

1st Sunday in Lent (9<sup>th</sup> March 2025) - Canon Neil Patterson

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

## Into the Wilderness

“He was led by the Spirit into the wilderness”

So, how's Lent going, five days in? It would probably be normal for a preacher at this point to offer you some wise words about how to form a Lenten discipline, just in case you hadn't quite managed that yet. But for that I am going to defer to the Dean's excellent sermon of Ash Wednesday evening. I encourage you to find it on our website if you didn't hear it in person, because she covered that very well. So I'm going to have to talk about something else...

Part of the evocative power of Jesus' forty days of fasting and temptation is that it happens in a particular place, 'the wilderness.' And so we bring to mind rocks, sand, snakes and scorpions, to accompany the hard spiritual regime to which he is subjected. Worth noting 'led by the Spirit' (or even 'driven' in Mark) – somehow he is not in control, he *has* to go, and this perhaps prefigures the events of Holy Week, the Passion, when Jesus undergoes, passively, the suffering that comes to him.

But what I want to talk about this morning is the way the wilderness sits within the social and psychological geography of Scripture, and what that might mean for us now. You see, in the Bible there is a sort of hierarchy of places, variously translated. At the centre of things there is the city. Of course there is more than one city in the Bible, but to some extent it is always The City – Jerusalem, where the king is (when there is one) and the Temple, the centre of all belonging and purpose, though also of conflict and risk. There are, less remarked upon, villages and towns, where people live who may not be the core of the story.

Around all those inhabited places is what in Hebrew is called the *sadēh*, which we usually translate slightly quaintly as 'the field.' Quaintly because usually in England today a field is a specific piece of farmland, with hedges or fences round it, either for a particular crop or to contain livestock. What it really means is 'the cultivated land' – which you depend on for life, where those crops that Deuteronomy commanded them to give thanks for come from – under human management but not so safe as within the city walls. There enemies may prowl, or a murder or other crime be committed without witnesses.

And then beyond the *sadēh* is the *mithbar*, the wilderness or desert, beyond human control. There strange things happen, and people meet with God, and you don't generally go unless you have to. It's strange and scary, and where the wild things are. In Hebrew the book of Numbers is called *B'mithbar*, "In the wilderness" which are the opening words but also very much the setting in which Moses receives the law from God. If you have visited Israel/Palestine you will know that all this can really be quite close, and especially that the *mithbar* in the form of the Judean Desert is only just over the Mount of Olives from the centre of Jerusalem.

Why does this matter? Well, in part because we need to acknowledge that this is not our world, even if I suspect echoes of it continue to influence how we think about the natural environment today, in a most unhelpful way. In ancient times, cities were by our standards small, and the cultivated land occupied manageable parts in between great extents of wilderness. Whereas today the vast majority of the land surface of the world, apart from high mountains, ice sheets and deserts, is managed by humans one way or another. And with this goes the chilling reality that over half the animal biomass on earth is our livestock, and something like a third humans ourselves – I have seen the proportion that is wildlife variously estimated, but it is a tiny proportion, 10% or less, of the total. I wonder if we are somewhat blinded to this reality by the sense from ancient times that there is lots of 'wilderness' out there, somewhere in the beyond, and there isn't.

That matters for the health of the planet, but also, I suggest, for our spiritual health, because the existence of true wilderness where humans are not in control is good for us. Jesus goes out into the wilderness to fast and pray, and returns there many times during his teaching ministry to escape the crowds and spend time with his Father. Moses led the people through the wilderness where they met God and received the Law. Elijah and John the Baptist too, and Christians down the centuries from the Desert Fathers on have taken themselves away from the busyness of civilization to renew their spiritual lives. But it is becoming harder and harder to find that wilderness, true space and peace from the relentless demand of modern communications, the ability and temptation to stay in touch with the news, with social media, with all the people who want a bit of your time or an answer to a question. Perhaps part of our Lenten discipline needs to be enforcing that distance on ourselves.

But there is another way of looking at things. A phrase comes to my mind from the resonant words of the bishop's charge at a service for the ordination of new priests – those about to be ordained are told, among other things, that they are to search for the Lord's children 'in the wilderness of this world's temptations.' And this suggests a complete reversal of the layered territories of city, field and wilderness. Far from being the quiet place where the wild beasts roam, and perhaps inspire us with the beauty of Creation, the wilderness of temptation is the busy world of people and business and shopping and earning. And maybe then the safe place is the quiet retreat of the monastery or the mountains, free from all that.

Maybe this just leads to the conclusion that home and wilderness look different for introverts and extraverts! And maybe there are more different variations to think up. It leads though to a suggestion about Lent, hopefully different from the Dean's on Wednesday, to return to my starting point. Our task in Lent, I propose, is to renew and deepen our relationship with God, not to get right with him in the first place – that is done by his work and our faith alone, as the reading from Romans makes clear. But we are called to work to change ourselves to grow stronger in our spiritual journeys, both for our own sake and for the greater good we can then do for others.

And my thought is that in order to do that, we need to think where our own wilderness is, and take ourselves there and face the temptations, whatever they are. It may be out into the wild where there is no comfort from the bright lights and the busy messages, to face down the unsettled thoughts within and the realisations about ourself from which we hide. But if the quiet of the hills is peace and joy to us, then save that for Eastertide, and go in Lent to the demanding busyness of the city and its human need. And almost certainly for most of us, go and spend time with the people you find most difficult, and unsettling, and challenging. Let the Spirit lead you to wilderness ground where you do not feel safe or at ease, for it is there that you will find the temptation to flee to easy answers, and in resisting temptation, you will find the angels come to bring you strength.

Amen.