

IN THE WILDERNESS

So this is the first Sunday in the season of Lent – the run up to Easter.
Easter is going to be very early this year!

Now you can search your Bibles from one end to another and you'll not find the word '*Lent*'. The name (and even the idea of Lent) is not in the Bible.

Of course there are plenty of important words not mentioned in the Bible – like the word '*Christmas*' and the word '*Easter*' for example.

The season of Lent developed as people reflected on the need to stay close to God, and choosing periods of time to concentrate on this.
If it was important for Jesus, it's got to be important for us!

Throughout the Bible the number 40 seems to be significant.
Israel spent 40 years in the wilderness.
Moses spent 40 days on the mountain before receiving the Ten Comandments.
Elijah spent 40 days on the same mountain before he heard the still small voice of God.
And, of course, Jesus spent 40 days in the desert

So the early church decided to announce a 40 day lead-up to Easter and called it Lent.

Now obviously anyone can decide to take some time to think deeply about their faith, and we can choose to do that at any time of year.
But this is a particularly good time – the run up to Easter – a chance to identify with Jesus and to know that around the world millions of others are doing this too.

In the season of Lent these days, time is set aside for us to go deeper in faith..

And we begin by focussing in on the Temptations of Jesus.
We do it every year.
And every year I'll say that temptations aren't temptations if they aren't tempting.
And what Jesus had to face were things that tempted *him*.

Jesus wouldn't be tempted to get out of paying tax by spiriting away his money to an offshore tax haven.

He wouldn't be tempted to set up a pirate video stall on Nazareth Market Street.

He wouldn't be tempted to spend all his days glued to a computer screen.

Or to hide in dark alleys at night ready to mug old ladies.

His temptations had to be things that were realistic ideas for him.

And the things that are *our* temptations will be different.
Probably a lot more trivial.... but temptations nonetheless.

Rather than go back over again the things that Jesus had to face, I'd like to look at the venue for these tests – the desert.

It happened in a desert.

When Jesus was tempted he was in a lonely, inhospitable place. And he had been there long enough to be hungry.

Now Jesus was literally in a desert but I think even if we've never left the UK we have all had our taste of desert.

Maybe the desert looked like a hospital waiting room to you,
or the sleeping bag a friend gave you when you were kicked out of your house,
or the bank statement that proved your gambling habit was right out of control.

The thing is, of course, that we didn't choose those times. We didn't go looking for these deserts.

We didn't welcome them and even if they turned out to be important moments for us – we don't actively seek them out.

Who wants to be pacing up and down in a hospital waiting room, biting knuckles waiting for news of their child whose continued life in this world is touch and go, just so they can reflect on what matters most?

Who wants to have a bust up with their partner so serious that they have to leave the house altogether, just so they can reflect on what matters most?

Who wants to see their bank account cleaned out as a result of their gambling addiction, just so they can reflect on what matters most?

Those experiences are things we wouldn't want, welcome or choose.

They may turn out to be life-changing for us. They may eventually produce a happy ending.

But we sure aren't going to go looking for them...

And this is where Lent is different. This is something we choose.

We choose to go into the desert to meet with God, just like Jesus did before us.

Why would we do this? Are we nuts? Gluttons for punishment?

Think on it this way.

When Jesus went into the desert it gave him the chance to get nearer to God.

It gave him the chance to think more clearly about what his life would be about.

It gave him the chance to set goals.

It gave him the chance to face temptations and recognise shortcuts he could take that would not be good or wise.

It gave him the chance to reaffirm that he was going to trust God alone for the direction of his life.

And all of these things can be part of our Lenten experience too, if we agree to go into the desert for a time.

How do we do that?

It's not a case of booking flights to Tel Aviv and looking for a stretch of sand.

It's consciously deciding over the next few weeks to draw nearer to God and to turn down the volume of life all around us.

Because one reason why we are not close to God is not necessarily because we don't want to be, or that we fill our lives with things that God wouldn't approve of.

It's just that we fill our lives 'full stop'.

Our lives are so full there's not much space left for anything extra or new.

