



Peters Green News Sheet Issue No: 50

Sunday 21st February 2021

Mark 1, v. 12:

And immediately the Spirit drives him into the wilderness.

This is after Jesus' own baptism - and there's such impetus here: 'and immediately'.

He's just now experienced God's over-flowing love, and known his own world-changing mission for other people. At once, God's in-filling Spirit propels him away from everything else, and into much deeper water even than the Jordan: into wilderness.

At this start of Lent, as at any time, we try to follow His pathway, to catch hold of that same dynamo understanding for ourselves: God's love for us, and what we're really here for - in our own lives.

Much of the thought-world we live in today prefers to bypass the real meaning of Easter, of God's deeper reality, of Resurrection hope, of how God's life-affirming Spirit is eager to be at work in us, today. But Lent is our yearly reminder to re-orientate, in whatever ways open up for us.

A time of wilderness testing-out awaited the Hebrews in Sinai, and also later in Babylonian Exile, as part of re-engaging with who they were meant to be. Jesus entered his own wilderness time. In that rocky wasteland, out in the open, there was nowhere to hide, no place for part-answers, compromises, making-do. The challenge was to hold the one focus that was all-important.

Is it helpful to see our own experience during this last pandemic year as our own testing-out? But an exam, with a pass-mark? Surely not. It's a time, rather, of openness to being more aligned, more in harmony, in our relationship with the Father. And temptations will always rear up inside us to loosen or distort that relationship. In our own Virus lockdowns, it may help to identify, even to name what our own temptations are, right now.

Yet time and time again, He meets us wherever we are, and leads us further, as there's always further to go. We're not on our own, and encouragement is sent, in whatever form. We're given bread for the journey. In his Letter, James writes:

'Draw near to God, and He will draw near to you'. James 4, v.8.

Practical Lent suggestions often mention prayer, fasting, study, and giving; but it helps to remember the vision behind whatever it is we do. In Peter's words, Christ suffered 'to bring you to God'. So, we might pray beyond our normal times, or bring every part of a day to the Lord. Giving up something might include even a TV programme, media use, or a food item. We might read something to really

stretch us, spiritually, or give out to someone newly in need. And so on.

Charles Peguy imagined God's words to each one of us, as follows:-

'I myself will dream a dream within you. Good dreams come from me, you know.
My dreams seem impossible, not too practical, not for the cautious,
a little risky sometimes, perhaps a trifle brash.
For those who share my dreams, I ask a little patience, a little humour,
some small courage, and a listening heart - I will do the rest.
Then they will risk, and wonder at their daring; run, and marvel at their speed;
build, and stand in awe at the beauty of their building.'

Whatever we do, in this cheerful spring-cleaning by the Spirit, it's a time to begin or renew good habits that turn our lives to God's Kingdom amongst His people around us.

To help us in prayer, here are two verses from Hymn 132 of Mission Praise:-

Father, hear the prayer we offer:
Not for ease that prayer shall be,
But for strength that we may ever
Live our lives courageously.

Be our strength in hours of weakness,
in our wanderings be our guide;
through endeavour, failure, danger,
Father, be Thou at our side.

Tony Mann



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