

Forty Days in the Desert...

... Led by the Spirit

A sermon given on the on the First Sunday of Lent, 21st February 2021, by the Curate, the Revd Tim Kelly, in the Attended Communion Service.

Mark 1:9-15

Has there ever been a time in your life that you would describe as your wilderness years? One of the things that I was encouraged to do on my path to becoming ordained was to write down what they described as my 'faith-journey' and attempt to chart 'Where did that journey of faith start?' Where were the real challenges? Where were the real developments? It was an interesting and revealing activity, and sometimes it's only when you take stock and take a look back that you can see God's hand at work or, those times where he was simply holding you in your life, over key moments. Now, for me, there was a period that in that documented faith-journey that I did describe as my 'wilderness years': it came for me when I moved from being an undergraduate at Cambridge to being a PhD student at York.

The wilderness for me was perhaps accentuated by being in stark contrast to the times of plenty that I felt I had in my Christian journey whilst at Cambridge. I was a committed and involved member of our college Christian Union in my college, Trinity Hall, and I was also involved in the Cambridge University-wide Christian Union: I had the really important job of being 'tape secretary', which meant that I recorded all of the events and talks and kept the catalogue and sold them later (so even then you see, 'technology' - we've moved on a little bit, though, since then.) I was also the college sacristan, something a little bit akin to a virger or churchwarden in the college chapel, and I also had a church that I loved at the time, St Andrew's Street Baptist Church in Cambridge - I was very ecumenical - and of course I had a great group of friends from all of those different places, the CU, the chapel, the church.

But when I moved to York, it felt like I had nothing: none of those things; they were all gone; suddenly absent. I tried the Christian union at York, but suddenly I felt a little bit out of place as a grown-up PhD student. I tried church after church, but couldn't seem to find the one that felt like home - churches can sometimes be awkward places when you don't seem to fit any of the well-established or predefined groups that they expect: fresh-faced student; young married couple; family group; or retired couple. Did I still have my faith?

Yes. Did I still pray? Yes. But it did start to feel like the light was growing dim, that this particular coal had been out of the fire a little bit too long.

Looking back, I'm now very grateful for a Christian housemate who kept encouraging me. And I feel that it was God's hand that brought myself and Charlotte together and then brought us both to a church that felt like home and stayed our home for 19 years.

But I can remember what the wilderness felt like: lean times. It had been really easy to follow Jesus when the times were good, when being a Christian was easy with a great bunch of friends and support networks, good teaching, great fellowship. But now, when the spiritual times were hard, when so many of my support structures were absent, the journey of my faith seemed so much harder to walk. It was much easier to be tempted, just as we heard in today's passage, to be led off course. And it might be that you've experienced similar times.

Now, of course, it may be for you that this current time and these last 12 months, with all of its restrictions and lock-downs and the stripping away of the familiar, has felt like a wilderness for you: lean times in your own journey, the wilderness being defined by the absence of things. There's been a whole variety of experiences as to what has been absent. It varies so much from person to person: for those who love structure in their days, it can be the absence of that - too much freedom has been the problem; for those that have been too busy, it's been the exact opposite - the absence of freedom; for some, it may be the absence of people, the absence of human touch; for others with children unexpectedly home-schooling, it can be the absence of silence and calm; for those used to busyness, it can be the absence of duty; for those with extra duties and workload at this time, it can be the absence of respite from that. The contrast, the absence, may be marked for some by the absence of contrast; the absence of variety; all days starting to seem like they're the same. I heard this week of one person who found it really hard to have quiet times of prayer because they were so used to them being in marked times of contrast from the busy times - that's what they were used to, being busy and then being able to withdraw.

So for many people, this has been a time marked by absences and I would say perhaps quite understandably, all of these absences can lead to us being upset with God. Why is this happening? Why is this happening to them? Why is this happening to me? It may feel like God has somehow broken his side of the deal, "Follow me," he said. I thought that meant everything was going to be all right. But of course, that never was the deal that was

struck: Jesus never said, "Follow me and everything will be fine", but he did say, "I will be with you always, even to the end of the age." Many things may feel like they're absent, but one thing will always remain in the wilderness - God with us: many absences, but one remaining presence. Abba Moses, one of the Desert Fathers, once said to his monks, "Go to your cell and your cell will teach you everything." I don't know if you've ever stayed in a monastery - I have - many monk's cells are almost defined by their absence of decoration; their absence of home comforts; they're a pretty stark and spartan experience - perhaps a cross on the wall, a Bible and the basics required to wash and clothe yourself. In your cell, there is not much room to hide: there's you, and there's God. In this stripped-back existence you're reminded of that most fundamental and most important of relationships, namely that between you and your Heavenly Father.

Now, am I saying that God willed me to have a time of wilderness when I arrived in York? No, I don't think so. But did I learn anything? Yes. I learnt that even with the absence of all of the accoutrements of my faith- the meetings, the visiting speakers, the cosy Christian Union meetings,- one thing remained: a golden thread that could be stretched but not broken - that relationship between myself and God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit; a Father that would not let me go.

Am I saying now that God 'wills' for this period of wilderness that we are all experiencing to be upon us now? No, I'm not. But as it does say in Romans 8:28, I do believe that God can turn all things to the good of those who love him. Just as we hear in today's gospel passage, Jesus isn't sent off into this wilderness on his own: he's sent off first with that affirmation resounding in his ears, "This is my son"; and he isn't cast out into the wilderness, he's led by the Spirit, the Spirit is with him.

So too, we may need to hear and acknowledge those two same things, "You are my son; you are my daughter. My Spirit is there to lead you and go with you as you walk through the wilderness." So in this period of Lent this year, let us not define it by its absences, but instead by the presence of the one who will never let us go.

I just want to end with the beginning of a poem by Jan Richardson called 'Beloved is where we Begin':-

*If you would enter
into the wilderness,
do not begin
without a blessing.*

*Do not leave
without hearing
who you are:
Beloved,
named by the One
who has travelled this path
before you.*

Reading Text

Mark 1:9-15

⁹ In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. ¹⁰ And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. ¹¹ And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." ¹² And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. ¹³ He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him. ¹⁴ Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, ¹⁵ and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."