

Homily Lent 1 Sunday 21st February, 2010.

Mass Readings: Deuteronomy 26:4-10; Romans 10:8-13; Luke 4:1-13.

The first Sunday of Lent always carries as a theme the entry of Jesus into the wilderness. Matthew and Luke tell us that the Spirit led Him there. Mark more forcefully tells us that the Spirit drove Him there. The desert is a hard place. Rarely is it likely to be the preferred venue in holiday brochures.

“Where are you going for your holidays this year?”

“Oh, we thought this year we’d go to the Sahara.” You might think that a little bit strange.

“Did you have a good week-end?”

“Oh great week-end thanks, we went to the Arctic.”

“Oh.....no accounting for taste!”

The desert is a place of loss – and confusion and disorientation. We don’t choose to go there. Sometimes the wilderness comes to us, just turns up. There can be many causes. Some turmoil perhaps, some crisis, bereavement, unemployment, sickness, or some strange compelling inner searching or cry after something, some sharp unavoidable pang of hunger. Luke only carries the detail that Jesus was led there, full of the Spirit. Jesus at His baptism heard the voice of His Father and was filled with the Spirit - *and was made hungry, filled, with longing, and filled with emptiness*. When the Spirit fills us, something strangely opposite can occur, we get empty, we get hungry – or disturbed, as Peter was, remember, when he landed a boat full of fish after Jesus had asked him to put out into deep water, and that after a night of fishing and finding nothing. Or when the Archangel Gabriel came to Mary and deeply disturbed her with his greeting. She went off then into the hill country to her cousin Elizabeth, with a hunger. Jesus went into the desert led by hunger, or as Mark more sharply puts it – driven by hunger. Jesus entered the wilderness *because* of hunger, full - but hungry. He didn’t simply encounter hunger once there. It was hunger that led Him there. The hunger we are dealing with here is interior. We enter Lent hungry. Why do we fast, to get hungry? No, to recognise we already are hungry.

So entering fully into Lent doesn’t necessarily mean *becoming* hungry. Entering fully into Lent means acknowledging bravely and honestly that *we are in fact already* hungry, perhaps seriously so, but have avoided the desert which is the real place of encounter with our hungers and their hidden message. The desert is the real place of discernment and inquiry over what our hungers are actually about, and where they could really go and be satisfied and re-interpreted, leading to much greater intimacy with God and a wider service of others, and where they certainly must not go, where Satan wants them to, where he can destructively misuse them – turning them into self-pity, discouragement, and the acting out of addictive and destructive patterns of behaviour. So the Lenten desert isn’t a barren place at all but a place of special responsibility and discernment.

The most important element about all our experiences of derailment, bereavement, anguish, sorrow, loss, and hardship - all the human heart's predicaments or hungers – our deserts - is that they carry within them a great potential. We have to learn this. It's a hard lesson because the desert is not a place we want to go or stay. It's the place of God's apparent silence and absence. "Why should this happen to me - to anyone?" That's the cry of the wilderness. "Is anyone there?" "Does anyone care?" We cry, as if each day and night is a coming home to a dark empty house full of the ghosts of absent loved ones. That's the desert cry. "God is dead. God is a delusion." That's the lament of the wasteland. Now, the scriptures know this cry. Israel often cried thus to God. They said to Moses, "*Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you brought us to the desert to die? What have you done to us by bringing us out of Egypt?*" (Exodus 14:11) The psalms frequently carry the lament of a nation in mourning and longing. The scriptures teach, however, through the great depth of their human spiritual experience, that the desert isn't simply the place of our being abandoned but of our being met, and embraced. The desert isn't the place of rejection but of intimacy. The prophet Hosea recalls the voice of God saying of Israel: "*I will lead her into the wilderness, and there I will speak to her heart.*" (Hosea 2:14)

