

**Homily 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of the Year (C) Sunday 24<sup>th</sup> January, 2010.**

**Mass Readings: Nehemiah 8:2-4,5-6,8-10; 1 Cor 12:12-30; Luke 1:1-4; 4:14-21.**

Jesus, with the power of the Spirit in Him, returned to Galilee. From where? From the desert, from the wilderness, from emptiness, from loneliness, from the place of temptation and hunger and thirst and confrontation and hardship, from the place no one visits, from the place from which all seek to escape; He returned from there. He began His ministry from there – that’s important for us to remember. That’s what I would like us to reflect upon this morning. He was led into the desert by the Spirit, and returned from the desert with the Spirit. Only now with the power of that Spirit more completely His. In His humanity Jesus too had to grow. Although His state was divine, Paul says, He emptied Himself and became as we are, though without sin, so as to grow as we have to grow. The desert is *the* place of growth in the life of the Spirit. As the Lord said to the prophet Hosea, speaking of the nation of Israel: *“I will lead her into the wilderness, and there I will speak to her heart.”*

It is in the desert that God speaks to the heart. The desert is an important place to learn how to listen to our depths, how to listen to the voice of God who speaks to us from there. There are other voices in the desert of course, voices of temptation, despair and anxiety, but if we can stay, and become still enough, we will hear a voice deeper than those other voices; the voice of God, telling us not to be afraid. The desert teaches us discernment; how to choose to listen to the voice that matters. God leads me into the desert to speak to my heart, my depths, so that my heart may then speak for Him, speak to others of Him, in His name, more confidently, with His power anew in me.

From the desert Jesus emerged with a new voice, a voice that spoke with authority, not like that of the Pharisees and Scribes. The desert is an important place, a fruitful place, a meeting place. Most importantly it is an empowering place. It is the place where God speaks to our heart, and in that speaking to us in our depths He deepens us, awakens us, invigorates us, and empowers us afresh with His Spirit. But it’s a hard place to be, a difficult place to stay. If you want to be a disciple of the Lord Jesus, really want to be, and He wants you to be, then it is into the desert that the Spirit will lead you. Therefore, and this is crucial to remember, the wilderness is not a place of abandonment by Him but of encounter with Him, a place of meeting, of intimacy, of preparation, of renewal, of deepening – all for the purpose of a greater fruitfulness at the service of others. We so often interpret the desert as a place of loss, but in fact it is quite the opposite. It is the place of enrichment. *“Those who bear fruit for me my Father will prune, so that they bear even more.”*

What do I mean here by the desert? It’s not a place where I immediately want to go. It wouldn’t be the first venue on my list of away-days. By the desert, I’m thinking of all the places, the moments, hours, days, weeks, even months and years in our lives, when it seems we have lost the plot, lost our bearings, cannot find an understanding ear or a receptive heart. Bereavement, redundancy, unemployment, misunderstanding, failure, grief, anxiety, loneliness, boredom, dryness, sickness, emptiness, doubt, despair, rejection, pointlessness – all have the character of the desert. What’s vital to know is that they are not the place of God’s

forgetfulness of us, but more specifically the place of His special loving intimacy with us. The wilderness is the place to which He invites us, in which He waits for us. It's where He seeks to share more intimately His presence with us – His articulation within us, if we so permit it, of a new voice, His very own voice.

I will lead her into the desert, meaning I will permit the desert into her life, so that I may speak to her heart. Not only speak *to* her heart but *through* her heart. It is in the desert that we can ourselves find a new voice with which to proclaim freedom for those in captivity, new sight for the blind, new courage for the downtrodden, and a new authority to speak of God's blessings. I've always liked very much what St Jean Vianney, the patron saint of the parochial clergy, once said of the priest's ministry in the confessional. He once said: "For the priest to have anything worth saying or offering at all to people, in confession, he must have had his own heart broken many times." Meaning he must have been in the desert himself – often. Heart-break often happens in the desert; either the desert of loneliness or the desert of the sharp reminder of and encounter with one's own weakness and need for mercy. If the priest is not spoken to in the desert of his own heart, by the One who speaks in the desert to the broken-hearted, how can he touch or speak to the broken-heartedness of others? This is not only true for the priest of course but for each of us. Each of us through our baptism and confirmation shares in the priesthood of Christ whose heart was pierced that we might live. So, as Paul writes in his letter to the Galatians, we too must share one another's burdens and so build up the Body of Christ.

In the desert we not only meet the One who speaks to our heart, our God, but we meet others also. In the desert we meet the pains and needs of others. So when Jesus emerged from the desert, filled with the power of the Spirit, and spoke in the synagogue, all eyes were fixed on Him. When he spoke of liberty for captives, sight for the blind, freedom for the downtrodden, they felt that He was speaking directly to them – which He was of course. He taught in their synagogues and everyone praised Him.

The folks in the synagogue had presumably heard this text many times before. What they had not encountered before was the freedom and authority of the speaker. Jesus was Himself the fulfilment of the promises made in the text He was reading. In Him the words came to life even as they listened, just if they were meant and were written uniquely for each person there. Simply to be in His company was to be in the company of One who had stared the worst in the face and not been cowed by it. All eyes in the synagogue were on Him. Simply to look into His eyes was to come face to face with the victory over the worst in one's own life.

Desert experiences are permitted us so that, under Christ, our lives may similarly share His authority and be evidence of His victory. It's not what we say that matters here, even what we do, but who we are. What we say or do is only given authority by who we are. Who we are is given authority by being with Him. "*You are my witnesses because you have been with me,*" He tells the apostles. You bear witness to Him not because you are a fantastic speaker, or because you are of a perfect character, or because you are a model of virtue, but because you have been with Him, because you have found Him in that place within why He waits for you, that place in your heart where He is, where there is already victory, where already love is stronger than fear, because He is there.

When we consume the Eucharist we become the Eucharist. And what is the Eucharist but Jesus Himself? We receive Him to become Him, to be in our lives the fulfilment of His promises to liberate and heal. It's as if He wants to say to others through us, "See what I can do with those who trust in me. My promises of liberation and healing are being fulfilled even as you can see in this person's life, in this follower of mine." That is our vocation, to be in His hands an instrument, a sign, concrete evidence of His power to set people free, give new sight and raise up what has been downtrodden. Holding you and I up before others He wants to say of us, taking us, blessing us, breaking us and sharing us: "This is my Body given for you, my Blood shed for you." The desert may be a hard place to be, but the One who waits for us there promises great things for those who meet Him there – great things for them and great things through them. May those promises more and more be fulfilled in your life and mine.