

As might be expected, I have been reflecting a lot on the task we have before us, that of the interim journey we are about to undertake. And what better time to start such a journey, than at the beginning of Lent? The Lenten readings offer us a way of thinking about the journey ahead, and the processes that are normally followed in a period of interim ministry.

Lent begins with the familiar story of what is known as the temptation of Jesus. It is as much about a wilderness experience as it is about Jesus being put to the test. I have talked about the IIM experience also as being a wilderness experience, and this has shaped the approach I am going to take to this passage. So I am viewing the story of Jesus in the wilderness through the lens of transitional ministry, which I hope will create a better understanding of both.

As an astute congregation, I am sure you have all paid close attention to the documentation that has come your way, including the five tasks of the congregation in transitional ministry, and can repeat them to me.

Let me remind you:

- A. Coming to terms with the congregation's history
- B. Discerning the congregation's purpose and identity
- C. Supporting leadership change and development
- D. Reaffirming and strengthening denominational links
- E. Committing to new leadership and new ministry

In this story of Jesus' testing in the wilderness, we find all of these things happening.

Firstly, in this story, we have an interesting parallel with the story of the Israelites when they were in the wilderness. After God delivered Israel from Egypt, they also experienced some temptations and testing in the desert. In fact, two of Jesus' answers to the tempter are drawn from Deuteronomy, where Israel's time of testing in the wilderness is described. Jesus experiences the same experience of Israel. Israel, whom God refers to as "his son", was tested in the wilderness for 40 years; Jesus the newly proclaimed Son of God is tested in the wilderness for 40 days and nights. Like Israel, Jesus is tempted by hunger. And like Israel, Jesus is tempted by idolatry and self interest. Jesus is confronted with the history of Israel's unfaithfulness and lack of trust. He is given the choice of repeating this past, or of responding with something new.

Israel, when in the desert, questioned God's wisdom, demanded that God "fix" whatever was wrong, and then decided to worship a golden calf. Their obedience to God wavered many times. But Jesus breaks this pattern by responding differently. He remains steadfastly faithful. He demands nothing of God, and instead of relying on God to "fix" things, he relies on his faith, his trust and uses this to make different decisions.

Next, Jesus has been sent with some force by the spirit into the wilderness. It is a hard test, involving fasting, endurance and a testing of will. The trials that Jesus undergoes helps him to discern truly the purpose of his ministry, and reinforces his identity as the son of God. It is only after this period of discernment in the wilderness that Jesus' begins his ministry in Luke's gospel.

Thirdly, having discerned his calling and identity, Jesus then goes straight to the synagogue to teach. But his teaching is not what is expected. His teaching is about a just society, about freeing the oppressed, and making restitution to the poor. It includes not only Jews, but opens the love of God to Gentiles as well. He sets new guidelines from his time of discernment in the wilderness, and it is clear he represents a new voice, a new authority. His vision statement is about the impact of the good news of God's kingdom, his mission is the transformation of society. He is encouraging his audience to think and do things differently.

But Jesus has not rejected his heritage outright. He stands firmly in the tradition of the great prophets of Israel, where he both reaffirms the legitimacy of their words and also fulfills them. Most of the quotes of Jesus in the gospels are from the prophets, with Second Isaiah coming in for the lion's share. Jesus' teaching links the

people back into this tradition of justice and equality and faithfulness, giving those he teaches a firm foundation upon which to build, and upon which to strengthen their relationship to their faith.

Lastly, Jesus picks a new leadership, an unlikely bunch of people to carry out his new ministry. His disciples are not drawn from the leadership of the synagogue, but instead are called from different levels of society. They are sent out with different guidelines for their ministry, which has at its heart the challenging of an unsatisfactory status quo. They are charged with a ministry that offers God's healing and wholeness to all, a ministry of shalom and of kingdom values that sat counter to the Temple cult and the empire that supported it. And contrary to the leadership models offered by both Temple and empire, they were told not to be leaders that exercised power and authority, but to be servants, who were characterised by humility, trust and suffering. It was indeed a transformative experience that begins Jesus' journey in and beyond the wilderness.

Though the decision to enter the wilderness may be hard, and the journey difficult, it really is a simple and basic message that the gospel offers this week. But like many simple messages, such as just lose weight, eat less and exercise more, it is a message that is very hard to follow at times.

