Lent 1 The wilderness

I often think how the Church’s year gives shape to our concept of time. Christmas is the most obvious example because, despite its religious content, it has been adopted by a secular society to frame time’s random flow in such a way as to help us get through the darkest part of the year. First Advent, or in secular terms *the lead up to Christmas*, then the festival days themselves, followed by the wait for New Year. Our own childhood memories provide an inexhaustible energy to fuel the season and make it seem annually new.

Of course, you might argue that Christianity has slotted its story into the natural rhythm of the earth’s orbit of the sun and that we’d have a very different view of time without seasons and the moon’s orbit around the earth. Our concept of time is conditioned by our situation in this part of the solar system. But we still benefit from other markers: the school holidays, the week and the weekend, Wimbledon Fortnight, St Valentine’s Day and so on. Easter is a fraction more problematic because its date can be anywhere between 22 March and 25 April, but regardless of that we associate it with spring and daffodils, the German Osterglocken, with new life and the hope of a fresh growing cycle.

And so the beginning of Lent can also vary from early February to the middle of March. But it’s still 40 days long. Just like quarantine the forty days a ship had to wait in port during the Black Death to prevent the plague from spreading.

For us, as Christians, it can be about reappraisal of our lives and values. As the Greeks say, Gnothi seauton, Know thyself, a legend written up in Delphi when the ancients went to consult the oracle, with questions ranging from whether or not to sell their sheep or whether or not to go to war. Know *thyself*.

I had a lesson in that this week. At the staff meeting we were discussing who would keep a critical eye on the building and day to day management of SMV during the interregnum. Who would tell the café when their van was parked at the wrong angle in Radcliffe Square or cigarette ends were piling up at the churchyard gate? And Ana Maria, our Parish Administrator, suddenly declared, ‘At the moment Brian is the *overarching menace*.’ But I give seminars in *leadership* and I certainly don’t see that as my style. Do people rally see me like that? The only consolation I could find was that English is her second language. And then, that afternoon, after I had interred Anne Hart’s ashes in Holywell Cemetery, one of her contemporaries said, ‘I hope you won’t be around to bury my ashes!’ Both these comments, I was assured afterwards, were meant positively and lovingly.

I guess if you are to know yourself, you need to hear what other people think about you. One of the things we have been claiming about St Mary’s recently is that we are re-defining the sermon. By which we mean that we have opened up the sermon slot to a wide range of speakers, some of whom would not regard themselves as specifically Christian. And the reason we do this is because it’s important to hear from so-called *outsiders* what they think of the Church and to listen to the questions they present. We also experimented with music in place of the sermon last term and will do the same again next term. But what we haven’t been doing is to critique our own sermons – at least not in any depth. When Desmond Tutu spent a week here twenty years ago, I was privileged to be with him most of the time and what struck me particularly was that after each talk or address he gave, he sat down with his personal secretary and together they went through the speech paragraph by paragraph assessing what worked and what didn’t work. This internationally famous speaker wasn’t fazed by listening to criticism, but seemed to thrive on it.

There are two things that catch my attention in the readings today. The first is the wonderful passage from Deuteronomy in which the Jewish people settling in the Promised Land, a land flowing with milk and honey, are commanded never to forget that their roots are in the wilderness: ‘A wandering Aramean was my ancestor; he went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien.’ This was where their character was formed and where their ethics were forged. The Greek word for law, *nomos*, is also the root of the word nomad, recognising that connection in the making of ancient laws. When you are in luxury, or comparative luxury, remember how you started. There is something spiritually energising about privations of the wilderness and the immense challenges of the nomadic period, which can inform Jewish spiritual life, just as we sometimes look to previous times when we were materially far less well off as a corrective to our present lifestyle, because we know that the lure of materialism can easily distract us from spiritual understanding.

I suppose that’s why some people, at a turning point in their lives – retirement, or change of job, or after an illness, or around a divorce, do something like going on a pilgrimage to Compostela, walking one of the Camino routes to Santiago de Compostela, from France or Southern Spain or through Portugal. Being on your own, the rhythm of walking, being away from the internet are all aids to reflection and reassessment and rebooting your whole mental and spiritual internal connections.

In spiritual terms you go into the Wilderness, literal or metaphorical, as a means of purification. Stripping away the distracting paraphernalia. Asking what ultimately matters? What you value when faced with a new challenge or indeed with crisis or tragedy. Knowing yourself and knowing God’s will. What could I mean by that? I often speak in public prayer of tuning in our wills with God’s will; of getting on the same wavelength. If you have a notion of an underlying meaning or good or purpose in life, which would of course be part of God’s being, then it only makes sense to try to tune in with that and to make that the same wavelength your own. This is extremely metaphorical talk, but I think you know what I’m trying to get at.

Jesus undoubtedly comes out of the Jewish tradition and would have been conscious of the imagery of the wilderness and that imagery would have shaped part of his thinking. He seems to have lived a peripatetic life during his ministry, moving from town to town, and often going off by himself to a remote or private place to pray. So this time in the Wilderness is fully in character. And what we see here is, in the language of North Oxford, a kind of *gardening leave*. Time out. Time thinking about the new job. And so he considers the style and emphasis of his ministry: the ministry Luke tells us a few verses later was to ‘to bring good news to the poor…release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free.’

He is also battling with the temptation to be flashy – jumping of the Temple building in order to impress, winning converts with the shallow trickery of the mountebank and magician. But what kind of discipleship would that produce? True discipleship would require self-sacrifice, taking up your cross to follow him. Of course that language could only be used after his crucifixion and it seems extremely unlikely, to me at any rate, that at the beginning of his ministry he had any idea that it would end as it did. Although of course he would have realised that if he confronted the Roman authorities, it would more than likely end in violence. But his vision was of a more radical Judaism and he probably didn’t think his own people would turn against him. He probably looked for reform. Some might have thought him naïve, but he was not risking his life at this point.

Finally, the story is overlaid with the imagery of Israel’s forty years in the wilderness. So when he is tempted to turn stones into bread, there is an obvious parallel with God providing manna in the wilderness. We usually think he was hungry and therefore was tempted to abuse his godly powers by feeding himself. But the imagery suggests he is tempted to play God and he rejects that strategy. In fact in the synoptic gospels Jesus is never presented as God. He is reticent about such a suggestion and famously in Mark’s Gospel, the first gospel, he even wants to keep talk about his being Messiah a secret.

So it all sounds like a mythical tale with Jesus meeting the devil and arguing with him and refusing the Faustian pact, but it makes plenty of sense in psychological terms, it’s an experience we recognise and perhaps a place we should visit more often in our Christian life if we think it important to ‘Know thyself’.