

PSALM 25 verses 1 - 10

¹ In you, LORD my God, I put my trust.

² I trust in you; do not let me be put to shame, nor let my enemies triumph over me.

³ No one who hopes in you will ever be put to shame, but shame will come on those who are treacherous without cause.

⁴ Show me your ways, LORD, teach me your paths.

⁵ Guide me in your truth and teach me, for you are God my Saviour, and my hope is in you all day long.

⁶ Remember, LORD, your great mercy and love, for they are from of old.

⁷ Do not remember the sins of my youth and my rebellious ways; according to your love remember me, for you, LORD, are good.

⁸ Good and upright is the LORD; therefore he instructs sinners in his ways.

⁹ He guides the humble in what is right and teaches them his way.

¹⁰ All the ways of the LORD are loving and faithful toward those who keep the demands of his covenant.

MARK 1 verses 9 - 15

⁹ At that time Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptised by John in the Jordan. ¹⁰ Just as Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. ¹¹ And a voice came from heaven: 'You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.'

¹² At once the Spirit sent him out into the wilderness, ¹³ and he was in the wilderness for forty days, being tempted by Satan. He was with the wild animals, and angels attended him.

¹⁴ After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. ¹⁵ 'The time has come,' he said. 'The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!'

THE WILDERNESS DAYS

READING: Mark 1 verses 9 - 15

A college student wanted to take an easy class to finish up his degree during his spring semester. He was told by his friends to take a course in ornithology by an old professor near retirement who made the class an easy A. However, during the holidays the professor died. The school hired a replacement professor, a PhD candidate, who had a reputation for being extremely difficult. This student finds the class extremely difficult and spent an extraordinary amount of time in study to make a good grade. In fact, he really studies his brains out for the final. He comes to the classroom feeling prepared, but instead of having the normal test, there are 25 pictures on the wall of bird's feet. When he finds out that he is supposed to identify the birds by their feet, he goes nuts, and says to the professor, "This is crazy. Nobody could take this test. The professor says, "Nevertheless, you have to take it." The student says, "I am not going to take it." The professor replied, "You will take it, or you'll fail." The student says, "Go ahead and fail me. I am not going to take this test." The professor says, "All right. That's it. You've failed. Tell me your name." The bright young man rolls up his trousers to his knees and says to the professor, "I don't know, you tell me."

What Jesus went through for His test in the wilderness was far greater than any test you or I have ever taken! In two brief verses in Mark, we see a great spiritual test undertaken that is not seen again until Gethsemane and Calvary! Jesus passes the test! That's the good news! Let's examine what kind of place this was for a test. This test was a place for trauma, temptation and triumph!

Looking at our reading, what is your reaction to **verses 12 and 13** where we read that **"the Spirit sent him out into the wilderness, and he was in the wilderness for forty days, being tempted by Satan."** When we think about the Holy Spirit, some have the image of a soft marshmallow, or a cloud. In the Lord's prayer, we pray "lead us not into temptation", yet here we read that same Spirit sending Jesus into the wilderness, to go alone into a place where wild animals prowled around, a place where the forces of evil tested him in every way. All of this happening immediately after that wonderful experience at his baptism in the River Jordan, when the heavens opened, the Spirit descended on him like a dove, and God spoke his words of approval and confirmation **"You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."**

After that high moment of the Spirit, that moment of approval, of affirmation from God, we find another side of the Spirit, a side that seems less comforting. Think of it for a moment. The Spirit descends with blessings and the same Spirit drives the one blessed out into the wilderness, into the barren place, the dangerous place and allows him to be tested, to be tempted, to be placed at risk. This is a picture of the Christian life. Thankfully, there are those high moments, the moments of great blessing, moments like that at Christ's baptism, like that of the transfiguration; but there are also those days of wilderness experiences, those time when we feel alone, surrounded by dangers, assaulted by the temptation to take the easy way out, or to just plain give up. Moments which feel less than God filled. What we need to remember, in looking at what Jesus experienced, is that these wilderness moments do not always come as a result of our wrong-doing. Hard though it may seem, and I am in the same boat as everyone else, they are just as much a part of God's plan for my life as those moments of exhilarated blessing. I am not being dismissive of the troubles which everyone else is experiencing, but we also need to note, in our reading, that just as he was with the wild animals, **"angels attended him"**, or as in other versions "angels ministered to him."

Jesus' journey through life, is like our journey. The journey of life goes through stages, growing to maturity, being called to do the work that God wants us to do and being equipped for that work, and then the wilderness confronts us - the testing of our skills, our faith and trust, a time of preparation to be effective in what we are called to do and to be, where we find ourselves. The striking feature of Jesus here, is his willingness to be "Spirit-driven", his willingness to enter that place of wilderness. I wonder, if it is because of his sense of the nearness of God the Father, the

vision of the eternal reign of God victorious which enables him to face the wilderness, and ultimately, later, to face his trial and the cross? The resoluteness of Jesus to go into the wilderness, and through the wilderness to emerge the other side, shows a confidence that often we lack.

