

Hymns: 238 “Lead us heavenly Father, lead us”
 706 “Christ, be our light”
 235 “Christ our Redeemer knew temptation’s hour”
 405 “Guide me, O thou great Jehovah”

Readings: Psalm 88
 Mark 1:9-15

“IN THE WILDERNESS”

It’s always a relief when the lectionary schedules bring us back to St Mark’s gospel. Especially on the first Sunday in Lent! Where Matthew and Luke, their imaginations touched by the idea of Jesus in the wilderness, have “pushed out the boat” and given us a full-scale and dramatic account of the experience of Jesus in the wilderness, dear Mark is wonderfully brief, succinct, and to the point. Indeed, the whole of his account of Jesus’s desert experience can be repeated here without making serious inroads to the length of this sermon. Here it is:

At once, the Spirit drove him out into the wilderness, and there he remained for 40 days tempted by Satan. He was among the wild beasts; and angels attended to his needs.

There it is! I begin my response to this by expressing surprise at the fact that it’s the Spirit, the same Spirit that has only just been described as having descended upon him “like a dove” at the moment of his baptism, the same Spirit that’s present when the voice attesting that Jesus is God’s “beloved Son” come down from heaven, one and the same Spirit that then went on to drive him into the wilderness.

The Spirit of God present in two entirely different ways, responsible for pushing Jesus (or being present with him) at two fundamentally different moments in his life.

It’s a reminder of the way light and darkness are perpetually at work in human life. It shows us how hope and despair are locked in a seemingly endless struggle. And often, so often, when the lights go out, when despair mounts, and when, like Jesus, we find ourselves in the wilderness, on a blasted heath, in the Slough of Despond, in the valley of the shadow of Death, in the dark night of the soul, we have to dig deep to deal with the darker side of life.

All of these experiences are pre-figured in the simple statement that God’s Spirit was intimately involved both in the affirmation of Jesus as God’s son and, at virtually the same time, his testing time in the wilderness.

I've witnessed this struggle in human life at various points in my ministry. This morning, I want to draw attention to one particularly harrowing wilderness time that occurred whilst I was Chaplain to the newly-established Cancer Ward for Adolescents which was being opened at the Middlesex Hospital. I was the only member of the chaplaincy team with children and, according to the argument I remember being rehearsed at that time, therefore qualified to deal with the patients on this new ward. It was not an easy assignment.

I remember now all those children and young people who, from the moment they were born, brought joy to their parents. They were a gift, full of promise, lives stretching out ahead of them. And here they were, struck down, laid low, being eaten up by the murderous work of cancerous cells.

I remember Danny: they took a huge chunk out of his leg and replaced it with a prosthesis. It was successful at first but the cancer returned. With a vengeance. How will I ever forget his funeral. It was filled with details planned and ordered by Danny. Then there was Matthew - a pale 11 year old with leukaemia. He died after terrible suffering and, as we buried him in the Kensal Rise Cemetery, I noticed that he was laid to rest in the same grave as his mum who, in her mid-thirties, had died two or three years previously. The poor dad (with a younger child) had to re-build his life from scratch. Then there was Samir – a Muslim boy from Khartoum. They amputated his arm before his parents took him back to Sudan where he died shortly afterwards. But the friendship formed at Samir's bedside created a lasting friendship between his parents and myself. And I remember Gavin – a Jew from a secular family, wasting away. His mum was beside herself and simply couldn't come to terms with it. His funeral was such a hard experience for all of us. And a mum (how I regret having forgotten her name) who sat between two beds where her two boys Christopher and Richard were sick and dying.

In all these cases, the garrulous Leslie Griffiths found himself with absolutely nothing to say. I became rabbi, imam, minister, priest, friend by turns. I stayed alongside people in their time of affliction, observed at first hand the wilderness in which they walked. O the memory of those children! O the thoughts of their parents!

I was bound as I saw this senseless suffering, to ask Why? How? The Lord give's and the Lord takes away. The Spirit blesses and then curses. I know that our human life is like that. Of course I know it.

But children! It's completely mindless.

