

Wilderness: from Wounds to Well-being

May my words...

I don't know how often you think about Wilderness. Today I want to think about wilderness, recalling Jesus being *led by the Spirit into the wilderness* (Matthew 4.1) at the start of our Gospel.

I want to suggest that the gift of the wilderness is one that gives a space for 'emancipated imaginations of alternative' (Bruggemann). A place where we can explore wounds and well being. I believe it is a place to rekindle trust in the healing, eternal work of love that lies at the heart of our lives. I think this is why Jesus went out into the wilderness, to find a place which opened up his ability to receive this gift of space and healing, yes, of challenge, but also of renewal. It is a space which can offer us emancipated imaginations of alternative - a place not only of wound, but also of well-being.

The wilderness is a rich vein within our Christian theology. It can be said to have roots in the chaos of creation (tohu wa-bohu). But the classic example of wilderness is the Exodus from Egypt - a 40 year wandering - where the only goal was that the people would be free to worship, as the people and God develop a relationship of trust that is deepened through communication, facilitated by solitude and isolation.

Indeed, we cannot explore Wilderness, without realising that we are exploring relationship. It is because of relationship that God invites people into the wilderness - to discover themselves, and to discover more about God.

What we also discover when we read the OT is that from a

human perspective there are two key reasons why people go into the wilderness - to run away from one's problems to what seems like a safe haven, or second, being driven against one's will into what appears quite inhospitable and dangerous. And within a story these can easily alternate, indeed are sometimes inseparable.

Moses and Hagar both reveal the importance of wilderness twice - once to run away from oppressive situations and family conflicts. They both encounter God, understand God by new names, receive a promise and are sent back to their difficult situations. So the wilderness might be said to be a place of temporary escape, of transformation.

The second time each of them returns to the wilderness it is more threatening - that borderland between civilisation and chaos. The wilderness can be a place where hope has been proclaimed, but where hope keeps disappearing in the sandstorm. A place where trust often turns to recalcitrance and resentment (T Fretheim), before discovering redemption.

In our Gospel today we hear of Jesus being led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. The temptations - put simply - are to '**do it all, have it all, control it all**'.

More specifically beyond this sense of 'do it all, have it all, control it all', if you listened carefully, you may have noticed that there is a tension between the temptations and Jesus' later activities:

Multiplying loaves of bread,
Taking the plunge into the abyss of death with trust that God would save Jesus,
& becoming king of heaven.

Surely the devil (what ever you may take that to mean) is trying to twist Jesus' attempts to understand his own life and calling and to move it outside God's plan and timetable.

And this all happens in the wilderness.

I wonder what wilderness mean to you? The American Wilderness Act of 1964, describes it as "in contrast with those areas where humanities own works dominate the landscape ... [it is] an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by humanity, where humanity is a visitor who does not remain."

Some of you may have come across Robert Macfarlane's lovely book *The Wild Places* which explores the wild places left in Britain and Ireland - searching out the wilderness that remains. I'm just beginning to read it this Lent and I'm inspired by this journey God invites for each of us to enter the wilderness. What Macfarlane discovers is that there is more wilderness than he thought and he explores these places with great descriptive power and asks where wildness remains. As Gerard Manley Hopkins, in his hymn to the outdoors, "Inversnaid" said:

What would the world be, once bereft
Of wet and of wildness? Let them be left,
O let them be let, wildness and wet;
Long live the weeds and the wilderness yet.

The wilderness, as we've explored, has the sole purpose of growing relationship with God. So I want to invite you to enter into the wilderness this Lent. I wonder where God is inviting you to find wilderness in your life? (...)

This is important because the most profound wilderness experiences are orchestrated by God. They do not always have to be times of trial and pain, they can, indeed, be an

oasis from some sort of abuse or discomfort. It is in the wilderness that we decided whether to trust God even when our own situation may appear to be dire. This can take us to spiritual - or physical - wilderness.

The wilderness is a space for 'emancipated imaginations of alternative', where we step out of the norms we live in, and are taken to a place of encounter - where relationship is central - with ourself and with God. A place where in God's time, we may become a garden of grace-guided action. Not that this is easy. As any of you who have entered therapy or entered strict spiritual discipline will know: the first thing you often encounter is fierce resistance to change.

Now this is important - and I want you to hear carefully. Harry Williams in his wonderful book *True Wilderness* says that it is a down right tragic disaster when we think of Lent "as a time to indulge in the secret and destructive pleasures of doing a good orthodox grovel to a pseudo-Lord, the Pharisee in each of us we call God and who despises the rest of who we are." Hear that again.

Lent is not about self loathing and woe is me. It isn't about being focused on shame and guilt. No!

Rather it is about opening ourselves up to wilderness to be led from wounds to well-being. For wilderness challenges us to remember our weakness and sin are doorways to grace and trust. Sadly, you can't buy your way out of the wilderness. Yet the good news is that the Spirit that drives us into the wilderness is the same Spirit that carries us out.

We may be tempted to try and shelter away from wilderness - with our hearts hardened and lifeless, tempted to disbelieve

our true identity as beloved daughter of God or beloved son to God.

But wilderness is our Lent. This is what we are faced with and what we must deal with. Life, death and resurrection, and it happens over and over and over, until we learn to dance unfettered in the sunlight of the Spirit. I believe the wilderness is the only place where we learn to saturate the most isolated parts of our humanity.

For the wilderness is a true place of relationship. A place that reminds us we don't have to 'do it all, have it all, control it all'. It is a space for 'emancipated imaginations of alternative' where we reject the pseudo-Lord in each of us who despises the rest of who we are. It's a doorway to grace and trust - a doorway to dancing unfettered in the sunlight of the Spirit. As Manley Hopkins said, *Long live the weeds and the wilderness yet.*

So where might your wilderness be this Lent - physical or spiritual? As you journey this Lent, may you come to discover the wilderness as a space for 'emancipated imaginations of alternative' where things can be different. For the deep reality is that Christ is truly the Consolation of all the world: longing to transform you through the gift of wilderness: from wounds to well-being.

Amen.