

out of wilderness

a sermon preached on the

1st Sunday in Lent

22 February 2015

at

st john's

ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL

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the lections: Genesis 9:8-17, Psalm 25:1-10, 1 Peter 3:18-22, Mark 1:9-15

Each time we enter the Lenten pilgrimage a particular task is set before us. Because of the nature of our humanity, something of what we confront is recurring. We are still the same person – with the same genetics, the same history, the same parents and circumstances of early life, and so on. Here I am again, this is me. Yet the planet revolves, the galaxies expand, evolution does not turn back – thus life is always asking of us some further development. Life calls us to ever deeper layers of our inner being – which is simultaneously deeper layers of the Divine being. Hence, each Lent is both same and different.

When we reflect upon Mark's account of Jesus' wilderness experience perhaps the first thing that strikes us is its uniqueness. The evangelist tells about just one instance of Jesus facing this experience – neatly contained, and tightly compressed, into just thirty Greek words.¹ Yet, we know that in a fully human life there can be many such experiences of being tested in wilderness, even though there may be one experience which stands out. The way we manage that peak experience is profoundly informed by the many lesser wilderness experiences which have prepared us. So when, at the age of about thirty-something Jesus is baptised and immediately driven out into wilderness it seems likely that there have been many preparatory experiences.

Moreover, it will not be the last such encounter. We get something of this sense, when – in his private conversations with his disciples in chapters eight and nine – they repeatedly fail to understand his central teaching about the nature of messiahship, suffering, and kenosis. These episodes convey a profound wilderness sense of loneliness, isolation, and failure. A person who teaches disciples: “when they bring you to trial and hand you over, do not worry beforehand about what you are to say”,² is surely someone in a dreadful pit of wilderness, in spite of, and perhaps even because of, being in the company of others. And of course, the ultimate wilderness temptation of the Christian evangel is the experience initiated with the entry into Jerusalem, culminating in the utter silence and darkness of the tomb.

So it is that at each stage of our pilgrimage life calls us to a particular aspect of the experience of wilderness. What is the particular aspect of wilderness to which you are being called this Lent? What new depths of the same old you are you being invited to plumb more deeply?

The pilgrimage is both intensely individual, personal – and communal, collective. What new depths of the same old nation is Australia being called into? What new depths of the same old parish is St John's Camberwell being called into?

Having said that, it's important to remember that a central insight of the revelation in Christ is that whatever might be accomplished in the collective, communal, domain, the true work always begins within the individual soul. Jesus is sent into the wilderness to enter his own wild, dark, and even 'satanic' depths. He will have nothing genuine to offer the collective, except by undergoing in himself this inner task.

This spiritual teaching is crucial. Christian faith is cheapened and perverted – and ultimately sows the seeds of its own destruction – by attempts to package it and sell it like any other commodity in the marketplace, precisely because it's not authentic, does not organically arise from the depths of wilderness.

You and I only have something authentic and life-giving to offer, therefore, when – following the One whose cross we bear on our foreheads and in our hearts – we speak and

¹ Mark 1:12-13
² Mark 13:11

witness out of our own wilderness of testing. No one in their right mind goes to a spiritual teacher who has not themselves entered their own depths. People were struck by a sense of a ‘new authority’ in Jesus for this very reason.³ Jesus was a true wisdom teacher not because he read about things in the Torah scrolls – but because he had endured the wilderness of his own inner being.

I wonder, what new authority may be coming to birth in you and me, as a consequence of the particular depth of wilderness to which we are being called this Lent?

Finally, we note that in Mark’s gospel there is no polite invitation to Jesus by the Holy Spirit. In contrast to both Matthew and Luke, Mark’s choice of verb is strikingly brutal.⁴ As soon as Jesus is baptised, the Spirit “drove him out”, says the NRSV. The Greek verb is in fact rather more brutal in tone – the same verb the evangelists use when describing the casting out of demons,⁵ and to describe hostile seizure.⁶ Perhaps we are not accustomed to thinking of the Holy Spirit in such terms?

This accurately indicates the spiritual reality of the Lenten pilgrimage. Generally speaking, we do not choose wilderness – but have to be forced there, perhaps against our wishes. The Holy Spirit can at times kick us to the depths we prefer to avoid. The gospel’s promise is that it is precisely out of this encounter that we have anything of value – a true authority – to offer. The only ‘mission’ that is authentic is organically grounded in wilderness.

If this seems too much to bear, remember that though ‘tempted by Satan, and with wild beasts’ – there *are* ministering angels.⁷

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³ Mark 1:27
⁴ Matthew 4:1, Luke 4:1
⁵ Mark 1:34, 3:15, 6:13
⁶ Mark 14:46
⁷ Mark 1:13