

Reflection on Sunday 18 February 2024

by Forbes Mutch, Lay Leader of Worship

Gospel: Mark 1. 9-15

Listening to the desert wind

I woke up the other morning and lay half awake, half asleep. I suddenly remembered that I needed to write a reflection for the First Sunday of Lent about the Temptation of Christ in the wilderness. It made me think about the exact location of Christ's desert, wondering what it was really like to be in a desert, because the nearest I've come to that kind of terrain is standing outside Phoenix in Arizona, which is a bit tame, considering that there was a 7-11 diner less than five miles away.

Jesus didn't have that nearby comfort or luxury.

It is widely assumed that Jesus was tempted in the Judean Desert, also known as the Desert of Judah or the Judean Wilderness. It is located southeast of Jerusalem, along the western shore of the Dead Sea.

What was it really like?

Close your eyes for a moment and imagine a landscape of hard rock mountains and deep canyons, torrid heat, harsh sunlight, cracked earth, wind whistling, faraway eagles calling, the sound of your own steps, arid air, dust in your dry mouth, grit on your tongue, the smell of your own sweat, an insatiable thirst and

hunger, pain from split lips and dehydration, cramp in your legs. It is not a pleasant experience.

In the Judean desert, summer temperatures rise to over 45C (or nearly 120F in old currency). For comparison, the average summer temperature in Hertford last year was 22C. There's hardly any rainfall in the Judean desert (less than 50mm a year); nothing really grows there, apart from a few scrubby bushes and flowers, which means any animals that survive there – a few scorpions, reptiles and skinny mammals, such as gerbils, foxes and wolves – are hungry and therefore dangerous.

It makes you wonder why the Holy Spirit – to quote Mark's gospel – immediately drove Jesus out into this inhospitable environment for 40 days without food.

Well, the answer is that, historically, a wilderness was always God's favourite place for a conversation or a proving ground.

For the People of Israel and many of their leaders, the desert was a place of testing, encounter, and renewal. When the Israelites were freed from slavery in Egypt, they wandered for 40 years in the wilderness. This was seen as a time of purification and preparation for entry into the promised land.

Moses went to the mountain of the Lord in the Sinai wilderness and stayed there for 40 days and nights in prayer and fasting.

Elijah, after he was fed with bread from heaven, journeyed through the wilderness without any food for the obligatory 40 days.

So, it shouldn't be surprising that Jesus is in the wilderness for 40 days, because God wants a conversation with him about his big upcoming mission. Satan is there to do a bit tempting.

The word 'tempt' in English usually means to entice someone to do what is wrong or forbidden. The scriptural word used here also means to 'test' in the sense of proving and purifying someone to see if they are ready for the task ahead.

Talking of translations, the Hebrew word for the desert is MIDBAR. Because there are no vowels in Hebrew, the letters that spell it out are M-D-B-R. Coincidentally, this is also how you spell another Hebrew word, MEDABER – to speak.

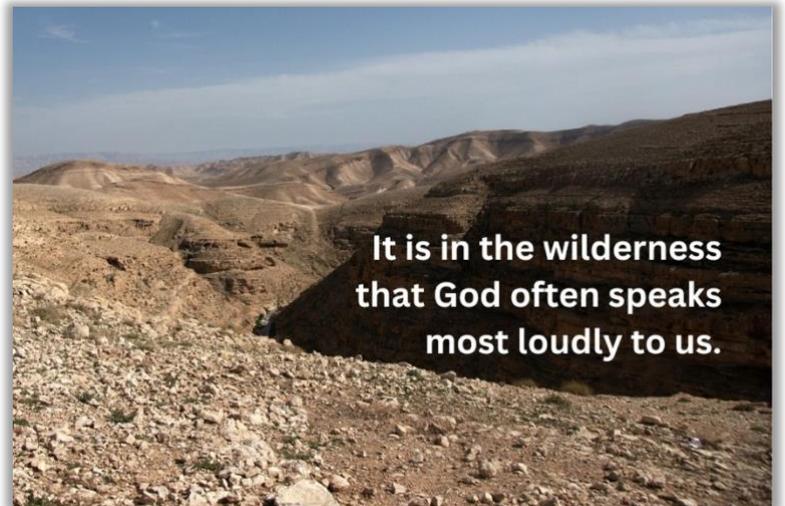
I like Mark's account of the temptation. I used to spend many hours reading my parents' collection of Readers' Digest magazines, including the publication's condensed books. Do you remember those? You could read a shortened version of a Dickens' novel in a couple of hours.

Mark's version of the desert temptation is like that. John and Matthew go into much more detail in their gospels, telling us what Satan said and what Jesus said and all that stuff about stones and bread. Mark cuts to the chase, with no frills. *Jesus was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan and the angels waited on him.* That's it, end of story. The Readers' Digest version.

But short is powerful in this case. Mark's succinct passage is enough to remind me that this is Christ being his most human on earth. He has a wilderness experience, just as **we** have

wilderness experiences in our own lives; where we feel alone, wandering around not knowing what to do or where to turn. The COVID pandemic and lockdown felt like a wilderness time for many people. A major health issue, trouble at work, relationship breakdown, these are some of the desert phases that people travel through in their lives.

And yet, while those times may be painful, true to form, it is in the wilderness that God often speaks most loudly to us. We don't necessarily meet Satan, but we come face to face with the reality of our lives. And,



to use that translation of temptation, we are tested. I don't believe God puts temptations in our way to see if we can resist to prove our faith, but I do believe God allows us to wander in the desert sometimes to remind us how much we should depend on him for strength, direction and guidance.

As we begin to observe our 40 days of Lent, we might be sacrificing some luxury items in our lives as a symbolic gesture to purify ourselves before Easter. But, as we lie dozing in the morning in that half-awake, half-asleep twilight zone and we start contemplating the torment of a day ahead with no biscuits, alcohol, cream cakes or Maltesers, we have to remind ourselves that it's not going to be as bad as the 40 days that Christ spent in the Desert of Judah. And if you are in a bit of a personal wilderness, worrying about something in your life, listen out for the still small voice of God, because, chances are, he's trying to have a conversation with you in the silence of the desert.

Prayer

Jesus, Lamb of God,
when you walked this earth
you did not consider
heavenly equality,
though that was yours to choose.
Instead, you took the role of servant,
and in humility
and obedience
allowed the hot sun to burn your skin,
the desert wind to dry your lips,
the cold nights to make you shiver,
And, in the end, the rough nails of our sin
to be hammered into your flesh
for the sake of our salvation.
And so it is
that we acknowledge you
as Lord of all,
to the glory of God the Father,
Son and Spirit, Three.
Amen