

## Text of address given by Bishop Helen- Ann on 12<sup>th</sup> March at St. Andrew's

How's your Lent going?

There is a tradition of giving things up for Lent, and I have succeeded or failed in this over the years. I few years ago I remember being challenged by an inspiring young woman from Harrogate to do something about the excessive use of plastic. So I am tried to use less single-use plastic. It was very hard!

Some of the Old Testament imagery that is often used in this season presents us with stories of place: the land of milk and honey and the wilderness. One, full of growth and creative potential; the other, a place of wandering, exile, loss, and temptation, but ultimately of journey to a promised land. It's not an easy pilgrimage and if we ever find ourselves thinking otherwise, think again.

What looks bright, colourful, powerful and all-knowing, is in fact made of dust. Reach out to embrace and it all crumbles into nothingness. This brings to mind that recent story about the Willy Wonka experience in Glasgow that went badly wrong, when people turned up expecting an amazing immersive experience instead found a sparsely decorated warehouse with a sad Oompah Loompa.

*Had I not seen the Sun*

*I could have borne the shade*

*But Light a newer Wilderness*

*My Wilderness has made –*

These words, by the 19<sup>th</sup> century American poet Emily Dickinson point us, I think, to that place beyond our Lenten Wilderness, where Jesus the Son of God blazes in resurrection light – the light of our own journey as disciples, which can, at times, feel like another sort of wilderness. The wilderness is not just the dry and dusty heat of the desert, it is the story of our lives as followers of Christ. The wilderness can of course, be the place of unexpected revelations.

Nearly thirty years ago, I spent a month in the hot dry land of the Galilee, literally on my hands and knees. In case any of you hear are under the impression that archaeology is rather like being in an Indiana Jones movie, where you invariably uncover a treasure of such riches, and much more besides, well actually it isn't like that. But as a young twenty-something student of the Bible, that was exactly what it appeared to be. Under the intense heat of the sun, I worked my way very slowly through the small area of land that I had been assigned to, painstakingly removing granules of dust, and sifting through soil, absolutely convinced that soon I would see treasure, gold, something, anything that looked spectacular. Well you can imagine my utter disbelief when I discovered, a food wrapper. Falafel to be exact, a Mediterranean staple. Falafel?! I had come upon a rubbish dump basically, from one of the Holy Land's more recent skirmishes. This was not the era of King Solomon as I had thought, it was somewhat more contemporary than that. Thus the desert to me seemed even dryer, even less forgiving, even less attractive than I could ever possibly have imagined. My illusions about archaeology were shattered, or so it seemed at the time.

The tempter is clever. Jesus is hungry, surely he won't be able to resist food? He does.

Jesus is alone. Surely he won't be able to resist love and support, affirmation of who he really is? He does.

Jesus is human. Surely he won't be able to resist an offer of power? He does.

The reality of God brings us into a new wilderness, but this is not a place of despair, it is one of hope.

Prior to Jesus' sojourn in the wilderness, another figure appeared: his cousin, John the Baptist. John is famously recorded as quoting that well-known passage from the prophet Isaiah – 'the voice of one who shouts in the desert, Make the Lord's way ready, make his paths straight.'

More traditional readings take the figure looming out from the direction of the wilderness into civilisation, proclaiming the coming of the Kingdom of God. But there is another way of reading it, indeed a way that was certainly known in Jesus' day: 'the voice of one of shouts, *In the desert* make the Lord's way ready, make his paths straight.' Seen in that way, the wilderness of Jesus' temptations becomes the very place in which glimpses of God's Kingdom, God's way are discerned: in trusting God's purposes, in honouring God's call, and in worshipping God's holy name made present in Jesus Christ by the very same power of the Holy Spirit who led Jesus into the wilderness.

'There comes a moment,' C.S. Lewis writes in his 1948 book *Miracles*, 'when the children who have been playing at burglars hush suddenly: was that a **real** footstep in the hall? There comes a moment when people who have been dabbling in religion suddenly draw back. Supposing we really found Him? We never meant it to come to **that!** Worse still, supposing He found us?' (C.S. Lewis, *Miracles*, 1948, pp. 113-114).

Surely the wilderness can become the place where we experience the rich challenge and deep grace of God? Surely the wilderness can be the place of opportunity, of edge, of being in the midst of (which is not the same as being in the middle of)? That is precisely where the Church is called to be. If we are under any illusion that we occupy a place of privilege and power, then think again. The rich heritage of our Anglican tradition enables us to take a place of love and reconciliation, of partnership, of careful listening, of challenge, and ultimately as bearers of God's grace.

To be the body of Christ, broken, wounded, and left for dead, is interwoven with a tapestry of hope, joy, and resurrection. Lent affords us the opportunity to be with Christ in the wilderness, that we might see the path that lies ahead of us, that calls us out of ourselves, beyond all that is fleeting and transitory in our world, grasping the reality of pain, but upheld by the light of what completes our journey, the eternal light of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.