



Resurrection Journeys

Session 1: Awareness of grace

The Wilderness

Matthew 4.1-11

“Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness.”

Welcome to our “One Hundred Days of Prayer”. One hundred days?! If that sounds like something of a marathon to you, be assured, as we gather at the starting line, we’re drawn to the unhurried pace of the wilderness.

Between his momentous baptism in the River Jordan and his world-changing public ministry, Jesus stepped out on his journey into the wilderness. For forty days and forty nights he experienced life in the barren Judean desert. Matthew’s gospel describes the temptations that reared their heads during that time too: the taunting of the devil towards self-importance, power and material wealth; sometimes described as challenges to Jesus’s heart, soul and might. Jesus’s heart, soul and might remained intact, closely aligned with God. Commentators perceive Jesus emerging as the model prayerful disciple. These verses in Matthew’s gospel provide a statement of salvation history, the Son of God recapitulating the experience of Israel in the desert and Moses’ days of fasting.

Important stuff. But it’s the wilderness experience that always touches me.

This was a basic existence. The desert lacked shelter, protection and creature comforts. It also lacked people. No wonder the temptations appeared along the lines of self-importance, power and material wealth. Human existence grapples with such things whenever communities are formed.

But these elements and all the complexities surrounding them had no place in the wilderness. The solitude of the wilderness meant there was no one to impress, no point to prove, no argument to win, no one to amuse, no fashions to adhere to, no deadlines to meet, no one to judge or to be judged. With all this stripped away, ego had no place. Heart and soul, the inner self, could reset in the wilderness of the desert. I sense something similar in a winter woodland.

Even for Jesus, this reset didn't happen overnight. It took forty nights. It wasn't without temptations along the way. This first journey we consider wasn't a walk in the park. As his wilderness time drew to a close, Jesus was described as famished. In verse 11 we're told that angels came and waited on him. With worldly baggage left behind and with the care of angels, Jesus emerged from the wilderness as his God-given self, re-centred, restored and ready to journey into the future.

His life would be one of presence not performance. In the wilderness, the devil demanded, "Prove yourself". Jesus didn't have anything to prove! The Son of God stepped out of the wilderness into his public ministry simply as himself in communion with his Father.

In a world of pressure and judgement, anxiety lurks in the background ready to strip us of self-worth. Such pressures can manifest into a way of life where every step along the path feels like navigating exhausting obstacles just to remain vaguely on course.

And that's why I find Jesus' wilderness experience such a comfort. It didn't need to be some sort of lonely, punishing, boot-camp. More likely the Holy Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness to give him the vital space for a reset; a foundational time where presence took precedent over performance; a place where the grace of God was sensed profoundly.

This 100 Day of Prayer Course might offer you something similar.

This course will be approached in many different ways. But the wilderness teaches us that a good place to start is one where your inner self can be stilled with the assurance that prayer has no place for ego. When prayer is the focus, the stuff that so often threatens to weigh us down, gently falls away. If we have the courage to connect to a wilderness-style reset, there's no one to impress, no point to prove, no argument to win, no one to amuse, no fashions to adhere to, no deadlines to meet and no judgement. This is the opposite to quick-fix, temporary solutions to our problems. This is a slow and gentle waiting upon the mystery of God.

God gave Jesus a slow-burn release of the depth of his love over forty days and forty nights. As we begin this journey together, imagine the difference if each of us gently put aside the shallow temptations of worldliness in order to receive the depth of God's love! I imagine God saying, "Hello! I've been waiting for you. (The true you!)"

I simply pray that in this place, and probably with the nurturing of some "angels" (which come in many guises), your heart and soul, the very being of yourself, can reset in God's ways, looking forward to a future where we will travel well together.

Revd Canon Janet Nicholls