

Lent 1, 21 February 2021. Revd Nicki Bullivant

Today is the first Sunday of Lent. Lent is traditionally a time of deep spiritual reflection, where we journey with Jesus, following him as closely as we can as he draws ever nearer to the cross.

In our Gospel reading today we see Jesus being baptised by John and then being driven by the Spirit into the rough and harsh place of the wilderness. / Lent can be a time when we are more aware of our own rough and harsh places, those rough places where we experience the discomfort of times of challenge and grief, and also become more aware of those rough places within our own lives that need Christ's transforming touch.

This morning we follow in Jesus' footsteps as he enters the wilderness for 40 days of fasting and temptation by Satan.

There are many accounts in both the old and new testaments of people being in the wilderness. They were there for a variety of reasons: sometimes lost, sometimes desperate, sometimes with a plan, sometimes with no idea what they were doing there, but as we think about Jesus in the wilderness, we see someone who enters the wilderness with a clear sense of who he is, and someone who leaves the wilderness having confronted temptation, and who as a result is ready to live out his life purpose.

The wilderness is a dry desert place, there are no distinguishing landmarks to be found there and you can easily become lost and disorientated, it can be a place that is fraught with danger, a place of exile and isolation, a place of hunger and thirst.

The wilderness isn't necessarily a geographical place though; there are emotional, social and spiritual wildernesses too. The wilderness can be within us as well as all around us. However, it can be a place of self discovery, renewal and transformation, a place where we encounter God in new and exciting ways.

According to Mark, Jesus was driven into the wilderness, it was involuntary. The past year could well be described as a wilderness that we were driven into against our will too. Many of us feel tired, isolated and lonely. We may feel disorientated and lost as we are unable to do many of the familiar things that give us a sense of meaning, purpose and belonging. The big calamities of life can drive us, kicking and screaming, to our own wilderness experience too - a serious diagnosis, a redundancy, a long period of unemployment, a mid life crisis, the death of a loved one, the loss of our faith in God. Anything can drive us into the wilderness where we can feel unsupported, isolated, afraid and alone.

But today as we journey with Jesus through Lent we enter the wilderness intentionally, on purpose, the wilderness can be a gift to us, if we allow ourselves to live through it, learn from it, and be transformed by it.

As we enter the wilderness we, like Jesus, are entering as God's beloved children, known and loved by him and accompanied by the Holy Spirit.

And with the Spirit's help we can choose to confront those things that are obstacles between us and God. It is when we are in the wilderness that we are able to distinguish the things that hold body and soul together from the baggage that weighs us down. During Lent we have time and

space to reflect on our spiritual journey and how life events are affecting our faith and relationship with God.

We may feel vulnerable and there is always the temptation to want to move on, to escape. It can be uncomfortable as we come face to face with our inner restlessness, but it is often in the uncomfortable desert places of our lives that we can begin to see again or to see more clearly, it can be a place where we recognise and acknowledge our need and our hunger for God.

And as we talk about being hungry we are reminded that Jesus fasted when he was in the wilderness and during Lent we too may find that fasting from certain things helps us to hear God's voice more clearly, In fasting, in taking an intentional break from something, we are seeking to remove from our lives anything that keeps our minds off God. In fasting we are making more space for God in our lives. There are many ways in which we can fast; we can fast from a particular food type, for example chocolate, cake or wine. We can fast from social media, television, gossiping, complaining, and unnecessary spending. As we fast from those things that we like to feast on we will find that we are hungering more for God.

Lent is not just about giving things up though, it can be a time in which we can adopt a new spiritual practice, not to prove to ourselves or to God that we can do it, but in order to grow closer to God and to grow in obedience and love for him. Spiritual practices can be seen as tools for our wilderness journey, helping us to draw closer to God. They can deepen our knowledge and understanding of God's presence with us.

Several years ago I adopted the practice of setting an alarm on my phone to ring at 9 12 3 and 6. When my alarm goes off I pause to be still and say a short prayer. I tend to live my life at 100 miles an hour but I have found that this simple spiritual practice has helped me to slow down, to refocus and to be more aware of God's presence with me.

Prayer, fasting and acts of service are spiritual practices that are associated with the season of Lent.

Have you considered adopting a new spiritual practice during Lent?

Why not join in with the Lent course on Wednesday evenings via zoom, or the daily pilgrimage at home, resources for this are available on Instagram, the parish Facebook page and the weekly briefing, there are also hard copies available in the porches of each of the parish churches.

These are strange times and it is upsetting for many that we can't meet face to face but as Vicar David reminded us in this week's parish briefing 'Lent is an individual journey but it's also a communal one. We can encourage one another, support one another and help one another in faith and love.'

I pray as we journey through lent, individually and in community, may we may we rediscover our thirst and hunger for God, may we encounter him in the desert place, may we be renewed and be forever changed. Amen.