

### **Genesis 9.8-17**

8 Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him, <sup>9</sup>'As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, <sup>10</sup>and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the domestic animals, and every animal of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark. <sup>11</sup>I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth.' <sup>12</sup>God said, 'This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: <sup>13</sup>I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. <sup>14</sup>When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, <sup>15</sup>I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh; and the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh. <sup>16</sup>When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth.' <sup>17</sup>God said to Noah, 'This is the sign of the covenant that I have established between me and all flesh that is on the earth.'

### **1 Peter 3.18-end**

<sup>18</sup>For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God. He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit, <sup>19</sup>in which also he went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison, <sup>20</sup>who in former times did not obey, when God waited patiently in the days of Noah, during the building of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight people, were saved through water. <sup>21</sup>And baptism, which this prefigured, now saves you—not as a removal of dirt from the body, but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, <sup>22</sup>who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers made subject to him.

### **Mark 1.9-15**

9 In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. <sup>10</sup>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. <sup>11</sup>And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'

<sup>12</sup> And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. <sup>13</sup>He was in the wilderness for forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.

<sup>14</sup> Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, <sup>15</sup>and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.'

*12 And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. +*

This week, I have been thinking about desert wilderness.

For Jesus, and those living in the Holy Land today, the wilderness is just a normal feature of the landscape. You only have to go out of Jerusalem for about 10 miles, into the direction of the Jordan valley, and the wild, dry, rugged landscape is all around you.

Whilst we don't have quite the same desert wilderness in the UK, the experience maybe comparable for those who live on the edge of some of our huge moors, such as Dartmoor or the Yorkshire moors. Of course, people are attracted to go into these wild landscapes, to enjoy the wilderness, the opportunity to get away, the vastness, the challenge of being in a sparse environment and to find solitude. People enjoy both the challenge and the rewarding experience. Those, who live near a wilderness learn to respect it and not to underestimate its dangers.

The wilderness of Judea, where Jesus spent his 40 days, is not a sandy, but a rocky terrain. It's full of hills and ravines. There will be little streams in the summer or even rivers in the winter. Jesus would have found shade, shelter and some refreshment. And, although the ground is arid and rocky, in the spring there will be surprising shoots of green grasses and flowers. As we think of Jesus spending 40 days in that wilderness, we can assume that there would have been some water and perhaps even a little food to prevent his death by thirst or starvation.

The season of Lent invites us to follow Jesus into the wilderness for forty days, in preparation of Easter.

This morning's gospel passage, from the gospel of Mark, is striking because of the brevity of Mark's account of the story of the temptation. Unlike Matthew and Luke, Mark does not record the three specific temptations. Satan is not portrayed as enticing Jesus to commit particular sins, but here the emphasis is on the implacable hostility between Jesus and Satan.

Our gospel today gives us the key events at the start of Jesus' public ministry – his baptism, his testing in the wilderness, the beginning of his proclamation of the good news of God ' <sup>15</sup>saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.'

Mark's account of these events may be brief, but there is an intensity and a sense of drama that compel us to take notice.

At his baptism the heavens are torn apart or 'ripped open' - the same verb is used to describe what happens to the temple curtain at the moment of his death. This is followed by the voice from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'

Then, immediately, Jesus is driven out, into the wilderness, by the Spirit. This scripture passage is rich with reference to the history of the Hebrew people, especially to the 40 years they spent in the wilderness before being led to the river Jordan, to cross into the Promised Land.

The season of Lent invites us to follow Jesus into the wilderness. This might not be an attractive prospect, especially if we are not familiar with the wilderness,

In Lent, most of us don't have the time to take ourselves away from our daily lives, so it is an invitation to willingly allow ourselves to be taken into a metaphorical wilderness.

It means spending some time away from the distractions of people and technology, from the normal demands of life. It means making space to allow for the stripping away of our preoccupations and to focus on the essence and purpose of life; to focus on God.

This might seem a bleak or even scary prospect, because when we stop, spend time alone, without others or the usual distractions, we quickly come into contact with our inner wilderness, the worries that we carry inside, our anxieties, our fear of illness, of failure, of death; our self-doubt and doubt of God. Going into the wilderness brings us in touch with our deep sense of isolation, essential aloneness, which is at the heart of the human condition.

We note from our gospel reading: Jesus is *driven* into the wilderness, by the Spirit, immediately after receiving his affirmation: you are my beloved Son. For him, too, it might have been much more attractive to go straight out there to proclaim the good news, after his baptism, after hearing the voice: you are my beloved – with you I am well pleased. But no, he is driven into the wilderness. His wonderful moment of affirmation needs to be tempered by facing the reality of being human and what it means for him to be the Chosen, the Messiah: he, too, will have encountered his fear, weakness, doubt, isolation; the source

of sin which Satan preys on - the temptation to go ahead and do his own thing, to turn away from God.

Going into the wilderness may not be an attractive prospect, but we, too, go into the wilderness as God's beloved children – we, too, have the spirit inside us that knows we need to spend time, with God, on our own.

Every year Lent is an invitation to draw closer to God - to go deeper in our knowledge of self and our knowledge of God; the God who knows us, as we are, and loves us.

How do we do that? Does the Spirit drive us? Many of us may think 'my life feels like a wilderness already', especially if we live with illness or are caring for a loved one who is suffering. Isn't the world we live in becoming more and more like a wilderness? It is, but it also was in Jesus' time, when Israel/ Palestine was occupied by the Romans and for many people there life was hard and full of danger. That makes it the more important to follow the invitation to go into the wilderness, with God's spirit; to do so in the knowledge that we are beloved and to allow God to minister to us; to be reminded of God's promise at our baptism that we are called and beloved, too.

Lent invites us to prioritise time with God; whether we set aside time at home, create a physical space to read and pray. Some people find it easier to be with God while walking – take a bible with you; or use the Lent app on your phone, to watch and pray to centre your mind. I recommend reading Mark's gospel again this Lent, or to spend time with the psalms. If we make space to spend time with God, God will honour us; if we come with open hands seeking God's love and presence, while staying with the challenges and pain of being human, God will give us what we need. God will bless us.

Mark tells us: 'and [Jesus] was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him'. (vs 13)

The wilderness and the wild beasts frighten us, and they will have frightened Jesus. Yet, the biblical vision is for the wild beasts to become tame, as the lion lies with lamb. And so, we, too, can trust that the wild beasts of our inner and outer wilderness will not overcome us, but the angels will wait on us. We, too, can emerge from our observance of Lent, less fearful, freer and more aware of God's love, filled with fresh clarity, courage and love to proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God. Amen.