

Deuteronomy 26.1-11; Romans 10.8b-13; Luke 4.1-13

This morning we journey with Christ into the wilderness. Many of us will have had wilderness experiences, either physical or spiritual. My gap year in Sudan was a very formative time for me. During the year I contracted hepatitis A and spent some time in hospital in Khartoum. Afterwards I decided to go traveling. Sudan, before it was divided into two was the size of western Europe. I was given the opportunity to travel with a convoy of Band Aid lorries to Darfur in the west, a journey that took six days across scrub and desert. There were no proper roads, only tracks in the sand. I was the only westerner and my Arabic was limited so I was quite isolated. No one had told me but hepatitis can leave you feeling a bit depressed and I was reading Dostoyevsky's Crime and Punishment which is not exactly a barrel of laughs. The desert was harsh and uncompromising. Entirely un sentimental. But in this physical and spiritual wilderness God was able to speak to me. To come close in a way that I had not experienced before. I cannot tell you exactly what he said but it was from that time that my sense of call to ordained ministry comes. And whenever I hear today's Gospel it is to that time that I return.

We are fortunate to live on the edge of a spectacular wilderness, the Peak District. And many people will be exploring its pathways this morning. For some, this is their church, their place of encounter and recalibration. A place where they are able to find themselves again, away from the distractions of the city. Of work, technology and busyness. We all need to journey into the wilderness sometimes to remember who we are and what is really important in life.

Sometimes wilderness is thrust upon us. In the chaos of illness or bereavement. In challenging working environments or in unemployment. We would not seek these wildernesses but they are often formative. They reveal our inner strengths and weaknesses. They strip away some of the masks that we wear. And sometimes they can enable God to get a word in edgeways. They can force us to rely on him in a way that we rarely do when things are going swimmingly. They can allow God to break in and speak to us afresh.

The wilderness has frequently been formative in the story of God's people. We think of Abraham and his conversations with God under the stars. Or of Moses and the burning bush. Or Jacob wrestling with the angel. Most important of all of course is the forty years that the Israelites spent in the wilderness after crossing the Red Sea from Egypt. Here they learned to be God's people. To listen to his voice. To obey his commands. Here they were prepared to live in the promised land. A land flowing with milk and honey. Once they had entered the promised land they would never choose to return to the wilderness but they never forgot that experience. It remained the most formative event in their history and they would return to it frequently. At Shabbat, at Passover and, as in our reading from Deuteronomy, at harvest festival, the Feast of Weeks. Though settled in towns and cities they were to remember that a wandering Aramean was their ancestor. That they had been formed in the wilderness.

Jesus' forty days in the wilderness obviously echo the forty years endured by his ancestors. He embodies the new Israel but unlike his predecessors he learns complete obedience. They had demanded food in the wilderness and God had given them manna from heaven. Jesus was also hungry but avoided the temptation to put his miraculous powers to the test and turn stones into bread. The Israelites had worshipped the golden calf but Jesus worshipped only the Lord God and served only him. While the Israelites tested God many times in the wilderness Jesus learned total obedience.

We too experience temptation. The wilderness is where we discover what we are made of. Where our strength, our integrity lies. We sometimes reduce the idea of temptation to a cream cake or an extra glass of wine but temptations go much deeper than that. Like Jesus we are vulnerable to the temptation of self-sufficiency or consumerism. Turning stones into bread instead of relying on God. We are constantly tempted to put our faith in all sorts of things other than God or to put him to the test. To force his hand or to make some sort of deal with him.

The writer Henri Nouwen identifies three temptations to which we are particularly vulnerable in our age. He calls them the I am temptations. The first is I am what I have. The temptation to accumulate stuff. To

indulge in conspicuous displays of consumption. To seek security in possessions and to express feelings of superiority through what we have. The advertising industry feeds off this temptation and initially, when we respond to it, it can give us a temporary high. A release of endorphins. But the feeling doesn't last. And it's a habit we have to keep feeding. This temptation is bad for our souls and bad for the planet.

Nouwen's second temptation is I am what I do. I am the sum total of my busyness. This is a particularly insidious temptation. When someone asks how things are, it's very tempting to say, busy. To justify our existence by what we do. But we are called to live by grace. We are loved by God not because of what we do but because we are loved by God. We live in a very driven society but we are human rather than human doings.

Nouwen's third temptation is connected to both of the first temptations. I am what other people say or think of me. Obviously we live in community. We have to take other people into consideration. But we should not gain all of our sense of self worth from other people. If we do so we run the risk of losing ourselves. Our sense of who we really are. We are made in the image and likeness of God. We are beloved in his sight. And as his unique and precious children we find our true worth in him.

The commentator Vance Russell added a fourth temptation of our age: I am what I feel. These days we are encouraged to get in touch with our emotions and that's a good thing. But we do need to see them for what they are. To stand outside of them somehow and not always to be ruled by them. Our politics seem to be particularly subject to emotions at the moment and we need to be wary of giving them too much control.

There are many other temptations that we face. And Lent is a time for us to confront some of them. To journey into the wilderness and see ourselves afresh. To remove some of the things that we tend to hide behind and become naked before God. This is not easy and it can feel like a lonely journey but we do it in the company of Jesus Christ. Who has been there before and comes with us into the wilderness. Like him, we should travel with those words from God that Jesus heard at his baptism echoing in our ears. You are my child. You are beloved. You are precious in my sight. Amen.