It does help to be prepared for the wilderness. It helps if we know what lies ahead, and that we are equipped for what may come our way. I often think about those missing teenage years of Jesus' life. No doubt, as with other Jewish boys he would be instructed in the writings of the prophets, the stories of God's dealings with his people in ancient times, of the Laws of Moses. In this respect the knowledge of the scriptures would be with him, as we find out during those moments of specific temptations when the enticing but false offers of Satan, were answered quoting words of scripture. Being prepared for the wilderness is one thing, but what we make of that experience is something else.

There is a true story told by Stephen Covey about a man who experiences a time in his life when everything seemed flat, boring, dull. He went to a doctor who found nothing wrong with him physically. The doctor suggested that he take a day for some spiritual renewal, going to a place that had been special to him as a child. He could take food, but nothing else. The doctor then handed him four prescriptions - one to be read at 9am, one to be read at noon, one at 3pm, and the final one at 6pm. Covey agreed and next day, drove himself to the beach. At 9am he opened the first prescription, which read. "Listen carefully. For three hours do nothing but listen." Covey was annoyed, but decided to obey. At first he heard the wind, the birds, the waves, all the usual beach sounds. But then he found himself listening to his inner voice, reminding him of some of the lessons the beach had taught him as a child - patience, respect, the interdependence of the different parts of nature. Soon Covey was feeling more peaceful than he had in a long time. At 12 noon he opened the second prescription, and it said, "Try reaching back." His mind began to wander, and he discovered himself being overwhelmed by all the moments of joy and blessing he had been given in the past. At 3pm he opened the third prescription. This one was harder. It read, "Examine your motives." Defensively, he listed all that drove him in life - success, recognition, security, finding satisfactory justification for them all. But finally it occurred to him, in a shattering moment, that those motives were not enough, that the lack of a deeper motive probably accounted for the staleness and boredom of his life. "In a flash of certainty," he wrote, "I saw that if one's motives are wrong, nothing can be right. It makes no difference if you are a scientist, a housewife, a postman, or a lawyer. It is only when you are serving others, that you do the job well and feel good. This is a law as irrefutable as gravity." At 6pm he read the final prescription. It said, "Write your worries on the sand." He took a shell, scratched a few words, and then walked away, without turning back. He knew, with a great sense of relief, that the tide would come in, and his anxieties would be washed away." Covey has gone on to write many books including "The 7 habits of highly motivated people."

The Wilderness, that sense of aloneness, the solitude that the wilderness affords, the hardship – all these are an opportunity, believe it or not, but can be a blessing from the Spirit of God. It is a place where we can be tested, a place where we can grow into the maturity that we require so that we can face life, in good times and in bad, and do there those things that God would have us do.

Jesus matures in the wilderness. He listens to his inner voice. He connects the blessings of the past with his need to rely upon God and God alone for the day at hand and for the days to come. I believe that in those days he finally understands his mission, not just in his head (as when Spirit descended upon in the Jordan), but in actually facing trial and adversity and temptation on his own (with no help other than that of the Word of God he has learned and the presence of the angels that ministered to him). When Jesus goes through all this, then he is able to emerge back into the world, fully ready to serve. In the loneliness of the wilderness Jesus discovers, in his own experience, that he is not really alone - that God goes with him, that the angels care for him, and that with the aid of God's prescriptions - God's word, he can survive, and in fact prosper - no matter what will come his way.

I mentioned earlier that journey of Jesus is like our journey. How many times have we had similar experiences, or maybe even now are experiencing, just as Jesus did? Of filled with the Spirit, we are determined to go forward with a new commitment, a new determination to serve God, we get pumped up and ready to take on the world after a special experience of God, a special blessing; then the difficulties begin, the time of testing comes, almost as if we are being driven, at break neck speed, into it. The reality is that we, like Jesus, are tested whenever we try to truly serve God, to use our God given gifts and powers, to do the right thing and be the right people we know that we ought and want to be.

This may not happen immediately, but, despite appearances to the contrary, when the testing comes, it can be a blessing if we let it be. If we let God's angels/messengers minister to us, as they ministered to Jesus; if we hold on to the faith that we profess and exercise it in the circumstances that come to us, as he did. I can only speak for myself here. Like others, I do not like those wilderness days, but hindsight is a wonderful gift when we look back to where we have come from or through, feeling stronger, more focussed on what needs to be done, more able to help and to love others, to do what I am called to do.

In finishing, some will have either heard or read "The Testimony of a Confederate Soldier" from the period of the Civil War in the United States. It seems appropriate as a final thought, because of how it describes what God can accomplish in us through our wilderness experiences, through our times of testing:

"I asked God for strength that I might achieve - I was made weak that I might learn humbly to obey.

I asked for health that I might do greater things - I was given infirmity that I might do better things.

I asked for riches that I might be happy - I was given poverty that I might be wise.

I asked for power that I might have the praise of men - I was given weakness that I might feel the need of God.

I asked for all things that I might enjoy life - I was given life that I might enjoy all things.

I got nothing that I asked for - but everything I had hoped for.

Almost despite myself my unspoken prayers were answered.

I am, among all men, most richly blessed . "