

First Sunday of Lent *Mark 1:9-15*

I wonder what goes through your mind when you hear the story of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness? Does it bring to mind stories you have heard from the Old Testament? Perhaps you recall the narrative of the Israelites and their forty years wandering in the wilderness, before entering the Holy Land. Or, maybe the forty days of Jesus' fasting reflects Moses forty days fasting on Mount Sinai, or Elijah's forty day fast before discovering God in the sound of sheer silence.

In Biblical terms forty was not so much a specific number but more of a general expression for any large figure. However the number forty has great symbolic meaning to Jews, Christians and Muslims even today, and the number is used in terms of time, representing a period of probation and trial. For Christians that period of time called **Lent** is the period of forty days which come before Easter in the Christian calendar. Beginning on Ash Wednesday, it is a season of reflection and preparation before the celebrations of Easter.

In our Gospel reading today Mark tells us that at his baptism, a voice from heaven acclaimed Jesus as God's beloved Son, and that the Holy Spirit descended on him like a dove. It was a glorious moment, but one that was immediately followed by that same Spirit forcing Jesus out into the wilderness.

Mark's account of the wilderness episode is brief, to say the least. For Mark, the temptations we are told of in Matthew and Luke's Gospels, are not important, nor is Jesus' response in quoting scripture. All we have in Mark's account is the fact that Jesus was sent out into the wilderness and that he was there for forty days, tempted by Satan and living with the wild beasts.

The wilderness was, and still is, a stretch of land that lies between the inhabited part of Judea to the north, and the Dead Sea to the South. It is an area of land about 35 miles long by 15 miles wide (*most of which lies below sea level*). It is a place where the hills are like limestone heaps, and the rocks are bare and jagged. In Hebrew it is called "*Jeshimmon*", which means "*The Devastation*", and it was in this lonely place of devastation that Jesus wrestled with temptations before him.

So, what does the wilderness represent for us?

I think it is symbolic, of being deprived of luxury; of being taken out of our comfort zone; stripped of the reassuring material things that make our lives cosy and enjoyable. This Lent, I am sure some of us will be giving up some of the little luxuries that bring us pleasure. But Lent is not simply meant to be a personal diet plan, or a way to show off how much we love Jesus through our sacrifice. The fasting and abstinence that we partake in are meant to draw us deeper into a relationship with the Lord by undergoing some form of sacrifice, some form of suffering.

In contrast to our simple deprivations, Jesus gave up every luxury as he stepped out into a barren wasteland with no food, no house, no bed, no company – nothing.

But it's not just about giving up material things. If we want to follow Christ's example, we too need to loosen our ties with the things we find reassuring and safe.

If we want to share the good news of Jesus Christ with others, we need to step outside our comfort zones and embrace a simpler, and perhaps a more adventurous way of life, reaching out to people in diverse situations and surroundings.

Our reading today also tells us, Jesus "*was tempted by Satan, and he was with the wild animals*". Not only did Jesus step out of his own comfort zone but he also embraced danger. Alone and weary, he was not only incredibly vulnerable to the wolves and other wild animals that roamed the wilderness, but also to the realities of temptation and evil.

But there's another thing in our Gospel reading. Mark tells us that angels ministered to Jesus. God didn't abandon him but took care of him. As we live this risky, dangerous life, we too need God to be there to bring us comfort, and to minister to our needs – to soothe our pain – heal our hurts and strengthen us when we feel exhausted.

That is when we need God – and also the church. That is when we need each other.

Every Blessing June