

Sermon for 1st Sunday of Lent – Year B – Mark 1:9 – 15

In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit – Amen.

We have now entered the season of Lent – the 40 days before Easter, traditionally a time of reflection and renunciation. A time associated with the 40 day fast of Jesus in the wilderness. And it is common practise to give up something for Lent. My Facebook page has been awash with the question, “what are you giving up for Lent?” I have given up Facebook. Perhaps you have made a similar commitment to give something up. How is that going?

Today I would like to suggest that this Lent be not only about giving up, but also making space to take up.

In the story before us, Jesus is both giving up and taking up. Jesus is about to give up his anonymity, no longer will he simply be the humble carpenter working in his home village. Jesus is about to take up his very public ministry of ushering in the kingdom of God - seen in his teaching, healings and his very presence amongst the people. And the crowds will flock. But before this – Jesus has his baptism and wilderness experience.

The baptismal scene presents us with a marvellous image of the Trinity, the voice of God the Father affirming – “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased”. Jesus - God the Son, obedient, preparing to do the Father’s will and God the Holy Spirit overshadowing Jesus and his vocation in the symbol of the gentle dove. Jesus’ new life is about to begin. Then we read...

“And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness”.

It’s a short sentence isn’t it. Perhaps easy to skip over in this familiar narrative. Perhaps easy to miss that it is the Spirit, that which the gospel of John calls the comforter, that does this seemingly harsh thing, driving Jesus out into the wilderness.

In the gospel stories we associate driving out with harsh, violent action - Jesus driving out demons, or driving money changers out of the temple. Not the actions of a sweet little bird.

Yet it is the Holy Spirit that both comforts and challenges. At times, it is the Holy Spirit that can drive us into a wilderness, to draw us away from distractions, draw our attention and both challenge and comfort us there.

I have visited the Holy Land and seen this wilderness. It is mostly harsh and barren, often without noticeable landmarks to distract. The silence, the solitude can be immense and for some, overwhelming. It is an apt setting to hear the still, small voice of God that Father Scott spoke of last Sunday.

However, as we know, a wilderness can also be emotional, mental, spiritual. A bereavement or illness can dislocate us, all familiar points of reference disappear, we enter a foreign land with no recognisable signs posts as we struggle to make sense of it all.

Yet a journey into such a wilderness may not be due to a major event. Perhaps life merely seems empty and inertia takes hold. Or perhaps we feel a stirring to go deeper with God in the midst of our everyday life. Our hearts are restless, to quote St Augustine. Yet we may not know how to attend to, or even wish to attend to this restlessness, perhaps through uncertainty, perhaps through fear. So we can't go back to how things were, but neither can we move forward.

Permit me to tell a story about a wilderness time and a bird that I experienced. Please rest assured, not every sermon will be about me but I would like to share this with you. This experience happened while I was on a retreat. I have been on several retreats since then and have come to recognise that this type of experience, for me, is the exception rather than the rule. Most retreats have been, shall we say, less dramatic, but that has not diminished their spiritual benefit.

It's England, it's winter, it's cold, it's bleak and mirrors the way I feel. I'm in a sort of wilderness, no apparent points of reference, not even God. So I decide to go on a retreat to the north of England (because everyone knows you head to the north of England in winter).

A man from the retreat community is driving me from the station to the retreat and asks something like, "What do you hope to receive from God on this retreat?" I mumble something Christian and appropriate, but I look out the window and think, "When was the last time I got anything from God".

So I silently ask God for a sign (we can discuss the theological correctness of this some other time), "Lord, if you still care, please let me see a robin red breast". Not exactly a miracle, one can see them in England without divine intervention, but quite frankly I'm not expecting much from God at this point.

A few days in, I'm reading my bible, spending time in prayer, listening, hoping to hear the small, still voice of God and walking the grounds, hoping to see that robin redbreast.

One sunny, cold morning I enter one of the wooden prayer huts in the grounds of the retreat. I close the heavy wooden door and sit in the silence. My retreat is nearly over and it has been relaxing, in some ways comforting. But I am steeling myself for the disappointment that I will not see my bird. Rightly or wrongly, I have placed such importance on this, it is filling me with resigned sadness and self-pity. I know intellectually that God cares for me, but in my heart there is still a yearning of wanting, needing more. In this wilderness the wild beasts of negative thoughts attack: I don't love God enough, I don't pay enough attention to him, why should he pay attention to me.

My head is in my hands but then I notice that in front of me there is a shaft of sunlight on the wall from where the door has half opened. And as I turn, annoyed, my immediate thought is, "Someone hasn't paid any attention to the occupied sign on the door" but no one is there and there is momentary confusion until I look down. A small robin redbreast sits just inside the door, looks back at me with no fear, and then after a time calmly turns and flies away. I burst into tears. In that wilderness, I was affirmed and comforted by a tiny bird.

Yet there was also challenge, challenge to give up a negative image of God that I was constructing through life experiences of pain and disappointments certainly, but also worldly cynicism and my own sheer laziness and inattentiveness to God.

Through that bird, I believe God was giving me the choice to take up another concept, one of a God who is interested in his children. One who knows the desires of their hearts, one who answers prayers, one who goes beyond that which we imagine, one who loves.

A God who tore apart the heavens and took up an everyday, human life. A God who comes alongside us and proclaims, “the time is now, the kingdom of God has come near” – near in the person of Jesus: in his comforting and challenging words, his healings and the way he interacted with people. His example of how to live authentically and closer to God than one imagined possible.

This first Sunday of Lent, we hear Jesus proclaim “Repent”. In Greek this word means something like “to turn away”. Turn away from the old way of living and embrace a new life, new possibilities. The time is now. The time is always now.

However, as we know, when we turn away from something, we turn toward something else. This Lenten journey I would encourage us to turn towards the challenge of entering into a wilderness of stillness, of expect waiting to be meet by God, perhaps formally on the retreat to be led by Father Stewart.

To allow ourselves to be both comforted and challenged by the Holy Spirit – allow ourselves the space to attend to any restlessness, to hear afresh Jesus’ words – “the kingdom of God has come near” - to you and to me – and contemplate what stepping more fully into that kingdom may look like for each one of us.