

May I speak in the name of God, The Father, The Son and The Holy Spirit, Amen. Today is the first Sunday in this important season of Lent and as always the Gospel reading is that familiar story in all the synoptic Gospels of Jesus's temptation in the wilderness. It's a subject that we all know something about, a story we're familiar with. Oscar Wilde said he "could resist anything except temptation."

There was once a newly married couple and the husband was going through the credit card receipts to try and keep things on budget. He noticed a \$450 charge to Nordstrom's. He said to his wife, "Do you know anything about this?" She said, "Oh yes, I was going to mention it, but I was in Nordstrom's the other day and I noticed this beautiful dress. It was \$450 but it was as if the Devil was saying to me, "Try it on, it's beautiful, it's just for you." The husband said, "Well you know what we do when that kind of thing happens to us, we say as our Lord said, "Get behind me Satan." He said, "Did you say that?" She said, "I did." "But what did he say?" said the husband. "Well he said it looked fantastic from behind as well."

Enough frivolity for Lent, I want to say something about the who the how and the where of Luke's account of the temptation of Jesus. The who question is easy. Who led Jesus into the wilderness? Did Jesus think it was a good idea to go out there? Did the Devil lure him? No, look at how the Gospel begins. "After his baptism, Jesus full of the Holy Spirit returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit into the wilderness" It was the Spirit of God who led Jesus into the wilderness. The Devil didn't instigate Jesus's time there, it was the Spirit. The Devil simply took advantage of where Jesus was.

Our reading has a rather ominous end to it, if you look at the end it says, "The Devil departed from Him until an opportune time." Maybe that's something that's common with our experience, it's when we're weak that we're open to temptation. That was Jesus's experience, the Devil came to Him after 40 days of fasting. When he was famished, that to the Devil looked like an opportune time.

What about the how? How was Jesus tempted then? I think we have less in common with Jesus here, look at the first temptation. "If you are the Son of God, turn this stone into bread." I'm confident I'm not going to face this particular temptation as unlike Jesus, I'm

not the Son of God and even on a good day I can't turn stones into bread. In my experience I've only ever been tempted to do the things which might be possible. If it's something I can't do I'm not tempted to do it. One might say Jesus was tempted in ways that we're not.

Given that and the fact that many of you will have heard lots of sermons about these three temptations, I'm going to move on and say something about the where of these temptations. As I reckon it's in answering this question that we'll find most in common with this story. That's where we'll find it resonating with us. Where did the temptations occur? Well, in a way that's easy: the wilderness. To the first hearers of this story they would have a strong sense of what that wilderness looked like. It was a narrow strip of land, very arid, very mountainous, west of the Dead Sea, very little vegetation, just a very, very barren place.

We may not have such a strong sense of the geographical place that's being referred to here. But I reckon that we've all been to a wilderness, that's a place that we're all familiar with. I'm not talking here about the high desert. It could be that the wilderness for us has taken the form of a doctor's surgery as we wait for a prognosis. As we mourn the loss of a loved one. Maybe it's a cheap motel room that we're sleeping in because we've been kicked out of home. Those are all desert places. Maybe the wilderness for you is deep in your own soul. Many Christian people as they refer to their Christian lives, they talk about a desert experience, which might mean they've gone weeks, months, years without a sense of God, with feeling that God is far away, if anywhere at all. I know I've felt that, and it can last a long time

Kind David, the Great King of Israel who wrote so many glorious Psalms, many of them come out of his own experiences of being in a desert place both metaphorically and literally. Take the words of Psalm 42, that Palestrina put to music that we're going to here later in Latin. This is what the words say in English. "As the deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, oh God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God." These are the words of someone in a dry, desert, wilderness place. When we find ourselves in such a place we need to remember that many people have been there before and it's often in those times, times in the wilderness, that we discover what's important in life and we can learn thing about ourselves.

I can speak from my own experience here. Many years ago I walked with a friend of mine called Chris on the John Muir trail in the Sierra Nevada Mountains. We had a fantastic time, many of you I'm sure have been up there. It's very remote, you have to plan your provisions very carefully because going off the trail to pick something up can be a 25 mile detour. You have to be very careful. One day Chris and I, we began the day as we did everyday, by working out where we were going to get water on the route. We looked at our maps and we saw that about 10 miles down the trail there were some streams marked on the map. We thought well that's where we'll get our water, that's where we'll fill up our bottles for the day.

