

Arnhem-Nijmegen, Lent 1, Year C, March 9th 2025 – Revd Dorienke de Vries

Readings: Deut. 26.1-11; Psalm 91.1-2, 9-16; Luke 4.1-13

Hymns: 426, 560, 68, 15.

God of the wilderness,
your Spirit leads us
to face the truth, unprotected and exposed:
in our times of trial,
help us to resist
the worship of empty power
and the illusion of invulnerability
that we may find our true food
in Jesus Christ, the Broken Bread. **Amen.**

What would happen to us, if we were alone in a desolate place for forty days, or even for one day? No other people. No social media. No music. No books. No food. There are times when this sounds like heaven to me – apart from the food bit, that is... But people who have been on retreat or on a pilgrimage, will tell you that such solitude is not like a holiday at all.

Being alone in a desolate place means there are no distractions. No distractions. The word comes from a Latin verb that means to draw away. There is nothing to draw us away from what? From ourselves. In the solitude and the silence we are left without any defence against ourselves. We can no longer ignore the voice of our soul. The doubts about our faith. The unease about our relationships or our jobs. Hidden anger and suppressed memories. Needs that were not met, feelings of guilt and shame – all our shadows will come alive and creep up on us. The desert is the place where we have no choice – we have to face our demons.

This week we have entered the sacred season of Lent. Many of us will practice some kind of fasting, and spend more time in prayer and reflection. In doing this we create a kind of desert for ourselves, as we follow Jesus on his way to the cross. It is a good and helpful practice. But this is a desert of our own choice and of our own making, as we also choose what it will look like: no chocolates, or no social media, or no meat for 7 weeks.

But of course desert experiences will not neatly follow the church calendar. There are deserts not of our own choosing. Lonely, desolate places, journeys that can take years, instead of 7 weeks. Caused by chronic illness, be it physically or mentally. Caused by bereavement and grief. Caused by broken relationships or unemployment. Caused by a crisis of faith. Or just coming out of nowhere, when life looks bleak and bland and God is nowhere.

Take heart. Jesus has been there and seen it all. Today we join him in his desert experience, at the very beginning of his ministry. Jesus is full of the Holy Spirit, which seems like a good start. He has just had this wonderful experience at his baptism. A voice from heaven confirmed his identity as the Son of God, the beloved, the one with whom God is well pleased. It seems to be all systems go for his ministry. There is a world out there waiting for him, in great need of his healing work and the proclamation of the kingdom. There is no time to lose.

Instead the Spirit makes him wait, leading him into the wilderness where there is nothing to do but wander around. We find him all alone, with his own thoughts and doubts and questions and fears. He may have felt overwhelmed by what had happened at the Jordan, and needed time to make sense of it. Let us not think lightly of this. It is tempting to read the story as a kind of script, a play where Jesus just had to remember the right lines. The story makes it sound very simple: if satan tells you A, you just quote Bible verse B, and you'll be fine. But Jesus was tempted, just like us. The temptation was real,

and had to be real. Otherwise he would not have been able to understand us and have compassion on us whenever we go through a similar experience.

Let's have a closer look at the three temptations. We see that they concern three basic human needs: the need for food, the need for control, and the need for love. The need for food, the need for control, and the need for love. These are real needs and as such there is nothing wrong with them. But they become twisted if we make them all about us: and in all three temptations this is the common factor: Satan hopes to get Jesus to the point where it is all about him. Where his fasting, his powerlessness and his loneliness make him snap; make him go for his own survival, make him forget his purpose and make him deny his identity.

First, the need for food. Being really hungry does something to our brain. You go into survival mode, and survival mode makes us selfish. We have watched the scenes in refugee camps, where people will fight over the scarce supplies of bread, trampling each other, robbing trucks and stealing from their neighbours. Real hunger makes us act according to our basic instincts.

Jesus is famished. And Satan is using that vulnerability to tempt him to put himself first. To give priority to his own survival. If you are the Son of God, well, use that power, to save yourself from starvation. But Jesus has not come to save himself. He wants to be empty for our sake. His food is to do the will of God who sent him, and to complete his work. That is his life, and that is what his life is for. It is not about him. It is about us, and about God saving the world. This is the bread he wants to live by: his ministry to give his life for the world, so that the world may have life, and have it in abundance. Not that he himself is fed, but that others will have enough and can live in a land that flows with milk and honey, like the people of Israel in ancient times.

Second, the need for control. Fans of the Lord of the Rings trilogy will notice the similarities: Jesus is being offered the Ring of Power. It is suggested that once he has all the power, he can do all the good that he would like to do. He can end all suffering. He can feed the whole world. He can heal all wounds. And for someone who is love in person, for someone whose compassion has no bounds, that is a very tempting offer indeed. To give up that opportunity is not easy. But again, Jesus does not want it to be all about him. He knows that this kind of power and control will corrupt the way of love. The way of love doesn't work through exercising power and dominating others. It would rob them of their freedom. The way of love starts with true worship: its focus is on God alone. We surrender all that we have and all that we are to him, so that he can use us for *his* glory and for *his* purpose.

Third, the need for love. The need to be known and accepted. The need to matter to someone else. Especially to the ones we love the most, or admire the most, or respect the most. If we feel insecure, if we are not completely certain about whether this person loves us or not, putting them to the test is what we will do. We will force them to prove that they love us – and of course in doing so we show that we do not trust them. Jesus' whole life, person, ministry depended on his perfect trust in God. Even when God had forsaken him on the cross, Jesus kept on trusting. He refused to put God to the test, just trusted his love and righteousness against all odds. Love was not about him receiving. Love was about giving himself, to God and to us.

Forty days of darkness and loneliness. Forty days of tempting, taunting whispers. Forty days of working through the doubts and fears, finding meaning in it all, finding the right way. Jesus stayed focused on God and therefore angels came and served him. And Jesus came out at the other end, still full of the Spirit, but even so changed and now well-prepared for what lay ahead.

Being in a real spiritual and emotional desert is a very big deal indeed. It is hard and it is frightening. We may need help and guidance to make sense of what is happening to us. But whenever the Spirit makes us go through desolate places, let us trust that God will provide, and will bring us life again by his word alone. Whenever the ground is shifting under our feet, let us continue in the way of love, trusting that God is in control. Whenever we feel unloved and lonely, let us trust that God loves us. In the deserts of

this life, let us stay focused on God. Then we will be able to see the angels he sends to serve and refresh us in the wilderness. Then we will get through and emerge on the other side, full of the Spirit, having found our true selves, prepared for what God wants us to do, ready to give ourselves for the sake of others, ready to live the life of love.

Amen.