front of a mirror. The child looked puzzled at the image staring back at him: it was confusing for him. He frowned in bewilderment. Then a look of recognition flitted across his little face. It was himself looking back at him. And Thielicke says it's like that in our reading for today. We look into the mirror of Jesus in the wilderness and find it's ourselves looking back at us.

In our spiritual journey it doesn't take long for us to encounter our personal wilderness. And what do we discover there? How do we respond to what we find? Are we more than a little afraid? Is the wilderness for us a place that is parched and barren? Is it a lonely place? Is it desolate and sad? Do we wander alone in it, bereft of contact, even with God?

Or do we find it a place of new directions and new discoveries? Do we find in it a new experience of God and of ourselves? Is it a place where we gain purpose, where we receive grace? Wilderness experiences can help us refresh our spiritual vision and restore our sense of direction and purpose. That's us looking back from the mirror of Jesus in the desert.

It's Jesus that is God's manna in the wildernesses of our lives, the one who reminds us day by day that we live because God provides not what we want necessarily but exactly what we need. That is the core of our belief about the loving God.

A voluntary trip to the desert this Lenten period would be a great way to practise getting free of all those devils (like dishonesty and selfishness and irritability and thoughtlessness), because the desert is where you lose your appetite for things that cannot ultimately save you and where you learn to trust the Spirit that led you there to lead you out again, ready to worship the Lord your God and serve him all the days of your lives.

Let's return to the text that we began this reflection with. Not the dramatic details of the argument between Jesus and the great Adversary, but the simple phrase from Mark: when it was all over Mark says, 'and angels waited on him'.

One of my favourite negro spirituals has the words 'Ma life's cloudy: send dem angels down'. Whenever we've been in a wilderness, a wilderness of pain or fear or loneliness or unbelief, as we've left the wild beasts behind, 'dem angels' have come down, in the form of close friends or partners or parents or siblings or grandchildren, 'dem angels' from God. So may it be.

Dr Ian Hansen 18 February 2018