

Jesus...was led by the Spirit in the wilderness (Luke 4. 1)

The wilderness plays a foundational part in the making of God's people. It was the period in the wilderness after they left Egypt which formed Israel's thinking and legislation and culture and worship. It does not take 40 years to walk from Egypt to Israel. But it took 40 years of depending solely on God in a place which was not theirs for them to discover who they were and to become the people who could then live in the land which was God's gift to them – not theirs, but God's alone.

From that point in Israel's thinking and praying and worshipping the wilderness became a place of discovery, of encounter, of being formed, of being renewed. The prophets take themselves there. John the Baptist exercises his ministry there, and Jesus goes there again and again to ensure that he is close to God and is doing his Father's will. Far from being a place of death and despair it is a place of new life and hope, just as when the rains come and flowers spring up seemingly overnight. There is almost a nostalgia for the wilderness, as that is place where they are closest to the heart of God. In the wilderness Jesus's calling, revealed in baptism, is sealed through testing.

When a priest is ordained these days they hear this description of their ministry:

They are to be messengers, watchmen and stewards of the Lord; they are to teach and to admonish, to feed and provide for his family, to search for his children in **the wilderness of this world's temptations, and to guide them through its confusions, that they may be saved through Christ for ever.** Formed by the word, they are to call their hearers to repentance and to declare in Christ's name the absolution and forgiveness of their sins.

You could hear this as a requirement to search for people and rescue them *from* the wilderness, but it's not. It is a call to guide people *in* the wilderness, so that they are saved through Christ. There is perhaps even a suggestion that salvation is only truly to be found in the wilderness, when we recognise that nothing around us can really sustain and save us except for a complete dependence on God.

One of the ways of looking at Lent is as entering a wilderness, the wilderness, a place where the usual things we depend on are taken away. The wilderness into which Jesus would retreat is not like the vast Sahara desert. It is a place of valleys, of caves, of springs of water when you know where to look for them, of food when you happen to find it; a place where you can survive, but where the normal commitments and demands and distractions are taken away. It is a place of examination, a place where true motive is revealed.

The ordination service talks about "the wilderness of the world's temptations." This has to reflect the temptations Jesus faced. Taken away from people, work, play, money, Jesus discovers the motives which were driving his life and action. The most basic is food, and he knows he has the power to make it instantly to satisfy his hunger. But that would be to make his own needs a more powerful God than his service of God the Provider, whom he trusted to meet those needs in God's own good time. Satisfying our most basic needs can lead us to make those needs greater than God. So giving something up – even fasting

(which Jesus assumed we would do), puts those needs in their place. A supermarket, or a fast food restaurant, may not feel like a wilderness. But it is there where we discover what drives us.

Another basic need is power, recognition, prestige, acclaim. 'You can have all this glory and authority' says the tempter. We might not think we want it, but it's there. I can remember a time when I posted something on Facebook, and lots of people shared it and liked it. I might act humble, but it gave me an amazing sense of self worth. Jesus will one day be revealed as King of kings and Lord of lords. This has to be in his mind, but in the wilderness he recognises that such acclaim can only come through sacrifice rather than self regard. There is no easy way to this position. Collecting Twitter followers, Facebook friends, or increasing numbers of people who send you Christmas cards may not feel like the wilderness, but working out how we want to be seen by others is a testing battleground, where we discover it is not how we are regarded but how we regard God which counts.

Another need: to know that we are loved, unconditionally. Jesus can only do what he is called to do because he knows God will never let him go. And the test was whether he could do something that would make that plain. Just once. Then he would know. But that would be to make his own need greater than his own loving of God. We are called to love unconditionally, not to love once we have proved that someone else loves us. That makes it about us, not them. And this is about God, not us. Valentine's Day may not seem like the wilderness. But here we work out what drives our love of God, and whether we are doing this just so we will be loved in return.

We do not need to take ourselves into the desert to realise that its testing, its challenge, are all around us. To stop doing something you normally do, to stop eating something you normally eat, to reflect carefully on what you say and how you are, to decide to simply give for the sake of giving: all of these things uncover our motives, and are a nudge to ensure that we depend solely on God for everything. It may be that we recognise, powerfully, that something needs to stop, permanently. That's a good definition of repentance. It may be that we discover that underneath it all is God's unconditional love. That's a good definition of salvation. It may be that we recognise that this will take practice and will power. That's not a bad definition of discipleship – especially when we realise that Jesus went through this process too, and is alongside us and behind us and in front of us, willing us on.

So: in the wilderness of Lent, and the world's temptations: have you given anything up? Might you fast? Or are you taking anything on? How about doing both? Is there something you do every day which you don't need to, and could fill with something else? May this wilderness be for you a place of discovery, of revelation, of hope, or new life. For God is our salvation, and we need nothing more than that.