

HOMILY LENT 4 2021

Given that the 40 days of Lent echo the period of testing which Jesus endured in the wilderness at the beginning of his ministry, it is little wonder that the image of the desert or wilderness is a common Lenten theme.

Hiking in the dry river valleys of Morocco, running down mighty Saharan sand dunes and travelling across high, cold wilderness plateaus of Peru I've been amazed at their vast stark uniqueness. I've also been aware that I was there very much a guest, one lacking the resources and skills to survive there without the help of others more equipped and knowledgeable.

The Bible contains many passages which speak of literal deserts or wildernesses. In Scripture the desert is a constant reminder of danger, hardship, even death. Its where fugitives hide and the home of wild animals. But the wilderness also the place of refuge, the path to freedom, the place of encounter with God. Time and again we find that deserts or wilderness places are 'holy ground'; places where God meets, calls and directs.

The reading from Deuteronomy speaks of the journey made by the people of God after their liberation from captivity. Between captivity and Promised Land lay the wilderness, where they had to lean entirely upon God. They had not the resources to survive the long years, God alone was their provider and guide.

In the Gospels, the wilderness of Judea is the key setting for the ministry of John the Baptist. Clifford M Yeary picks up on the dualistic symbolism of the desert in John's ministry: it is a place of warning as well as of spiritual encounter. Those who came out to find John in the desert were met with both an unequivocal call to repentance and the possibility of renewal in baptism.

Then as we've recalled Jesus was led into the wilderness immediately after his own Baptism. There he was tempted, tested, and commissioned. The Greek word most often translated as 'wilderness' is 'eremos', meaning 'an isolated place'. Throughout his life Jesus would seek out such isolated or lonely places in which to pray, to be with the Father, to find strength and guidance. At other times the loneliness of the garden of Gethsemane and indeed of the cross pressed in on him.

Some of us choose desert experiences, wilderness times. Lent may be one of them. At other times however, most of us will find ourselves in the deserts which are not of our choosing. Apparently desolate or fearful times. Yet what we might find helpful to recall is that wildernesses are not barren or empty but are precisely where God is. And where God is, is holy ground, out of which life comes.

Moses was a fugitive in the desert, but it was there that he met God. The people were not abandoned to the desert but were led, protected, and provided for there. The lonely place, whatever that might be for us is where we truly stand before God. It can be precisely the moment when we are asked to reflect on the reality of our faith and our values. We may notice, perhaps for the first time in a long while the joys and the ambiguities of our life and how we are living it. It may be where we learn the trust in God which sustains us through the whole of life. It may be where we are commissioned.

Moses emerged from the wilderness to be God's spokesperson and to lead God's people out of captivity. Jesus emerged from the desert and travelled to Nazareth where he spoke aloud the words of the prophet Isaiah

'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.'

The astonishing claim is this: not only does God sustain us in the desert place but God's presence brings those places alive and brings life out of those places. Both our psalm today and the passage from Deuteronomy speak of God's bringing forth pools of water, flowing streams, deep streams and brooks in the desert place.

One of the trips I mentioned in opening was an adventure camping in the Sahara. One night to everyone's astonishment we experience a deluge of rain, we were told the first for decades. Such rain that the sand on which we were camping liquified and having waded through liquid sand to get into our tent we slept afloat. The next day the rivers had risen in the previously dry bed of the gorge to the extent that our vehicle couldn't get through and so we had to wade through turbulent waters waist high holding onto one another in groups to avoid being swept away. To experience such powerful water – in the desert - is very memorable.

It's been a tough year and it's been a very tough, desolate week for many women especially. This Lent we might be called again to pray for water in the desert, for the power that brings change, for the fruitful yield which God promises.