

21st February Reflection and Prayers for Lent 1

Dear Friends, I think at times you must be a bit fed up with only hearing my reflections, (although I have asked others to do them, they were not keen. This week for my reading around the theme of wilderness I found this reflection written by a former colleague of mine. It was too good to ignore, so I share it with you for this week. Vanda.

Reflection by

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Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil (Luke 4:1) The first Sunday in Lent is, classically, the Sunday when we look at Jesus experience of temptation in the wilderness.

But today, I want to spend a few minutes thinking not about the temptations themselves, but about 'wilderness' and what that might mean for us as we begin our journey through the season of Lent.

A few years ago, whilst on holiday, I read a novel by Jim Crace called 'Quarantine'. In it we see how five 'pilgrims' - including a Galilean called Jesus - go out into the desert to find themselves and their god. It's not Christian; it's not Scripturally accurate; but it is captivating in its powerful descriptions and allusions to the time of Jesus Christ and the draw of the wilderness existence for many of the religious people of his day. Any of you who have been to Jericho, and beyond Jericho to the Dead Sea, Qumran and Masada would, I believe, immediately be gripped by the vividness of this story. Let me read a short extract for you: "The salty scrubland was a lazy and malicious host, Even lizards lifted their legs for fear of touching it too firmly.... It was indiscriminating in its cruelties. The scrub, at best, allowed its brief and passing guests to stub their toes on stones or snag their arms and legs on thorns.... Or it lamed their animals. Or, should they spend the night with this hard scrubland as their inn, it let its snakes and scorpions take refuge underneath the covers of their beds." (p.8)

Wilderness in the Bible can mean both mountainous regions and regions that after rainfall can be used as pastures. It's a place on the

edge, a marginal place, often a place of disputed territory. It can be a place of conflict, a place of the unexpected; a place where feelings run high, where little is hidden, much is exposed; a place where things of the spirit - both 'holy' and otherwise - can run riot with little to distract from their powerful influences. It's a place of activity simply to survive, but it's also a place where one is passive - where events happen, where suffering is endured which is beyond the control of those who experience it.

It's very easy to conclude that 'wilderness' is a singularly negative place. But the Bible would suggest that that is not so. It's true that in our Old Testament reading from Deuteronomy, where the writer is recounting the wonderful deeds of God, he 'jumps', as it were, from the escape from Egypt to the arrival in the promised land without even mentioning the Israelites' forty years of wandering which took place in between. But it's clear from other parts of the Bible that 'wilderness' can sometimes be a place of refuge, a place of miracles, a place of guidance or revelation; in short, a place where God's glory is revealed. You only have to think of the episodes from the story of the exodus to recognise this - pillars of fire and cloud, manna from heaven, water from the rock, fire and thunder on the mountain, the shining face of Moses himself.... The wilderness was a place where the people of Israel grew.

It wasn't an easy place by any means, but it was part of God's purpose for them, so that they might grow in knowledge of themselves and in dependence on him. Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil (Luke 4:1) Do you notice? Jesus was 'led by the Spirit in the wilderness'. He'd just been baptised by John in the Jordan, affirmed by the Father, and commissioned for his ministry; and the first thing he does is to allow himself to be led (the word in Matthew and Mark's gospels is actually 'driven') into the wilderness, where he will be tested physically, emotionally and spiritually. The Son of God chooses to identify himself with the experience of human beings - to endure what they endure, to suffer what they suffer - and to grow through it, growing in self knowledge and dependence upon his Father.

Indeed, his baptism and wilderness experience become the foundation stones of his life and ministry. Our baptism is the foundation stone of our life and ministry. But what about 'wilderness'? Our natural inclination is to shy away from anything which might be difficult to endure. To choose to 'go into the desert', whether literally or metaphorically, might seem a bizarre thing to do. But the truth is that the wilderness experience is part of being human. There are times when everyone can feel out on a limb, abandoned by friends and God, lonely, attacked by demons, real or imaginary, lost and wandering aimlessly, despite the fact that they thought they knew where they were going. It is an experience known by individuals, but also an experience known by communities.

You only have to think of the millions of refugees, displaced by war and conflict – in Syria, Yemen, Myanmar, South Sudan – to recognise that whole communities can endure these terrors. And yet it remains true that in spite of the horrors, people persevere, they come alongside one another, they sacrifice themselves for each other and are drawn together through the hell of it all.

The season of Lent invites us to consider again what we might describe as 'the benefits of wilderness'; to acknowledge that it was part of Jesus' experience, just as it is a part of our own, and to recognise the wilderness - not just as a place of suffering and difficulty - but as a place where we may meet with God and grow deeper in our dependence on him, by the strengthening power of the Holy Spirit.

Prayers – Sunday 21 February 2021 Lent 1 by Fiona Vinnicombe

Everlasting God, your son Jesus Christ was tried and tempted by the devil. Help us choose the way of faithfulness rather than popularity, service rather than fame and sacrifice rather than power. Lord in your mercy, **Hear our Prayer**

Creator God, we pray for those in positions of authority and leadership; that they do not misuse their powers but respect and care for all their people and also for the natural resources of their

countries. During our Lenten fasting may we be constantly aware of those in our world who are always hungry and thirsty and of all those who have so little when we have so much. Lord in your mercy, **Hear our Prayer**

Gracious God, we pray for the whole family of your church here in the Land's End Benefice. May we all grow in faith and demonstrate in our lives the gospel of Jesus Christ especially at this time whilst we are struggling to meet together because of the pandemic. Help us to play our part in the life of the church here and throughout the world; through our prayers and service during this season of Lent and beyond. Give courage to those who find it hard to follow you. Give us a fresh vision that leads to action and strengthen us to serve you. Lord in your mercy, **Hear our Prayer**

Loving God, we pray for those who are ill and in pain, longing to live full lives, for those who are sad and hurt, for those longing for comfort. May we always offer gentle support to those in trouble, sensitive encouragement to those in need, and strength and support to those feeling helpless. We especially pray for any suffering from Coronavirus. Lord in your mercy, **Hear our Prayer**

Merciful God, we pray for those saddened by the death of someone close to them. Give them your comfort as they mourn for their loved ones and turn their darkness into light. We commend them to your everlasting love. Lord in your mercy, **Hear our Prayer**

Gracious God, help us to see this time of Lent as an opportunity to develop our discipleship and discipline and as your Son Jesus showed us how to reject temptation, fill us with grace to be faithful to his example in this Lenten season and the years ahead. Merciful Father: **accept these prayers for the sake of your Son, our Saviour, Jesus Christ. Amen.**