We carried on walking, it was very hot, we were drinking and we finished our water. We didn't worry because we knew there were streams coming up, although we did start to worry when we got to the first place where the stream was marked on the map and it was a dry valley -- as was the next one and indeed the third and final stream marked on the map. There we were at the end of the day with empty bottles of water. I realized if someone had come along and offered me a bottle of water I would have paid hundreds and hundreds of dollars for it, whether it was cool or not. I would have taken whatever they had and drunk it enthusiastically.

I'm still here because when we went around the next corner there was a puddle, I have never been so excited to see a puddle in all my life. It was brown, but we took great care to fill our bottles up and we were away. I learnt a great lesson of how valuable water is. We can so easily take for granted the gift of running water, we just turn our taps on, we fill up our glasses. In that moment I learned that was something that we should never take for granted because water is a very valuable resource. That experience brought me a measure of clarity. We all need that clarity to see things for what they really are. To see what's truly of value in life.

Jesus emerged from his wilderness experience with that clear mind and purpose. His 40 days in the desert freed Him. It freed Him from all devilish attempts to distract Him from His true purpose. It freed Him from those hungry cravings for things that had no power to give life. It freed Him from any illusion that God would make His choices for Him. After 40 days in the wilderness, Jesus had not only learned to manage His

appetites, He had learned also to trust the Spirit that had led Him into the desert, that that same Spirit would lead him out of the desert. Jesus discovered in the wilderness a clarity and a grit that He couldn't have found anywhere else.

Our Old Testament reading reminds us that the same is true for the people of Israel in the Old Testament. Their ancestors were wandering Arameans. God led them out of Egypt and into the Promised Land, but not straight away. They had 40 years of wandering in the wilderness. It was there in those years that that's where they received the Ten Commandments, and actually much of their teaching and understanding of God was shaped by that wilderness experience. For them too as for Jesus, the wilderness years were a time when things became clear.

As I was doing my final edit of this sermon yesterday I felt a prompting that actually a time of transition for a church can be a time in the wilderness. That's an unsettling time, especially when it can go on for three years like it did here at St. James, where there's not that same continuity and leadership. Of course that's going to be a difficult and challenging time that might be perceived as a wilderness time. Actually my experience of coming here to St. James is that that time has served to bring great clarity that I encounter amongst the people here, a great desire to move forward as one, to pursue a common vision, to engage more actively with our community and those around us. I see coming in how the time here of transition has brought clarity and unity to the people here at St. James.

What's true for a church and the people of Israel can be true for us too as individuals. We too will inevitably be led at some point into a wilderness which may take a number of forms as I have suggested. Whatever form it takes, those wilderness experiences can bring clarity and refine our sense of who we are, what we're about and what's important. At times like this we need to remember the story of the Emperor Moth, I don't know if you're aware of that story, but Emperor Moths emerge from cocoons which are flask like in shape. To develop into a perfect insect an Emperor Moth must take a long time to force its way through the narrow neck of the cocoon. It does this with hours of intense struggle. The pressure that the moth is subjected to at this time is nature's way of forcing life giving substance into its wings. One observer of the

moth saw the struggle the moth was having to go through to get out of its cocoon and he tried to ease the struggle by snipping away with a small pair of scissors, those bits of the cocoon that were holding the moth back. When the creature emerged its wings were never fully developed and for a brief time before its death it simply crawled instead of flying through the air on rainbow colored wings.

Before I close I want to return to the words of the Psalm I quoted earlier that will be sung later. I think that's a great help, as all the Psalms are in a time of a wilderness or desert experience. At such times we can be thankful to David as we turn to him. We can use his words as our own words. They can become the language of our own prayers. That Psalm can become a prayer for us. "As the deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul thirsts for you, oh God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God." That's a prayer in the wilderness we can all pray. Those words can mark the beginning of a great journey of Faith. It's often only in the absence of God, that we can recognize how much we desire Him. It's only when we recognize the presence of God in our lives that we know that for a time He has been absent.

As we remember the temptations of Jesus, and as we enter into this season of Lent, let's remember that we don't journey alone. We're accompanied by the Spirit and we're walking a path trodden by Jesus Himself, and countless others throughout the centuries.

Amen.