Though we have our five guidelines to follow in the wilderness that is intentional interim ministry, and though we might like to think that like Jesus, we can resist the trials and the chaos of the wilderness journey, the reality is that the things that confronted Jesus in the desert are things that confront us all and can often prevent us moving forward.

We tend not to deny our appetites ("command these stones to become loaves of bread"), we are very concerned for self-preservation ("jump, and the angels will hold you as you fall"), and none of us really like the idea of giving up any power we may have accumulated ("all these kingdoms I will give you, if you worship me"). Instead of finding inspiration and guidance for our church and our own faith journeys in Jesus' overcoming of these things, we tend to dig in and resist anything that might possibly disturb or inconvenience us.

The wilderness then is the place where we may find ourselves confronted with difficult emotional and ethical choices, or we may find it a place of danger and desolation, or a "life isn't meant to be like this" place. We often refer to such times as 'being in the wilderness'.

Wilderness experiences happen to all of us. For many reasons, we can find ourselves alone and lost, pondering the meaning of our lives and faith, questioning God, wondering where God is. It can be a frightening place, where grief and fear lurk, temptation beckons, and where hopelessness can wait ready to pounce.

But the wilderness is also the place where God enters the human world, to speak to prophets, wrestle with patriarchs and comfort exiled slaves. It is where the people of Israel were tested and where they wandered for 40 years. It is where Jesus clearly shows himself to be God's "beloved son".

Despite the presence of God, the biblical wilderness is still portrayed as a place of threat, chaos and alienation. It is a wild place, a place between civilizations, a place of danger—but it is invariably the place where revelation that has been received, and the place where transformation begins.

Lent, with its emphasis on repentance, rejecting temptation and abstinence from the fat and fleshly things of life, has become synonymous with the wilderness experience.

Lent is meant to guide us through the wilderness experiences, with the goal of emerging transformed at the other end on Easter morning. I suspect that transformation is never quite so straightforward, and that

wilderness experiences tend not to be linear but meander around. Nor are such experiences always transformative. Nevertheless, the Lenten wilderness tradition can help us to face our dark places and our demons, and to help prepare us to encounter the divine in unexpected ways, and strengthen our faith in God.

In Lent, we can enter the wilderness as a deliberate spiritual quest. Further, we can enter it as a community of faith. For both Jesus and his church, the wilderness represents a "thin place between heaven and earth"; a place where we can come closer to God, closer to an understanding of the divine. Like Jesus, we can use this time to help us understand our history, our traditions, our ministry and ourselves, and to grow closer to God as we discern the new places that God is calling us to.

So to do this, we should avoid turning Lent into a programme of merely 'giving up' something, where we forego some of the luxurious 'un-necessities' of life, such as chocolate, wine, or coffee – even if such self-deprivation supports a good cause like Lent Event.

To embrace the Lenten wilderness means intentionally creating time and space to reflect. And if we do create such time and space and clear our minds and hearts, it means confronting the various demons, wild beasts and even angels hindering us from setting out on the journey to Jerusalem with Jesus. Deeply embedded beliefs, experiences and temptations can swamp our best intentions for change. We need to take time to sit with and confront our fears and our temptations: we need to name them and expose them as the potentially destructive forces that they are so that we can be set free from them.

There is something inherently powerful about a church season that actively calls the faithful to make the connection between the lives that people live, and the calling of God. We should ponder deeply how we will make use of this time, and how we are to discern and respond to God's call.

The call of the wilderness, and of Jesus' example of facing temptation and overcoming it, is a challenging lesson for our world. Justice can only be done as we learn to live lives of discipline and simplicity, of consideration and sharing, of prayer and service.

We need to have the courage and integrity to acknowledge our brokenness and destructiveness, and admit that we need both forgiveness and empowerment to become creative, contributing human beings who embody God's reign.

Lent invites us to take the time to listen for God's calling. It invites us to acknowledge our stumbling blocks, name our temptations, and to challenge the wild beasts. It also invites us to find the hand of God sustaining and guiding us, and to remember our calling as Christians. So when Easter arrives, we may be all the more ready not only to proclaim the good news of the kingdom, but to truly live it out in our lives.

Thanks be to the God of the wilderness.