**Wilderness**

*And the Spirit immediately drove Jesus out into the wilderness.*

*Jesus was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan;*

 *and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.* - *Mark 1:12*

The word “wilderness” appears in The Bible precisely 284 times. Of these 284 instances, the predominant occurrences are in the Old Testament. The word wilderness features in the Old Testament 231 times, primarily in relation to the Israelites in their Exodus and Exile. In the Book of Psalms, there are 16 references to the wilderness, and it is depicted as a uncultivated, often dry and arid area, a place that is uninhabited, or inhabited only by wild animals; a region of a wild or desolate character, or in which one wanders or loses one's way Metaphorically, it is a place of uncertainty. and even despairing.

For these negative connotations, the wilderness is also a transformative space, the bridge from one way of being to a new way of being. After His baptism and before He begins His ministry, Jesus was in the wilderness for forty days. Jesus’s wilderness experience enabled all that was to follow. Jesus could begin His ministry and enact His mission because His mettle had been tested and His will had been fired. He had accepted the charge and sustained the challenge.

It is important to note, and Mark, Matthew and Luke make it clear— it is the Holy Spirit that leads Jesus into the wilderness. On this point, theologian Jill Weber, in her characteristically light-hearted, yet thought-provoking way, writes: “I notice that it is the Holy Spirit who leads Jesus into the wilderness. This is isn’t exactly the sort of thing I would expect the Holy Spirit to do. Shouldn’t the Holy Spirit be protecting Jesus from the onslaughts of the Enemy, not leading him to them?”

The presence of the Spirit, the Spirit that has just descended in the form of dove at Jesus’ Baptism, is immediately at work. And, this moment is as significant as the moment of Baptism. Indeed, it is in a way another Baptism. As we might say, a baptism of fire. A test of Jesus’ strength, will, determination, resolve, humility, vulnerability, pride, etc and etc

The theme of wilderness seems most apt given our current state of affairs. To be sure, we are all of us quite literally in a wilderness, due to the Coronavirus pandemic with all its constraints and restrictions. However, the landscape I wish to explore is a spiritual one. What is the landscape of my life right now? I was once told a story of an African bishop who never asked people how they were when he met them. Instead, he would ask, directly, “How it is with your soul today?” Which is another way of asking: what is the landscape of my life right now?

As we think about our own individual wildernesses, could it be that the Holy Spirit has led us into a dry and difficult place? And, if so, why?

The wilderness is a place of challenge, but it is also a place of encounter. God is there, alongside and going before, as we are told in Psalm 136:16 “God leads his people through the wilderness for his steadfast love endures forever.” The wilderness and God’s Love are bound together. A bit like the children’s story, We’re Going on Bear Hunt, when we are faced with the wildernesses of our lives we can’t go over it, we can’t go under it, we can’t go around it, we have to go through it! And we can go through it because Jesus has gone through it before us! God is with us and has given us His Spirit to drive us through it.

In this way, the wilderness is also an invitation. God invites us into wilderness to examine the hard, dry, rough, unruly and wild places within ourselves. Samuel Johnson defined wilderness as a

 ‘a tract of solitude and savageness’. In the wilderness of the season of Lent we are called to expose to the light of God’s mercy and love those places of darkness, sorrow, regret and brokenness within ourselves.

The Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness — God’s Hand is in this action, it is part of God’s plan; this episode is key for Jesus’ growth and empowerment. Let us pray today for those who find themselves in wilderness places. As they feel emptiness and longing, may they hunger for God’s word and the Holy Spirit sustain them.

It is also not by chance that this experience takes place within the natural world, the realm of Creation.

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Music note for Day 4:

“Kyrieleison (R fol. 472v)” by Hildegard von Bingen, performed by Sequentia & Benjamin Bagby from the album *Hildegard Von Bingen: Celestial Hierarchy* ©1998 Sony Music Entertainment