

Lost in the wilderness – and found

I have had one very fleeting experience of feeling lost in the outback.

It was between Cobar and Broken Hill on flat saltbush country changeless to the horizon. It was a late Spring afternoon. The wild flowers were in contagious abundance.

I was miles from anywhere and there was a glow about the day.

I pulled off the road and went for a walk. I followed the course of a dry wash for a quite a while, then went on a little further.

I stopped and looked around.

Then I realised that I was no longer sure of the direction back to the car. I had been led astray by a gentle curve in the dry wash I had been following and there were absolutely no familiar features to guide me back.

It was only a moment.

I sat and listened.

In the distance I heard the sound of a truck or road-train making its way along the road. I recovered my bearings and found my way back.

But I remember that brief disconcerting, vulnerable moment only too well.

The journey from Lent to Easter begins with a much more intense experience.

We know the story well, of Jesus in the desert, fasting and struggling, battling temptation. For Jesus it was a time when everything was questioned and tested¹.

“If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become bread....”

“If you are the Son of God... worship me and all will be yours,.

“If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here...”

Strange as they might sound, these temptations are not biblically

¹Lk 4.1-13

unique.

They are not at all unfamiliar, for they are the basic temptations of human power, gift and opportunity.

“Command these stones to become bread” The temptation of exploitation.

“Worship me....then all will be yours”. The temptation of expediency.

“Throw yourself down from the temple....the temptation of the spectacular, the temptation of manipulation.

These are the temptations of every political process, every election campaign, every boardroom and workplace.

These are the temptation of the wilderness.

It's the place where nothing seems secure and all things are questioned.

It's the place of vulnerability where we find ourselves alone and unsure.

It's the place where our own darkness comes to us as a seducing friend.

Now the desert is not a place of choice.

We go there not willingly.

But often enough, life seems like a desert,
an open, hard and empty space,
when we struggle and seem to make little progress,
when we are weighed down with our own shortcomings,
and prayer seems to bounce of a brassy heaven.

It's a dry place in the desert.

So easily we can see it as a godless place.

But our Gospel today encourages us to see those hard open spaces in a different light. For the Gospel writer the desert is where the journey to Easter begins.....

For Jesus it is the prelude to his public ministry,
the beginning, the foundation, from which so much will grow.

The wilderness is the place where we encounter our shadows,
and encounter our truths:

For Jesus as he begins his earthly ministry.

For the People of God.

For the Church.

For you and me....

As individuals,
the place to begin the journey of faith is in the wilderness....in
the desert, in the empty place of struggle.

Where is that place in your life?

The wilderness parts of our lives,
are bits we tend to suppress, bury,
cover up, polish up, deny, avoid at all cost!

The fundamentalist has no time for visiting the wilderness.

They live in the castle of certainty.

Lent calls us to a different place,
to faith questioned, tested in the wilderness of emptiness and
struggle.

The journey of faith begins when we are prepared to go there,
for the wilderness is also the place of discovery and truth.

Often enough the wilderness comes to us unwanted.

But Lent calls us to visit it intentionally,
to go to that place and ask once more the honest questions of life
and living and faith and purpose, to go there and find someone,
whose face is remarkably like that of our own....

You have but one life, and it is short. What is it you are filling
your life with? Is it true, is it worth it, is it authentically you? Or
have you lost yourself in the traffic of living?

These are the questions that Lent bids us ask,
the wilderness questions of being and life and purpose and call,
not to make us glum and repressed as some Christians appear,
but so that we can find the true self we often misplace on life's
way.

When we are going through a personal desert,
it is easy to feel quite God-forsaken,
as if prayer is empty and God mockingly absent,
and all is hard, so very hard.

Yet as our Gospel reminds us,
it is the Spirit of God which takes Jesus
into this desert of aloneness and struggle,
of question and turmoil.

It was from this wilderness that Jesus came proclaiming the
kingdom.

It was from this wilderness that Jesus began his journey to the
Cross, for it was there that Jesus rejected all the false and
manipulative ways to exercise his ministry.

So God is not absent in the desert of questioning and struggle,
though some would have him live only within the cloisters of
certainty.

God is no sugar Daddy,
to be found only in the warm and fuzzy places.

God is a God who often calls us, his people,
out of the familiar into the unknown,
out of the safe into the uncertain.

Whatever your wilderness, God can be found there.
The wilderness, with all its desolation,
is the place of encounter and meeting with God,
and with our true selves, so easily mislaid.

So decide to make a pilgrimage of the Spirit this Lent
Take time to step out of the traffic and ask the deep questions
again, those questions of authenticity and purpose and call,
that in the busyness of living, we can easily avoid.

Visit the wilderness this Lent.
Go there and find yourself again.