

Now may I speak in the name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

It's the first Sunday in the season of Lent and so our gospel reading is as always, the story of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness. Temptation is a subject that we all know something about. Oscar Wilde said he could resist everything except temptation. And there's a story of a newly married couple and the husband was going through the credit cards bills after their first six months of marriage. He found a bill from a well-known department store for \$450. He called up his wife and said, "Is this yours?" She said, "Yes." He said, "What did you buy with \$450 that we can't afford?" She said, "A dress." He said, "A dress? What were you looking at a dress for?" She said, "I wasn't really but I tried it on ... It was as if the devil was whispering in my ear that dress is beautiful, buy it." The husband said, "Well you know what you say..." because he was rather an earnest man..."You know what you say in those situations?" You say, "Get behind me Satan." She said, "I did and he told me it looked wonderful from there as well."

I want to say something about the who, the how, and the where of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness. The who question is this. Who led Jesus into the wilderness? Did he think it was a good idea to go there? Was it the devil that led him there? No. If you look at the beginning of the gospel reading, it was the Spirit of God that led Jesus into the wilderness. The devil didn't instigate his time there. He simply took advantage of it when Jesus was weak. And our reading has an ominous end: "The devil departed from Jesus until an opportune time." Maybe that's something in common with our experience. The devil's temptations come when we are weak.

How was Jesus tempted then? I think the answer to this question is something which we have less in common with Jesus. Look at the first temptation, "If you are the Son of God." Now, I'm not going to face that temptation and even on a good day, I cannot turn a loaf of bread into stone. In my experience, I have only been tempted to do those things which are possible. So one might say that Jesus was tempted in ways that we're not and given that fact and that you will have heard plenty of sermons if you're a long-time churchgoer on the nature of the three temptations, I'm going to focus and say a bit more on the where of the temptations. And I reckon that it's in answering this question that we might find the story resonating with us.

So where did the temptations occur? It's easy. The wilderness. And the first hearers of this story would have a strong sense of where this wilderness was, a relatively narrow strip of land west of the Dead Sea. It's a very mountainous area with very low rainfall, little vegetation. It's a barren place. We might not have such a strong sense of a geographical place but I reckon that we all have a sense of the wilderness. I'm not talking necessarily about the high desert. It could be that the wilderness has for you taken the form of a waiting room outside a doctor's surgery as you wait a significant prognosis. It could be a cheap motel room that you're staying in because you can't be at home. Maybe the wilderness is somewhere deep in your own soul. Many Christian people have talked throughout the generations of having a desert experience in their spiritual life by which they mean that they have no sense of God's presence with them. That is feels as though God is absent and removed from them. I know that I've felt that and I know it can last a long time. And David the great Old Testament King who wrote so many of our Psalms certainly knew that. He writes in one of the, Psalm 94. He says this, "As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God." Those are the words of someone in the wilderness, a spiritual wilderness, a dry wilderness.

When we find ourselves in such a place we need to remember that many people have been there before and it's often in these wilderness times that we discover what's really important, the true value of things. We see our lives in a different perspective and maybe don't take so many things for granted. I can speak from my own experience here when I had a very vivid experience of this. Many years ago I walked a big chunk of the John Muir Trail and we had a great time in the Sierra Mountains. They're very beautiful but they're also very remote. If you've been up there you will note that supplies are short and you often have trek off the trail to pick up supplies. One day we began as we always did by planning our route for the day and that meant working out where we were going to get our water and we saw a couple of streams marked on the map. That was fine and we headed off. It was very hot. We drank our water supply knowing that there were streams ahead and we got to the place where the streams were marked and there was nothing there. Well, there was a very muddy puddle there and that was all. We panicked. I suddenly realized that if somebody had come along offering to sell me a flask of water for \$100,

I'd have bought it because in that context water was priceless. So in the end we ended up drinking the puddle. How I longed just to drink clean water. It was only when I was forced to go without it that I realized how essential, how important, how valuable drinking water is.

And in that moment I realized what's really necessary in life. That experience brought me a measure of clarity and we all need that clarity to see things for what they really are. Jesus emerged from his wilderness experience with clarity of mind and purpose. His 40 days in the wilderness freed him. It freed him from all devilish attempts to distract him from his true purpose. It freed him from those hungry cravings, the things with no power to give life. It freed him from any illusion that God would make his choices for him.

After 40 days in the wilderness Jesus had not only learned to manage his appetite, he'd also learned to trust the Spirit that had led him there in the first place. Jesus discovered in the wilderness a clarity and a grit that he couldn't have found any other way. Our Old Testament reminds us that the same was true for the people of Israel in the Old Testament. Their ancestors it says we're wandering Arameans. God led them out of Egypt into the Promised Land, but not right away. They had to wander for a generation. 40 years they spent in the desert. But it was in those years that they received the Ten Commandments, that their faith was formed and refined. For them too, the wilderness were years when things became clear. And what's true for Jesus and the people of Israel is also true for us.

We too, will be led into a wilderness which may take any number of forms and that too, whilst being painful can be a time of refining and clarity. And at times like that we need to remember of the emperor moth. You may know that the cocoon out of which the moth emerges, the cocoon is shaped like a flask and to develop into a perfect insect the moth needs to force its way into the neck of the cocoon by hours of intense struggle. And it's the pressure to which the moth is subjected as it struggles to get out, which gives substance and forms its wings.

One observer saw a moth struggling and tried to ease its struggle, while taking small scissors and just clipping the restraining threads to make the moth's emergence painless, effortless and quick. But the creature's wings

never fully developed because it hadn't had to go through the struggle of escaping from the cocoon. And for a brief time the moth crawled instead of flying and then died.

Before I close I want to return to the words of Psalm which I quoted earlier. I think it could be a great help to us as we all endure our wilderness experiences. And at such times we shouldn't give up on prayer even if it feels that there is no God to pray to, that God doesn't hear our prayer, it's a time to pray fervently, and the Psalms can be a great aid in those times because the Psalmists themselves were writing sometimes out of a time of a wilderness experience.

"As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul thirsts for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God." Those words can become our prayer. We can adopt the words of the Psalms and make them for ourselves. Those words can mark the beginning of a great journey of faith. It is often only in the absence of God that we recognize how much we desire him. And we only recognize the presence of God in our lives, when we lived with and experienced his absence.

So as we remember the temptations of Jesus and we enter into this great season of Lent, let's remember that we don't journey alone. We might at times, feel alone but we're walking a path trodden by Jesus himself and countless believers through the ages.

Amen.