We have become used to a fast pace of life, the action, the loud soundtrack to every day that we've got to the stage when we struggle to cope with silence, with stillness, with stopping. It all seems foreign to us.

When we're not actually working, we fill up with other things in order to keep ourselves occupied.

A wee jaunt to Silverburn, re-runs of old *Friends* episodes, a good murder mystery novel, Facebook, a couple of glasses of Jack Daniels, picking up materials from the arts and craft shop, some rounds of golf.

Nothing wrong with any of these things but they can often act as diversions – they're there to keep us busy – keep us occupied – anything rather than being quiet and reflective.

It used to be that when you were on a train journey you had a wee while to relax and think. Not now, when you've got your mobile phone beside you. Now it's time to get in touch with someone.

We are not good at stopping.

Once you take the headphones off, the silence can get really loud.

Once you turn the television off, the nights can get really long

And the reason why we need a period like 40 days is that we can't just go from switching off our mobile phones to being instantly aware of God's voice in our lives.

We need to take some time to adjust, to tune into God and to become aware of God's voice.

There's lots of things we can do in the period of Lent.

One thing is actually **not** to do something.

It's been a commonplace idea to give something up for Lent. In other words, copy Jesus who gave up comforts to go into the desert without food, by sacrificing some of our own comfort to get a sense of what really matters.

That can be a good way of identifying that we are in control of our lives and not slaves to our appetites and urges. It also can be useful in working out whether some of our habits have become addictions and there are things in our lives that need addressing.

Another thing to do for Lent is the opposite.

Instead of **giving** something up we could **take** something up. It could be anything from volunteering at a local foodbank or homeless shelter, to making more time for prayer and reading to grow in faith.

Or there may be something in your life that you could improve on and you want to take some time to look at that.

The wee piece of paper in the Order of Service was spotted in another church. It gives you some ideas of things you can do – and of course you're not just limited to what is written there.

Last week we had the reading about Jesus calling disciples, and the story of him calling some fishermen.

These fishermen had just had a very bad night's work. They had been out all night and caught nothing.

So Jesus said to Peter, *"Push your boat out further to the deep water, and you and your partners let down your nets for a catch."*

When they did this, immediately they caught so many fish that their nets were about to break and their boats were about to sink. They had to call their friends to come out to help them land the catch.

Now I didn't mention this last week, but I came across a sermon that a Bishop called Robert Wright had written about this incident.

It was called *"Why Some People Don't Catch Fish."*

And in the sermon he outlined a few humorous reasons why.

But one of his points was this.

People don't catch fish because they don't go to the deep water.

The deep water is where the fish are. If you want to be successful you have to go there.

The deep water might ask more of us, and the shallow water seems much safer and easier, but if we want maximum results we need to go deep.

Now substitute some words.

Instead of "catching fish" let's say we are looking for spiritual wisdom or insight or growth, or love or peace, the words remain true.

Some people don't have the things they need spiritually because they don't go deep.

Deep water takes commitment, risk and faith but its there that we find what we need.

As it was for Jesus, deep water is where we have to go in order to get what God wants for us.

(Very Rev Robert C Wright: Why Some People Don't Catch Fish, Day 1, 2010)

The season of Lent is a call to us to venture out a bit deeper and discover more of who we are supposed to be – (and like Jesus) discover our deepest and truest identity.

Get rid of the things that are holding us back, however tempting they may be, draw closer to God, and get ready to trust God with our lives and our futures.

In a sermon on this passage called "*The Wilderness Exam*" a great preacher called Barbara Brown Taylor ended with these words and I use them in closing.

"It would be a mistake for me to try to describe your wilderness exam. Only you can do that, because only you know what devils have your number, and what kinds of bribes they use to get you to pick up the phone.

All I know for sure is that a voluntary trip to the desert this Lent is a great way to practice getting free of those devils for good -not only because it is where you lose your appetite for things that cannot save you, but also because it is where you learn to trust the Spirit that led you there to lead you out again, ready to worship the Lord your God and serve no other all the days of your life."

(Barbara Brown Taylor: Day 1 2010, The Wilderness Exam)

Luke 4:1-13

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