So much of all our desert longing, and our addictive behaviour, is pain seeking after meaning, seeking after a purpose and a direction. Addictive patterns of behaviour have aptly been described as hungers that have gone to the wrong address, in other words hungers denied a proper hearing, not properly discerned, not creatively carried, not attentively listened to, not patiently purified, and for this you need the desert. Lent can serve this purpose. When everything falls apart we have to be wise enough not to assume that this is purely negative. It's quite possibly, even probably, a visit of the Holy Spirit! As the book of Proverbs tells us: "*The Lord disciplines those whom He loves, as a father the son he delights in.*" (Prov 3:12) The well known Jesuit spiritual writer and peace activist, Fr. Daniel Berrigan SJ, often spoke about Jesus as 'that great wrecker of lives!' Peter, Paul, John, Augustine, Francis and most of the saints were nearly all first wrecked by Jesus before He restored them in a fashion they hitherto would not have imagined possible. There is about the Holy Spirit's loving a wounding, or as Mark puts it, a driving, so that we will come to a deeper involvement with whom we truly are now, and can become – hence the desert, hence Jesus' journey there; hence someone else's presence there also – Satan. Jesus takes us apart *only* to reconstruct us more beautifully. Satan takes us apart only out of malice, only to destroy us. How important the desert is as a place of encounter, struggle, possibility and real growth.

Satan knows how dangerous to his destructive plans is pain understood, pain listened to, hurt carried creatively, wounds with a meaning, brokenness re-formed into a message – hunger carried to the proper address, who is always God. God is the fulfilment and explanation of every hunger. So we hear today of the devil's attempts to re-direct the hunger, the good and holy hunger of Jesus, that He brings from His being filled with the Spirit into the wilderness. Satan rarely tempts us to do something obviously wrong, but something apparently good for an ultimately damaging purpose. All the temptations put to Jesus are to find an address for His hunger to love and to serve and to save, which is the Spirit's commission to Him, a hunger that is obviously good, away from its prime purpose, which is the glory of His Father, to a degraded purpose which is the adornment of Himself. Satan seeks to use the vulnerability of the humanity of Jesus to wreck the intimacy within the Holy Trinity – since he has a hatred of both God and

humanity. This is why Jesus' temptations were so terrible, because their consequences were of infinite significance. All this He faced for you, for me, for our freedom. For us He faced the worst in Satan, and overcame it. What is always most important to remember in the celebration of Mass is that we come to share in, to receive, the victory already won for us. We rejoice in the fact that the temptations we face have already been conquered. In Christ all our temptations have been overthrown.

Satan seeks only to destroy us and our potentially wonderful intimacy with God and with other people by redirecting, therefore disempowering our hungers, short-circuiting them, and sending them to the wrong address. For example, the alcoholic, instead of pouring yet another scotch needs to listen to what's hurting, to the hunger within, and that's hard, but not impossible. Equally so, the person fascinated by pornography, instead of endlessly logging on to certain websites, needs to listen to the anguished cry within for true intimacy and the hunger for real relationship. The man for whom work has become the only home he seems to know, or the woman for whom being a victim has become the only way she understands herself, needs to understand the hunger and the pain that's there, what it's about and what could be its most important journey – into God's immense power to heal and to transform. And God does this in so many ways; through prayer, through the Sacraments of Reconciliation and the Eucharist, through various healing, counselling and therapeutic ministries, through deep and true friendships, through loyal and faithful spouses. These are all the ministering angels that occupy the desert as well as the wild beasts.

The next sentence after the temptation in the wilderness concludes reads: "*Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit.*" His hunger having been carried, faced, listened to, honoured, surrendered completely to God, was transformed into an immense power. And it's the same He wants for you and me. On the other side of the hunger we bravely carry, face, listen to, honour, and surrender to God, are the persons whom God wants to touch through our desert journey. They cry out for us to be faithful. May God make us so.

And may He bless and keep you, and guide and befriend you by His angels in this holy and joyful season.