**Sermon – Sunday 21 February 2021 – First Sunday of Lent**

**May I speak in the name of the living God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.**

The focus of this morning’s Gospel is wilderness and temptation – not the two most cheery subjects for a Sunday morning.

The Gospel that we have just heard is one of the more familiar passages in the Bible, although Mark’s account does not have the detail contained within Matthew’s account of the 40 days that Jesus spent in the wilderness.

As we read Mark’s account we can mentally list the temptations – change stones in to bread, wait for God to catch him when he fell and bow down and worship the Devil which he does not mention

As we know, Jesus throws them back in the devil’s face and the devil leaves him – for the time being.

In normal times we would sing the Hymn that reminds us of this story – “Seek ye first”.

Simple account, clear message.

Whilst Mark’s account is brief we still need to look below the surface and find spiritual truths that are often hidden from clear sight and in this time of pandemic we need to also focus on the wilderness, into which Jesus was driven and which we may identify with at this time.

Wilderness.

For most of us the idea of a wilderness is somewhere that we see on a travel programme on the TV inviting us, when we can, to travel to an unexplored and unspoilt part of the world where we can really get away from it all.

Alternatively it can be somewhere that is bleak and rugged, with little vegetation and water and where we would not expect to live very long if we were stuck in the middle of it – we often hear of people lost in the outback or in a desert who miraculously survive but who speak of the desolation of the environment, the thirsty, the heat for example.

Not somewhere we may choose to be.

At the moment we can feel that we are in a wilderness – with the never ending landscape of the pandemic and lockdown – although hopefully on Monday we will hear some news as to the timescale for returning to some kind of normal – and our lives appear to drag on from one day to the next with no noticeable change to the landscape.

And in “normal” times we can also feel that we are in a wilderness, that our life is directionless or something happens that upsets the norms of our daily life – we may lose our job or a relationship ends - and we can feel that God is far away and distant – there can be that sense of emptiness within us.

As we are journeying through this apparent wilderness – whether due to the pandemic or other reasons - we can take comfort from the experience of Jesus and how he was maintained by his relationship with God, as he was tempted by the devil.

At each of the temptations Jesus responded by quoting scripture and focusing on God.

He refused to be distracted by all the other “stuff” that the devil was promising him and focused on what he knew was true and right.

We too can be tempted to seek our way out of the wilderness of our lives by turning to things that ultimately will not satisfy – quick fixes that may give us a short-term lift but may actually drag us back into an even deeper wilderness experience.

I know in my own life there have been times when I have felt that I have been in the wilderness and God has appeared distant and it was by remembering that God will never leave us and will be there for us come what may that I was sustained and came out the other side.

And just with an exploration or journey, we can go in and out of wildernesses – whilst Jesus spent the 40 days in the wilderness at the start of his ministry, we know there were times when he would have felt he was “in the wilderness” - the Garden of Gethsemane, the Cross – yet he overcame them.

Just as Jesus focused on things of God to help him overcome the temptations of the devil, so we can be sustained during our wilderness experiences by things of God.

And linked into the wilderness experiences that we can all encounter, are the temptations that we can all face even when things appear to be going well in our lives.

We all know of things that can draw us away from God:-

* Conflicting priorities when we should be spending time with God;
* Mockery or ridicule from our friends that we are a Christian;
* Demands of our jobs that cause us to compromise our faith;
* “The world, the flesh and the devil” to use a familiar phrase.

For each of us our own temptations will be different as each of us is an individual and has our own relationship with God and also may change as we journey through life.

But what is important is that whatever the temptation we adopt the same approach that Jesus adopted – keep our focus on God.

One of the interesting aspects of our Gospel passage and in particular the wilderness account is that Jesus must have spoken of it – there were no witnesses.

Why not just keep quiet, as if nothing happened?

Because it is part of Jesus’ spiritual journey and thus an important part of his story.

He is laying bare his own soul and inner most heart and telling us that he, too, was tempted and thus he can help those who are tempted as well.

He is reiterating his own humanity and that he too experienced what we experience and thus when we are facing challenges and temptations, we can approach Jesus for help and strength to overcome and can use his example as a comfort.

This passage falls within the Church’s Lectionary – or cycle of readings – at the start of Lent as it is a reminder to all of us of Jesus’ time in the wilderness and links with the 40 days of Lent

As we enter into this period of reflection and prayer we can seek to follow Christ’s example of focusing on God’s word and spending time with God.

As I mentioned at our Ash Wednesday service, too often Lent is associated with giving things up rather than the positive of picking something up to help us with our own spiritual journey.

We need to focus more on what we are going to do rather than on what we are going to stop doing and again, even if it is only an extra 5 minutes in prayer that is OK.

The intention is the important point and Jesus in the wilderness was focussed on his relationship with God and with preparing himself for his ministry.

There are many resources available, including the Church’s #LiveLent booklet or app and also a number of Lent books that can help us. If anyone wishes to have some suggestion please do contact me.

In this time of Lent we have the opportunity to reflect on our own spiritual journeys and those aspects of our lives that may cause us problems or tempt us and ask for God’s help to overcome them.

We are reassured by Jesus’ own experiences that God understands when we are faced with our own wildernesses and temptations and also we know that when we fail – which we will – we can receive forgiveness from God.

Wildernesses and temptations.

All part of our human condition.

Understood by God, overcome by Jesus.

We are called to follow Christ’s example, and focus on the things of God, not of man.

May you continue to have a blessed Lent.

Amen.