

A Sermon preached by the Archdeacon of France
The Venerable Meurig Williams
in the Church of St Pierre, La Chapelle Palluau, Vendée
on Sunday 4th March 2017, being the First Sunday of Lent

If I say the word ‘wilderness’, what picture comes into your mind? May be it evokes images of vast, inhospitable tracts of deserted terrain. Or may be you are prompted to think of the searing heat of the Sahara, with the sight of the occasional Bedouin on a camel; or the war-torn wastelands of Afghanistan. Perhaps you will think of the endless, frozen landscapes of the Arctic, where life is severely and dangerously limited by the extreme cold.

But the wilderness need not be so distant and alien. It can also be very familiar and close to us. It is the home of someone who’s been deserted by her partner; or it can be someone’s whole life because they are shattered by the death of the one who matters most to them. The wilderness can be our loss of self-esteem, because we have just lost our job; or it can be a dramatic and unexpected change in the way we view the future, because we have just been diagnosed with a terminal illness. The wilderness can be living in a strange country with a strange culture, where everyone treats us with suspicion. The wilderness is rarely a place we wish to be. It is tough and uncompromising. To stand any chance of survival in the wilderness requires extraordinary resources and resolve.

But the wilderness is also a place of truth. This is one insight that is frequently spoken about by people suffering from depression. A friend of mine, a poet, has written a book about her experience, and described her depression as a desert.¹ “By knocking you out for a while” she writes “it allows you to ditch the out-of-date ideas by which you’ve been living and enables you to grasp a more accurate description of the terrain.”

But the wilderness can become your mentor, your counsellor, your friend, even. The British theologian, David Jasper, has written of a period of time spent in the Texas desert, and the sacred Indian lands of South Dakota in the USA. In the diary he kept, during this time, he wrote:

Odd things are happening to my sense of time and place. I have travelled 5,000 miles to be in this strange place, but I don't feel remotely lonely or cut off. I am where I am, touching base. This is my home for the time being, and it does very nicely. I should have expected as much, of course – to travel all this way and find a place which has been familiar all along but hitherto largely unfrequented by me.

Jasper is following in the tradition of the Desert Mothers and Fathers, those amazing men and women who turned their back on the cities, and went into the wilderness because they simply longed for God. They knew that, to become whole and balanced people, they had to leave behind the competitive impulses of city life, face their demons and overcome them.

There is a story of one of the newly arrived younger brothers. He went to see an elder, Abba Moses. He was keen to learn, and begged Abba Moses for instruction on the wisdom of the desert. The old man sent him away and said: 'Go and sit in your cell, and your cell will teach you everything.'

In other words, the wilderness will teach you everything you need to flourish. Go and face it: the hunger, the thirst, the silence, the loneliness, and whatever else comes your way. Face the demons that come up from the depths of your soul, however frightening they are. This is how you will learn and grow. This is how you become the person God longs for you to be. That's not bad advice for us to hear at the beginning of Lent.

As we heard in the Gospel (Matthew 4. 1-11) at the start of his ministry, Jesus follows the example of Moses and Elijah, and goes out into the wild places of the Judean desert. He lived on the margins of the world, faces ordeals he must undergo before he can announce the coming of the kingdom and enter his promised land. He faces the questions which we must all face: Who am I? What really matters to me? What are the ambitions driving me? Is my hunger for power or wealth or success just an empty mirage? Or am I being freed from the twisted motives that could diminish me and those around me? Am I free, in nothing more than the love of God, to simply be the person God has made me – and is still calls me to be? In that sense, the wilderness is the place where either flourish or perish.

In one of his poems, the Seventeenth Century priest and poet, George Herbert, called Lent a 'feast' and calls us to "Welcome deare feast of Lent"

Herbert's poem invites us to a banquet of prayer and fasting, silence and humility. These things will nourish us for forty days and forty nights. Lent is a time to clear-out the toxins from our system; it gives us time and space to see more clearly what really matters in life. It is a journey of opportunities that ends with us being greeted by the risen Christ.

The wilderness can also be a place of encounter with God. We are called ever-forward, as Jesus moved forward, through desolation, suffering and death. Lent resources us to move on towards that 'third day', when we are unexpectedly greeted by the miracle of new life. It's a time to come out of our winter hibernation, and walk towards the light of Easter. There, the risen Lord already waits to greet us, to grasp our hand and lift us up to the light of his undying love.

¹ *Sunbathing in the Rain: A Cheerful Book about Depression* Gwyneth Lewis, Flamingo, 2002