It's in the wilderness, when we're stripped bare, our defences down, our resistance destroyed, that we find ourselves (as the scripture quaintly puts it) "among wild beasts". That's how it's described for Jesus. And that's how it's experienced by so many people. These beasts circle us, they await their moment to strike, they're ready to tear into us, they want to take us apart.

Whilst I was at Cambridge there was a much-vaunted preacher who was Dean at one of the university's most prestigious colleges – Trinity. During my time there, Penguin Books brought out a volume of his sermons. Taking the title of one those sermons, the volume was entitled “The True Wilderness”. The preacher suggested that that's where we sometimes find ourselves. He himself had had a spiritual and mental breakdown and undergone extensive counselling and treatment. Only subsequently did we understand that it was his sexual orientation and the difficulties in those days to be gay that led him into this crisis. His descriptions were hauntingly relevant and universal. He suggested that the temptations experienced whilst we are in the wilderness are:

- to give up, to despair, to become cynical about everyday life;
- to banish from our lives all that we count most dear thus depriving ourselves of all resource;
- to distrust ourselves, to have little confidence in ourselves even when performing simple tasks that have never bothered us before;
- to deny that it's God's Spirit who witnesses to our spirit that we are children of God – thus thrusting God from our presence;
- to renounce our faith and declare our distaste for all that speaks of God.

And, once we give into these temptations, we put ourselves at the mercy of the wild beasts circling around us. What do they amount to? Well, Harry Williams is very explicit on this point:

- terror, panic, fills our very being and make us feel about the most ordinary and un-dangerous things “I can't do it”;
- violence rages inside us, often triggered by something ridiculously insignificant – a word, a glance, someone not noticing us;
- prowling beasts – envy, hatred, malice: “the devil (Satan) like a roaring lion seeketh whom he may devour”.

Williams ends this part of his sermon by pointing us towards a text in the first letter of Peter which declares “Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal which comes upon you to prove you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice, in so far as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed.”

Glory?

What glory?

How can we speak of glory when the Spirit that kindles hope, crushes it. What kind of glory is that? And, when the God who gives us life snuffs it out in such an arbitrary manner, how can we possibly think of the tie between that experience and anything that might be called glory?

And this allows us to move into the last detail from St Mark's account of Jesus in the wilderness. The fierce beasts are there alright. But so too are the "angels who minister to him".

I must note the presence amongst us today of Phil Elliot and his daughter Janice. Phil's darling wife Joyce died a few weeks ago. I was present at their 60th wedding anniversary some years ago. Phil's diamond girl has gone. When he wrote to tell me this he spoke of the deep shock that it had brought to him but, he added, "friends have been wonderful." Angels minister to us in our wilderness. I got to know Phil 30 years ago when his daughter Lorna was in the Middlesex Hospital (up for another mention) Lorna has since died but the friendship continues. And as my attention wanders back to that Hospital I can picture so vividly the angels who ministered to those children and young people on the Cancer Ward. The nurses – so young, so near in age to their patients, so exposed to long-term caring for their patients with all the challenges to their professional "detachment" posed by such contact. They buzzed around, there was no fuss in what they did, they were constantly cheerful and brave in the face of appalling suffering. They exuded love. Oh yes. There were ministering angels in that wilderness alright.

During the time I'm referring to, another innovative ward was opened in the Middlesex Hospital. A ward known as Broderip. It was the first purpose designed unit in a British hospital to care for people suffering from HIV/AIDS. I was there in 1987 when it was opened by Diana, Princess of Wales. The press had one question, and one question only: "would the princess be wearing gloves (to protect her from contact with the patients)"? She certainly wasn't. She shook everyone's hands. She sat on the beds of the patients held their hands and talked to them. She became that morning, the complex woman that she was, a ministering angel.

So, as we look at our own wilderness experiences, it's important to note that Jesus has been there too. He knew about the wild beasts. He knew about the ministering angels. All of which gives us confidence to walk with him towards Jerusalem. We know that Gethsemane lies ahead of us. But we also know about the stone that was rolled away from the tomb.

The journey of Lent has begun. It will continue next week. Amen