

Sermon - In the wilderness

Based on: Deuteronomy 26.1-11; Psalm 91.1-2, 9-16; Romans 10.4-13; Luke 4.1-15

The purpose of Lent

- The season of Lent started on Ash Wednesday last week, with the invitation for each of us to look into our own hearts, at our desires and motivations, and to repent - that is, to intentionally ensure that our hearts are realigned with our Lord God's heart.
- And we are encouraged by knowing that we don't have to do this alone.
- Not only do we travel through the season of Lent as a faith community together, but our Lord is also with each of us as we do so, encouraging, guiding, and supporting.
- One way of summing up what we are invited to do can be found in the preface for the Ash Wednesday Eucharist.
- Here is part of that prayer:

For in these forty days

*you lead us into the desert of repentance
that through a pilgrimage of prayer and discipline
we may grow in grace
and learn to be your people once again.*

*Through fasting, prayer and acts of service
you bring us back to your generous heart.*

*Through study of your holy word
you open our eyes to your presence in the world
and free our hands to welcome others
into the radiant splendour of your love.*

The desert of repentance

- The phrase 'you lead us into the desert of repentance' is, of course, a reference to the main focus of the first Sunday of Lent: the story of Jesus' forty days in the wilderness before he begins his ministry.
- Having been baptised, Jesus '*was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil*' (Luke 4.1)
- The fundamental teaching in this is that Jesus was in a challenging situation where he was tempted to depend upon himself rather than on his faith relationship with God.
- The three temptations described are not necessarily specific ones, but rather types of temptation.
- The temptations of food, worldly status, and testing God can represent all the temptations of body, mind and spirit.
- At the heart of these temptations was being tempted away from being fully dependent on his faith relationship with God.
- But Jesus repents effectively: he ensures that his own desires are completely right-wise with God's desire, and thus embodies the righteousness, or right-wiseness, that Paul writes about in his letter to the Romans.

Wilderness as metaphor

- In this story of Jesus in the wilderness, the wilderness is understood to be the actual literal wilderness - an area of semi-desert where there are no comforts, nothing to eat, little to drink, minimal shade, and extreme temperatures.
- However, the story also serves as a parable - a metaphor to reflect on and learn from.

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- The literal wilderness can also be a symbolic, or metaphorical, wilderness - that is, any challenging situation where one is tempted to depend upon one's own resources, but where one actually needs to depend on God in order to survive those challenges.
- So the reading from Deuteronomy serves as a reminder of some other kinds of wildernesses, that God's people experienced.
- The first metaphorical wilderness referred to was when they were slaves in Egypt.
- Now living as slaves there did not mean living in an actual wilderness, but rather in a metaphorical one.
- After all, as slaves being treated harshly, being afflicted, having hard labour imposed on them meant that they were in a challenging situation where they were tempted to depend upon themselves.
- Maybe they did try to do so, and found that that just wasn't working.
- So they cried to the Lord, who sent Moses to lead them on the exodus out of Egypt.
- Ironically, they had not yet learned to align themselves rightly with God's will and purpose, and so they needed to spend another period of time, this time in the literal wilderness, learning how to be fully dependent on our Lord God.

Deuteronomy: remember the wilderness

- So this passage from Deuteronomy comes at a time when they were getting ready to finally leave that wilderness, to cross the River Jordan and enter the land promised to their ancestors.
- The passage describes a liturgical instruction - a direction of what to do and what to say in a service of thanksgiving for benefiting from God's blessing.
- Part of it is to explicitly remind themselves of their wilderness experiences when they were learning to be fully dependent on God, so as to retain that heart knowledge, that even when they were benefitting from being in the land of milk and honey, that they were still ultimately dependent on their faith relationship with God.

Faith established in the wilderness

- In our Lent course book, *Repairing the Breach*, the study for this week suggests that our faith is established in the wilderness.
- It is the place that Jesus goes to first, before he goes to synagogues or the temple.
- And just as Jesus firmly grounds his own faith relationship with his heavenly Father in this space, so Jesus invites us to join him there, so that our own faith relationship can likewise be established in and through his own.
- The Christian faith is effectively founded here - in this place of extreme challenge, where one does not live normally, but rather where one either survives or dies.
- And the only way to survive is to recognise one's utter dependence on God, rather than on our own self-centred desires of body, or mind, or spirit.
- The wilderness, whether actual or metaphorical, is where we truly learn to be faithful to God.
- And we do not do even this in our own strength, but rather join Jesus there and rely on him and God's Spirit working through him, to bring us into that right alignment with God.
- As Paul writes in the passage from Romans:
For Christ is the end of the law so that there may be righteousness [that is, right alignment] for everyone who believes. (Romans 10.4)
- And Paul paraphrases Psalm 91.15 when he states:
For, 'Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.' (Romans 10.13)

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The commonality of the wilderness experience

- Yesterday a number of parishioners joined the online Zoom session to work through this week's study, entitled In the wilderness.
- And we were all able to describe different kinds of wilderness experiences where we found ourselves completely dependent on God.
- They varied from experiences of actual wilderness, to situations of great anxiety, or separation and loneliness.
- In each of these varied ways, we found that our survival - and even more than survival, but the ability to flourish in those situations - was fundamentally dependent on our faith relationship with God, through Jesus Christ.

Wilderness experiences of St John's

- Two years ago, in the midst of Lent, our faith community here at St John's, along with many others, found itself entering the unexpected wilderness of stage 4 lockdown due to the Covid pandemic.
- We could no longer count on physically attending church services in our sacred space - on being surrounded by stained glass, on being accompanied by the pipe organ, on receiving the consecrated bread and wine, on sharing a cuppa afterwards.
- It was an opportunity to enter the wilderness and be reminded that we are fundamentally dependent on our faith relationship with God.
- And now, over the past few weeks, our church community has found itself in a similar kind of wilderness, where we are shut out of our own worship space because of issues of structural integrity.
- Once again we find we cannot depend on the familiar pews, and familiar space, and familiar physical patterns of liturgy.
- Worshipping in the Fellowship Room is similar - but still different.
- The question for us in this situation is this: are we tempted to rely on ourselves, or are we being fully reliant on God?
- While we are hoping to be able to return to our consecrated worship space soon - perhaps even next Sunday - will each of us continue for the rest of Lent to inhabit the metaphorical wilderness of this season of penitence and preparation?
- Will we be taking up the invitation to repent, and realign our hearts and our desires, with God's heart, with God's desire?
- Will we recognise and acknowledge that it is in the wilderness that we truly encounter the one anointed by God, Jesus Christ - the *'famished One in a famished place, [remembering] this Jesus, who on the night he was betrayed, took bread, and when he had given thanks, broke it and said, "This is my body broken for you ..."'* (p32, *Repairing the Breach*)