

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Sermon –First Sunday of Lent

21st February 2021

All Saints' Marseille

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I wonder how you would complete the sentence: 'I spent a long time in the wilderness after...' Each of us has our wilderness experiences. They are part of the human condition. Often they are unsought, deeply painful, and we prefer to forget them.

The image is an apt one, though. A few years ago when I was on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land, we were taken by bus to the area of wilderness where it is suggested that Christ spent his forty days. We were left there for half an hour to experience its atmosphere. My abiding impression now is one of emptiness. Bleached rock, silence, sky; not a sign of vegetation in sight. That's hard to imagine living in this part of the world, though the Mont Ventoux gives us a flavour. Wilderness is a good image for what one spiritual writer¹ has described as a place of '...waste, darkness and struggle'.

Jesus's time in the wilderness is offered to us as a focus for the beginning of Lent, as we begin our journey through its weeks of spiritual challenge. Mark's

¹ Kenneth Leech, in *True God: An exploration in spiritual theology*.

account is particularly spare. We are simply told that after his baptism, in which Jesus had become aware of the Spirit of God resting on him and of the words of affirmation ('You are my child; I love you; you delight me'), 'the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness'. Before he begins his ministry of teaching and healing, he must do battle with the spiritual forces that can ensnare the soul and distort even the most noble intentions, as he works out what his vocation is to be.

In Mark's Gospel we are given none of the detail of the temptations described in Matthew and Luke's accounts. There we learn of Jesus's confrontation with the temptations which have been referred to as 'greed, ambition and pride'², temptations that beset many a religious endeavour. We see Jesus face similar temptations to those met by Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, yet resisting them. But in Mark's account, all we are told is that he 'was in the wilderness for forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.'

The next thing we hear is his message: 'The time is now. The kingdom of God has come near.' A kingdom radically different from the human ones beset by the temptations of greed, ambition and pride. Giving birth to a community of radical inclusion and unconditional acceptance where all on the outside will be welcomed in. A way of living that leads Jesus to the pain and desolation of the Cross, but which in God's economy also becomes a place of transformation.

The wilderness is not an end in itself. It is related to journeying. The ancient Israelites, after their liberation from slavery, journeyed forty years through the

² Ibid.

wilderness. There came to understand what it meant to become an interdependent people with laws and responsibilities, despite many false starts and setbacks along the way. It was only after their time in the wilderness that they came to the promised land. As we begin our own journey through Lent, however much we may feel resistance to its disciplines, we know in our hearts that spiritually it is a necessary thing. We don't have to go there literally (though climbing the Mont Ventoux might do some of us good). But we can go there spiritually and, if we do, we will find in the wilderness a place of change, of transformation.

This year we probably don't need to go far to find wilderness. Many have pointed out that the impact of the pandemic means that the whole world has been in a sort of wilderness for the last twelve months. For some, it has literally turned their world upside down, and our prayers for them continue daily as we walk alongside them in their anguish and pain. For others, there is just a dull sense of loss, isolation and sadness, with no end in sight. What are we to do with it?

There are some insights we can learn from the wilderness tradition of the Church and of the Scriptures. We might start by seeking out stillness, setting aside time to listen to God. Learning again that we are God's children. The pandemic has reminded us that, despite our illusions, we are not in control of everything. We are dependent, like children, on the love and provision of our life-giver and the creation around us. Instead of shoring up our sense of being in control we might listen instead for the still, small voice that says 'You are my child; I love you', rather than the negative thoughts that swirl round our heads as we focus on our lack and loss. Learning what 'enough' means, as opposed to our ceaseless quest

for 'more'. We could remind ourselves what it means to give back, seeking out a charity that's helping those in need and giving to it what we would otherwise have spent on ourselves. Or giving back to people who have helped us in the past, so that they feel less isolated and alone now. None of this is complicated – it's just that we don't find time to do it most of the time.

Then there are the biblical experiences of wilderness, which we might read again and mediate on. They include the lessons learned in the forty years after the Exodus, and later on in the fifty years of exile in Babylon, when paradoxically the people who were displaced found themselves closer to God in their time of trial than they had in their time of prosperity. We too are sometimes surprised to find hope in what seems to be a time of grief and adversity, light in the place which we expected to be all darkness.

Last week the BBC journalist Cathy Killick wrote of her experience of losing both parents to Covid within a few weeks. When her widowed mother was found to have the virus, she could not go from hospital back to her care home, but instead was allowed to be looked after in her daughter's home, with carers coming in and out during the day. Cathy Killick wrote:

'I will never forget those carers. The respect and tenderness they gave a stranger was the most humbling thing I've ever seen. For me, it transcends the misery and privations of the pandemic. It gives me something precious to hold on to and has left me with a memory of something truly beautiful.'

We all have our own examples. They are unexpected gifts. When we encounter them, we discover what the writer of Psalm 84 meant about people: 'who going through the desert use it for a well' (Psalm 84.5).

The point is not to escape the wilderness. The point is to discover that, when we are in it, we are walking with God. In the words of that other Psalm: 'Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me' (Psalm 23.4).

For in our wilderness, among the wild beasts, there may also be angels. Messengers of God who assure us we are not alone. Reminders that we are dealing with a Creator who, like any good parent, knows what our life is like and loves us through every minute of it. Even - perhaps especially - in our times of wilderness.

Amen.