

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Sermon – 1st Sunday of Lent

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All Saints' Marseille

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Can you believe that we already have a tenth of our Lent journey behind us? And I haven't finished yet pondering the Church's invitation on Ash Wednesday to 'observe a holy Lent, by self-examination and repentance; by prayer, fasting, and self-denial; and by reading and meditating on God's holy word' – and to adjust my to-do list for Lent accordingly.

Over the next six weeks, many people will engage creatively with the Lent tradition. Some will continue the ancient practice of giving something up as a way of identifying with Christ's forty days of fasting in the wilderness. Others may add something to their life: more time spent in prayer, more attentiveness and generosity towards those in need. Others may claim more quiet time and space for themselves. It could be a time to sit with our hungers, our wants, and learn what they teach us. Can we hunger and still live? Lack and still be generous? A time to learn what we are really famished for – friendship, meaning, quality time spent with our families, time spent with God ...

With a whole month between Candlemas and Ash Wednesday, I had plenty of time to get ready: I piled up books recommended by colleagues, friends, and archbishops, enrolled for our Lent group, put the 'Live Lent' app on my phone, and also got a hard copy of it, prepared action songs with the children at school to launch Lent, planned more time outdoors to contemplate God's creation (and get a little exercise), promised myself to be more committed to decluttering my home... So I thought I was ready.

And then, for the past two weeks, I spent so much time watching and reading the news that it felt like inhabiting a very uncomfortable place, a place of solitude, danger, fear, and disorientation. A wilderness.

And so it was that this year's Lenten journey began in this wilderness.

We know, don't we, that Lent is a challenging time. Most of us have comfortable and secure lives. Who'd like them to be challenged? So we'd rather watch with some detachment how Jesus fasts and is tempted.

Yet we cannot but begin our journey with Christ in the wilderness, because that is where we live. He is out there, hungry and hurting, because the world is hungry and hurting. Jesus goes into the wilderness, and he fasts; he leaves behind everything else that one needs even for bare existence, to find God, to belong to God to the exclusion of everything else that makes up human life. This is his proclamation that one thing only is necessary, to find God.

Over the centuries, many Christians wanted to withdraw to the wilderness, be that physically or symbolically, to stand where Jesus has stood, alone before God, in detachment from selfish concerns. In the first centuries, the desert fathers and mothers who withdrew to the deserts of Syria, Palestine and above all Egypt, had a lifestyle of great simplicity, with fasting, solitude, silence, vigil, prayer and poverty – one can 'hear' its echo in the Lenten practices that many church traditions still encourage, a tradition that reached Europe through monasticism, life in monastic communities, who have wanted to share a life of prayer, meditation and work. The desert fathers and mothers showed by simple but practical living that the Gospel is both true and real, and it is open for all who in sincerity want it.

Few among us would go so far today as to practise a monastic type of Lenten discipline. Nevertheless, there is much for us in today's Gospel reading to take on our Lent journey and beyond, whether we give this well-known temptation story a literal or a spiritual sense.

We don't always – if at all – choose to enter wilderness, to experience challenges, loss, pain, a time of trial. But wilderness happens, in the guise of a difficult relationship, a hospital waiting room, a panic attack, a sudden loss ... A place of uncertainty, of bewilderment and disorientation that strips us bare, both before God and evil. This brings us face to face with the temptations in our own life, with competing stories about who we are, what the meaning of our life is, and where we are going.

Jesus engages in a verbal sparring match with the devil, in the wilderness. When the devil offers a story of self-indulgence (make yourself bread from stones!), of self-aggrandisement (all the nations of the world will belong to you if you worship me!), and of self-serving religious identity (if you are God's beloved, cast yourself from the top of the temple!), Jesus offers the story of God being his source of life and identity. He chooses the path of trust in God over the security of meeting the world's expectations. Jesus affirms the primacy of God and of God's purposes for himself and for the world. It is here, in the wilderness, confronted with temptation, that he prepares to announce good news to the poor, freedom to the oppressed, the year of the Lord's favour.

Like many others, I so often give in to the temptation to define my own existence, to accumulate 'stuff' as a reflection of my identity, but it is in the wilderness that we are reminded that God is the origin of all that we are. We need to get to this place, so that we learn this lesson, but I can see, in my own life, how much I would like to avoid it.

We have to learn how to let the Spirit lead us out of that place within ourselves where hungers, dreams and fears try to shut out the voice of God – to allow ourselves to be led to an uncomfortable and challenging place with God, where we should kneel before the hopes and hurts of a broken world, where we should seek to bring healing and to bear witness to God's promises.

I'm someone who can't wait to get beyond the literal sense of Scripture, yet, these days, I cannot prevent myself from thinking about the long journey in the wilderness that has begun for millions of Ukrainian people who have had to flee their homes, confronted as they are with the terrors and losses of war. What will be the Lenten journey of other millions, across the border, who trust the one who proclaims that authority over kingdoms of the world and their earthly glory have been given to him, and who promises to share them with those who worship him?

We cannot escape the wilderness this year – we will stay there longer than we imagined a few weeks ago. Our greatest vulnerabilities and needs will be laid bare before God. We will look evil in the face, we will hear his voice.

Let Lent, then, be a time when we walk humbly and closer with God, when we put our trust in him, and when we direct our lives to doing his will in the world. And may we hear God whisper: 'Behold, I am doing a new thing, [...] I am making a way in the wilderness.' (Isaiah 43.19)

May God grant us the grace always to choose to be his, in the wilderness of our world and wherever our journey takes us.

Amen.