



THOUGHTS FOR SUNDAY
LENT I
21 FEBRUARY 2021

Wilderness
Mark 1:9-15

A few months ago, when I was writing an article for the Parish Magazine about the time when we put up the shed, now destroyed by fire, at S. Matthew's, I went hunting through my old diaries to fix the actual date. As inevitably happens on those occasions, my attention was caught by all the other entries, and I started reading through week after week. The thing that almost took my breath away as I read was just how much I seemed to cram into every single day. One Sunday, for example, I started the day with early communion at S. Oswald's in Durham, had a hearty breakfast at College (it was a reunion weekend), walked to the station and travelled back to Derby, walked home, had a bite to eat, cut and edged the lawns in my garden in Darley Abbey Drive, attended Evensong at S. Matthew's and then Eva Evans and I had a little run out to Alport Height in her car before a light supper at her bungalow!

This came to my mind as I read this morning's gospel. As Melonie said in her sermon last week, S. Mark was a man in a hurry. In six short verses we have Jesus being baptised in the Jordan, spending forty days in the wilderness, being tempted by Satan, a brief mention of John (the Baptist) being arrested and the beginning of Jesus' ministry, proclaiming the good news of God. Although this is an extreme example, all of Mark's gospel has this sense of urgency about it because he wants to get on to the decisive parts of his story, the ministry of Jesus, in Galilee, outside Galilee and then in Jerusalem, and so to the passion and resurrection.

As we embark once again on our Lenten journey, we shall have time enough through Passiontide to consider these latter parts of the story. For the time being let us dwell with Jesus in the wilderness. This may have particular resonance for us this year, as the third national lockdown drags on. Last year we began Lent with everything in life going on much as normal, and, when the first lockdown overtook us there was fear and uncertainty, certainly, but there was also novelty, and lovely sunny days provided cheer for those of us fortunate not to be caught up directly in the plague. This year the novelty has worn off and the weather looks less certain. We may feel that our faith is being tested, and that it is not quite so easy to be glib about God's purposes being all for good – too many people have died, too many cracks in society have been exposed, too many 'essential workers' are exhausted, and perhaps we feel that we have ourselves not very much to offer that would be of practical help after 11 months when the best we could do was to 'stay at home'. These are very much 'wilderness' thoughts, and ones we could do worse than acknowledge and take seriously. Jesus was tempted (Mark does not say exactly how) and did not rush away from the temptation to get on with the next thing, but stayed with the temptation in preparation for the next thing. Perhaps he used that uncomfortable time to work out what he was going to do next, or perhaps he already knew what he was going to do, but needed to work out how he was going to do it. However that was, this forty days in the wilderness seem to be an essential preparation for his great work, all of which was challenging, and the latter part of which was agonising.

This Lent some of us are using the book *Living His Story* to guide our thinking about what evangelism might mean for us in our lives. This is not a new thing for us to think about, but it is particularly relevant to our time, as the world begins to emerge from the shadow of the plague into a set of changed circumstances. As we seek to discover how we might be effective agents in helping to bring in the Kingdom of God in our parishes and communities in the circumstances in which we find ourselves we can take heart from the example of Jesus. His wilderness experience enabled him to carry out his ministry, go through his passion and crucifixion, and rise again on the third day. We are, because of

him, a resurrection people, so Easter awaits us too, so let us be faithful through Lent, not anxious to see it over, but taking heart from the positive signs of hope around us and being of good cheer.

Clive Lemmon