

LENT I – YEAR C (2019)

Lent is a wilderness: the place the Church calls us to inhabit in this season of penitence and preparation is a strange place; it's an uncomfortable place; it's an unfamiliar place. The season of Lent – if we are to observe it properly – is a journey into the wilderness, following in the steps of Jesus and the people of Israel before him; and it is a journey in which we contemplate and experience the four 'Rs': revelation, reality, repentance and regeneration. Revelation: we are led more deeply into the mysteries of our redemption in Christ. Reality: we are shown ourselves and our lives as they really are, as God sees us. Repentance: the reality of the life and death of Jesus, and its meaning for our lives, and the revelation of ourselves as we really are causes us to turn back to God. Regeneration: we are recalled to the vows of our baptism, and to starting out afresh in the power of the Spirit, as we experience the transformative power of Christ's death and resurrection in our lives.

And this work of revelation, showing us reality, calling us to repentance, and regenerating our lives is the work of the Holy Spirit: in our Gospel reading we heard that, immediately after his baptism, 'Filled with the Holy Spirit, Jesus left the Jordan and was led by the Spirit through the wilderness being tempted by the devil for forty days'. It was only because Jesus was filled with the Holy Spirit that he was able to endure

the temptations and privations of the wilderness; it was the Holy Spirit who led him through that wilderness experience in order to prepare him for his public ministry and, beyond it, for the ultimate experience of loneliness and abandonment in his death on the cross.

Because the wilderness experience, through which the Spirit leads us and through which all of us are called to go, teaches us two things: it teaches us about ourselves, and it teaches us about God. It teaches us about who God is, and particularly about who he is in the person of his Son Jesus Christ; and it teaches us about who we are in relation to God, showing us that Jesus' death and resurrection were for our sakes, so that we might no longer live for ourselves, but for God. This is the revelation of the Holy Spirit: he shows us God in Jesus Christ, and shows us our need of him, and our dependence on his grace, forgiveness and mercy.

And then there comes reality: Lent calls all of us to take a reality-check – to honestly, frankly and painfully take a look at ourselves and our lives, and to see how far short we have fallen from God's standard of love to which we are called. We are called to take off our blinkers, to lay down our attitudes, to put aside our prejudices, and to see ourselves as we are seen by God: infinitely loved, but in need of God's help, his grace, to return us from our self-centred, sinful ways of living, to the way of life as God intends it to be lived, as shown supremely in the life and death of

his Son Jesus Christ. And that reality check is painful, or at least it should be if we do it properly: it should cause us to squirm, to be ashamed, to be sorry. Because to live the Christian life properly is not always to be on a spiritual high; not always to be blessed and for everything to be going well. To follow Jesus faithfully is to recognise our need of him because we recognise that without his saving death and resurrection, without the help of his grace, we would be lost in the self-perpetuating cycle of human sin, in which we convince ourselves that we are in charge of our own destiny, and that we have no need of God. The whole point of this season of Lent is that it shows us, in the light of the cross of Jesus Christ, that we are not our own masters, that we are responsible for our actions, that we do think, say and do things wrong, and that only God can sort out the mess that we human beings make of our lives and our world. And to acknowledge that, to take the reality-check that the Holy Spirit inspires as he searches our hearts, is to be truly blessed: there's no blessing or truth in pretending everything's alright when it isn't, or convincing ourselves we're always in the right and it's everyone else who is wrong; always blaming others rather than pointing the finger at ourselves. Only in taking personal responsibility, and confessing our sins in the light of the truth of God as revealed in Jesus Christ can we reap the fruits of this holy season, and be led by the Spirit to repent.

So this Spirit-led reality-check leads us to recognition, and that recognition should lead us to repent: to recognise that all is not right, that we need to change, and that it is only God who can help us to do that. But repentance is about so much more than feeling bad and saying sorry: it is about turning our backs on all that has separated us from God and one another; it's about turning away from our blinkered, prejudiced, self-centred attitudes, and allowing God to open our eyes to see him, one another and ourselves with his vision, through eyes of mercy and compassion.

And when we have recognised our need of God's grace, and have resolved to turn back to him, confessing our sins, and receiving his forgiveness, we are ready to be renewed, to be transformed, to be regenerated, as we were when we were baptised into the death of Christ, so that we might share his risen life. But this transformation, this regeneration, can only happen if we truly repent: the power of the death and resurrection of Jesus can only have meaning for our lives if we recognise that without them our lives have no true meaning; Jesus can only truly save us if we accept our need of a Saviour.

These forty days of penitence and preparation for the celebration of the mysteries of our redemption in Holy Week and at Easter are our wilderness: this is the time in which we are given grace to be realistic, to be honest with ourselves and with God. Sin is not a popular word, and

we human beings don't like to admit that we've said, thought and done things wrong: but in this holy season, the Holy Spirit leads us through the wilderness and teaches us about ourselves and our sinfulness, not to make us feel wretched or to diminish us; but so that we might more fully see just how much God loves us, just how powerful is his grace, just how much we need him in our lives, and just how wonderful is the mystery of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

We're all in the same boat; we're all on the same journey; we are all sinners in need of the grace, mercy and redemption of Jesus Christ. May the Holy Spirit, who was poured into our hearts at our baptism and has brought us here this morning, lead us through the wilderness of this holy season; may he reveal Jesus Christ to us, and help us to recognise in him our only hope; may he help us to see ourselves as God sees us, and lead us to repent; so that, as we approach the mysteries of Jesus' cross and resurrection, we may grow in grace, increase in virtue, turn away from our sins and be more faithful to Christ.

Amen.