

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Reflection – First Sunday of Lent – 21st February 2021

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When I saw the gospel reading set for today, I had a sense of déjà vu all over again. Wasn't it the second Sunday of Advent when we read Mark's account of John crying in the wilderness? On the following Sunday, the third Sunday of Advent, we had John's account of the voice crying in the wilderness. Last month we met John again in the wilderness and the last two verses of that gospel reading are part of our gospel today. John was baptizing in the wilderness but our gospel today quickly moves on to another wilderness setting where Jesus goes to prepare for his ministry to us.

After putting all this together I said 'so God, I get it, you want me to talk about the wilderness' and He said 'yes and I want you to compare it to lockdown'. I said I would give it a go: here it is.

This talk will be different to the talks that I usually give which have a challenging aspect to them; challenging us on our discipleship, our service to others or our evangelisation of others; my favourite topics. But today I want to look at what strength and comfort we can get from what God teaches us through the wilderness experiences in the Bible. A strength and comfort that not only helps us to survive the rest of the pandemic but help us to grow, flourish and prosper in the knowledge of a God who actively loves and cares for us often without us knowing it. This is not a bible study but there are lots of biblical references and I make no apologies for this, for it was not only Jesus who quoted the bible when he was in the wilderness but the devil did too.

When we think about the wilderness, some of us think of desert conditions: a dry and barren area where little precipitation occurs and conditions are hostile for plant, animal and human life. We think of places of isolation and desolation. Others may think of wilderness as natural environments on earth that have not been changed by human activity. Not being inhabited they are at least places of solitude.

In the Bible the wilderness is the location for various settings. It is the setting for a time of danger – Hagar, the servant of Sarah, Abraham’s wife, first alone (Genesis 16:7) then with her son Ishmael (Genesis 21:14); a setting for a time of waiting – Moses tended his father-in-law’s sheep in the desert (Exodus 3:1). Most notably the wilderness is the setting for a time of wandering – the children of Israel in the desert for forty years on a journey that could have taken less than a month had they gone directly. The wilderness also is a setting for a time of hiding and hopelessness – Elijah (1 Kings 19:4); a time of witnessing – John the Baptist; and a time of testing and trial – Jesus (Mark 1:13).

And here is the comparison and the question. Have you felt the lockdown to be a time of danger, a time of waiting, a time of wandering, a time of hiding and hopelessness, a time of testing and trial; one, some, all or none of these things? Whatever your experience, I have some wonderful news for you and that is that God was present in every wilderness situation that I have mentioned. He showed up. God did not abandon the people who had these experiences. They were not left to fend for themselves. God was very active for and on their behalf.

In the first example God sent an angel to tell the bewildered Hagar what she should do. God also made an amazing promise to her that her descendants would be too numerous to count (Genesis 16:10). On the second occasion, when Hagar and her son were dying of thirst in the desert, God opened Hagar’s eyes and she saw a well of water (Genesis 21:19) but God did not stop there: he continued to be with the boy Ishmael as he grew up (Genesis 21:20).

Moses’ wilderness experience looking after his father in law’s sheep was not only a time of waiting but it led to an encounter with God and divine revelation. God introduced Himself to Moses, told Moses His name, ‘I am who I am’, and told Moses what his mission would be.

Turning to the longest wilderness experience recorded in the Bible, the exodus of the children of Israel was as much about coming into a relationship with God as it was about leaving the bondage of Egypt. The people set out at the beginning of the forty years as a very rebellious people manufacturing their own god-idol whilst Moses was up Mount Sinai receiving the ten commandments. They complained about everything: about Moses’ leadership, their hardships, their lack of food (the shelves were empty), and the lack of water. If they had had on-line delivery, they would probably have complained about their inability to get a delivery slot. But by the time they came into the promised land forty years

later they were more willing to follow God and keep his laws. At least they said they were (Joshua 24). We can learn much from this wilderness experience.

God is always present. God told Moses that He was to dwell in the midst of His people but His desire was to manifest His presence to the children of Israel in a unique way: the cloud to guide them by day and the pillar of fire to guide them by night. These signs reminded the people that God was in their midst. In the same way God has sent us His Living Word and His Holy Spirit to guide us by day and by night. And even when we turn away from Him, He is still watching over us as He did with the rebellious children of Israel.

God doesn't always take us on what we would consider the most direct route and for our own good too. At the beginning of the Israelites' journey, God led them around danger. The direct route would have taken the Israelites past the Egyptian fortresses and with the Pharaoh's chariots coming behind they would have been trapped. Even if our journey has a few unexpected bends in the road, we should realize that this is just where we need to be. When God is our guide we can forget about the destination and concentrate on today's miles. The course He plots will grow us in His image. We just have to trust Him.

God knows what we can handle and what we can't as He did with the Israelites. He knew that, at the first sign of trouble, His chosen people would have wanted to go back to what they knew in Egypt. They said as much at the Red Sea (Exodus 14: 11-12). God knows what our futures will hold. He knows what will be easy and what won't be. Isn't it comforting to know God knows what lies ahead and can lead us around, over or through the obstacles and challenges of life if we let Him?

God meets our needs miraculously and in abundance. When Hagar needed water in the desert, God provided a well. When the children of Israel needed water, God provided it and from a rock too (Exodus 17:6). If the water they found was undrinkable God cured it (Exodus 16:25). When the Israelites were hungry, God provided them quail to eat in the evening and manna to eat in the morning (Exodus 16:13-14). Just as miraculously, during the forty years of their sojourn their clothes and their sandals did not wear out (Deuteronomy 29:5).

God shows us how and provides the means for us to have a relationship with Him. In the desert God provided the Israelites with the 'old covenant', laws and provisions that would allow them to live as His chosen people and God to have fellowship with them and live among them. God continually provides us with a

solid structure for a relationship with Him. Jesus, through His death and resurrection, initiated the new covenant prophesied by Jeremiah (31:31) and to ignore or forget that is to forfeit the opportunity to have that relationship.

Lent is an excellent time for us to do some reflection and I hope you all have signed up for the Lent course we are starting on Tuesday evening and repeating on Thursday morning. This year we are reflecting on the pandemic and its consequences. The verse that has sustained me through the pandemic is from Isaiah: 'For waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert' We have seen that the desert can be a place of isolation, a place of danger, of waiting, of hiding and hopelessness, a place where we may be tempted to return to our former places and ways even though we know that that is not possible. We have also seen that the desert is a place where idols can be smashed and we can discover the true God; a place that we can discover that what we thought were certainties aren't certainties after all. Above all, we have learnt that God is always present with us and that He cares and provides for us if we will only trust Him completely.

Amen.