

## 28<sup>th</sup> February 2021, Second Sunday of Lent: 'A Simple journey' (Psalm 63, Luke 4:1-13)

I expect many of you have been enjoying the sunshine over the last couple of days. It feels like a long time since we've seen a bright blue sky for most of the day and felt any real warmth from that big yellow globe in the sky.

And for us, of course, sunshine is always welcome because we have plenty of rain across much of the year. We live in a climate where we rarely have to worry about water, and where our landscape is largely green for most of the year. I remember as a 19 year old flying for the first time that as the plane headed north from the Med the landscape out of my airplane window got greener and greener, until we crossed the Channel and the typical British patchwork of fields appeared. And yes, it was probably raining as I got off the plane, I can't remember now.

But there are lots of areas in the world which get all the sunshine but not enough rain. If the land gives off more in evaporation than it receives in rainfall then that is the technical definition of a desert – and you may be surprised to learn that, according to that definition, about 1/3 of the land surface in the world is desert. Deserts are far more common than we think.

And in today's passage we get probably the most famous desert trip of all time. Never mind Lawrence of Arabia or the Paris-Dakar rally, Jesus' journey into the desert – or more literally, the wilderness – is an iconic and unsettling narrative. We looked last week at *why* he did it – today we'll think more about **what actually happened, and what we can learn from it.**

Much is made, naturally, of the physical endurance required. An extended fast is a massive test of the will, but has been a feature of human spirituality in many cultures for thousands of years. For us, today, fasting remains a valuable part of our spiritual armoury. To fast is to discover spiritual reserves we knew nothing about, and to recover a deeper sense of gratitude for all that we've taken for granted. Our enforced fast from physical community life over the last year has probably never made us more grateful for the privilege of human contact, friendship and family.

But it's worth looking more closely at the temptations Jesus faced to understand what the true nature of Jesus' fast was about. It wasn't just a test of strength, a kind of extended macho wrestling contest with the devil. That was never going to be a fair fight: Jesus was God's Son, possessing all the spiritual authority of the universe within his human body. **The real temptation for Jesus was to abuse that authority, to misuse his power for wrong or misguided ends.** The key question is: *if Jesus is a king, what sort of king would Jesus be?*

These are the temptations Jesus faces. In the Roman Empire, the later emperors were criticised for distracting people from their failures of leadership with 'bread and circuses' – look at the temptations here: 'tell these stones to become bread', 'jump off the highest point of the temple.' Bread and circuses. Abuse your power for your own material gain. Misuse your authority to entertain people rather than serve them, liberate them, meet their deepest needs.

The third temptation is the most dangerous of all to a leader: power is a drug, and those who get addicted find that no amount of power is ever enough. Jesus has all the power already, but the devil says, why not bow down to me and get a bit more?

So in resisting these temptations **Jesus was decisively resisting all the ways that power corrupts a human leader**: this is what equipped him to come out of the wilderness as the perfect leader, the Saviour God intended him to be.

Now we may not be God's appointed rescuer, but the same temptations face us in different ways. The great writer on the spiritual life Richard Foster once wrote that the lure of 'Money, Sex and Power,' understood in their broadest context, still represent the biggest temptations that any Christian faces: the pursuit of material comfort, of sensual experience, and of the need for control. The exact same temptations Jesus faced.

And let's be clear, it not that material prosperity, or enjoyable experiences, or authority are bad things in themselves: it just that they all make good servants but lousy masters. They can all too easily replace God as the primary object of our worship. And if these things drive us, then we are on the path to spiritual ruin. That's why Jesus talks more about money than anything else, with power and sex also coming fairly high up in the top ten. He knows from his time in the wilderness the things that lead us away from vital, life-giving faith, and what we need to overcome their attractions.

And this is where time in the wilderness can be so important. Time in the wilderness is, in part, time to be alone, to be silent before God, to put the distractions of the world in their place. 'When a person is alone on their knees before God, that they are, and nothing more,' said Robert Murray McCheyne – and this is part of the value of the desert, the wilderness. **We choose the simple life**, we focus again on what is most important, and we allow God to re-order our desires and put them in their proper order.

And let's finally note that it's not just about prayer. Jesus counteracts the devil by quoting scripture back at him. The truth of God's word is our best antidote to the illusions of our frail human natures. I'm delighted that so many of us have joined our Lent journey of Worship in the Wilderness, and no doubt many others are following something else daily.

None of us wanted the current lifestyle forced upon us. But we can choose to make the most of this last few weeks of simplicity and solitude: a wilderness time that restores our gratitude, increases our humility and trust, fixes our eyes firmly back on Jesus, and so equips us to go back into the world with hearts fully surrendered to God. Amen.