

LENT I, YEAR B, 2021

Three years ago Ash Wednesday coincided with Valentine's Day. There was furious activity in the florist's next to the presbytery from Monday onwards and there were queues on Valentine's Day itself.

This year there was again brisk business at the florist's for Valentine's Day, which was last Sunday, but Ash Wednesday was very subdued.

For Holy Trinity and St Hugh's, the only service was a virtual one offered by the diocese via Zoom and YouTube.

For many of us, it may seem as though the Lent in which the first confinement occurred last year has never really ended. We have already had almost a year of 'fasting and self-denial', with restaurants closed for much of the time and our mobility severely curtailed. Nor, with so many Covid deaths have we needed the ashes of Ash Wednesday to remind us of mortality.

However, this doesn't mean that *this* Lent of 2021 can have no value or purpose for us. The wilderness story on which Lent is modelled can resonate for us, since for many of us the past year has been like being in a wilderness.

Today's version of the story from Mark's gospel is very simple and spare. Jesus alone hears the voice of God identifying him as God's son. He's driven by the Holy Spirit into the desert for forty days and during that time he is tempted by Satan.

Mark's account omits the detail we find in Matthew and Luke, that Jesus experienced the temptation to turn stones into bread; to jump from a high place in the hope of being caught by angels; and that he was offered dominion over all the nations of the earth. Mark merely says that Jesus was tempted by Satan and lived with the wild beasts.

He was there forty days which is why Lent lasts forty days. For Jesus it was a time of closeness to God and self-examination. The hope is that Lent can have same effect for us.

However, we don't follow Jesus by going into the Judaeen wilderness. We find a 'wilderness', a place or way of withdrawing to be closer to God. So, traditionally, we give up something and try to make more time for prayer. But we could say that in the past year, through the experience of the pandemic's restrictions, the wilderness has found us.

This has made me reflect on where 'wilderness' is to be found and I found a story written by a Jesuit priest about a long-term prisoner in New York State and his release after twenty-seven years very illuminating.

The story begins with a Jesuit priest, Christopher, conducting a retreat in a prison 80 miles north of New York City. He's doing this on behalf of a charity that helps prisoners prepare for life after prison. He meets Javier, a small man with an outsized personality. During the retreat Javier speaks eagerly about his life and his love for Jesus and how, over the course of his twenty-seven years of incarceration, he's come to know himself as deeply loved and blessed by God.

A month after the retreat Christopher receives a call that Javier is about to be released from prison and goes to fetch him. He describes how for the first twenty minutes' drive from the prison, Javier is his typical self and speaks very excitedly about the future. Then he becomes car sick. The charity's founder who is in the car with Christopher and Javier says that this is common for former prisoners who haven't been in a car for years. Fortunately, the nausea passes.

Further on, they stop for a meal at a diner. Before they go in, Javier stops in his tracks and exclaims in Spanish "*Mira, mira* – look!" He points to some squirrels chasing each other up and down a maple tree. His wonder is because he hasn't seen squirrels, or any animal for that matter, for years.

Eventually, when they reach the city limits, Javier is enchanted by how much the city has changed since he last saw it as a 19-year-old. At each traffic light, he thinks every other person on the street is either a relative or friend from his old neighborhood.

They drive on into Manhattan, where Christopher's organisation has an office and church. He shows Javier the church. As Javier approaches the altar, he closes his eyes and lifts his arms and face to the heavens. Full-throated, he sings bits of his favourite hymns. His praisings reverberate above.

Christopher then hands him his cell phone. He has never used one before; they weren't invented when he first went 'inside'. "Wanna FaceTime your mom in Puerto Rico?" says Christopher, the priest. After nearly three decades without seeing her face, suddenly there she is. Through tears, he whispers, "Mami, I'm home." At that moment, Christopher said that he lowered his gaze. For as they say, "one is not bold in an encounter with God."

Afterwards, Christopher reflected on this experience with Xavier – his coming out of the wilderness. Perhaps Xavier wouldn't necessarily see it that way but Christopher, the priest sees the twenty-seven years Xavier spent in prison as a time in the wilderness, away from everyday society.

Christopher believes there's something to be learnt from Xavier's reactions as he comes out of prison, something for us to learn about emerging from the pandemic wilderness. Without labouring the points too literally, is Xavier offering a parable for emerging from the pandemic?

First, we should note the way Xavier was disoriented by the experience of coming out of prison. We too may be disoriented by the return to a more normal life. This is borne out, for example, by people who have been vaccinated saying that they are hesitant about being out and about in a more normal way. But the answer is that we have to journey on.

Xavier's story also teaches us that we mustn't lose our capacity for joy. It's too easy to see Lent as a time to be preoccupied with sinfulness and our shadow side. But it's also a time to increase our awareness of the beauty and wonder of creation, as Xavier was at the sight the squirrels playing – real animals for the first time in decades. So, we can see the time of pandemic as a time for greater joy and thankfulness for the world around us.

We should – and this has been easier in the time of pandemic – become more aware of how inter-related we are. We depend upon others to produce and distribute food, provide health care and utilities, and keep our common life going. Javier had a sense of this, exclaiming that he seemed to know everyone as they drove into New York City.

We are still in the wilderness, but the way out is becoming clearer. Equip yourself, even while we are still in the wilderness. Remember, as Javier knew even in prison, that you are known, loved and forgiven by God. Be thankful for all the gifts you have received. Keep alive your sense of wonder. Remember how connected we are with each other.

Last year at the end of Lent we were denied Holy Week and Easter in person but we can be more hopeful this year. Let us use this strange time of curfew and anxiety about Covid as a time for reflection and preparation but in the hope that we will be able to celebrate Easter in person again this year. As we celebrate the resurrection of Christ, may we also celebrate the resurrection of the life of our community. Like being released from prison – a new beginning.