**
Genesis 9.8-17
Mark 1.9-15
21st February 2021

 Isolated yet not Alone**

INTRODUCTION TO THE THEME

Rainbows, not so much in the sky but on people’s doors and in their windows, have been prolific since last March.

Adopted as a symbol of support for the NHS they have been everywhere. When we see them, they speak to us of hope, comfort and dedication. Their vibrant colours and graceful arcs seemed apposite at a time of national gloom, even fear.

In the Judaeo-Christian story the rainbow first appears centuries ago in the myth narrative of Noah and the Ark. After the great flood, a tale that is common to just about every religion, there is regeneration and fresh hope after so much destruction. The author of Genesis has this picture of a compact, or covenant, between God and humanity enshrining a promise that never again would there be another such devastation. And every time God saw the rainbow – interesting that, the rainbow is described as being an aid memoir for God not us, he would be reminded of that promise and the rains would abate.

You know the writers of the Jewish Scriptures really didn’t like water. We first meet this fear in the creation story itself as the Spirit is described as brooding over the *great deep –* a somewhat terrifying phrase. And then there was the chaos of waters in the sky and on earth merging. It was only when God separated them that the day was eventually called good.

Encountering deep, dark waters or going through a raging storm is often the bible’s way of conjuring up the most fear-filled and anxious picture of life imaginable.

Of course, rainbows are essentially just water, water droplets through which the light shines. The result is that we see, but could never touch or capture, a rainbow. Its arc is so beautiful that the Irish tradition is always that there is a pot of gold where it ends.

So, maybe the rainbow is actually a very clever symbol. It’s made of water, the very thing that people feared when it fell from the sky in torrents. Yet this watery symbol brings hope in place of fear. The fact of the rainbow’s existence means the rains are tempered, the storm has eased and there will not be a flood. Instead, the sun is emerging from behind clouds that are now passing away. It shines through the droplets and separated arcs of rainbow colour glisten in the sky, their beauty captivating all who see the combined arc’s brief appearing.

The lesson of the rainbow is that the rain and the storm will not, ultimately, be overwhelming. We will cope. We will come out the other side.

The Psalmists often painted such a picture talking of the swirling waters that will not overcome us.

It’s about affirming hope even during a time of adversity. And that’s a theme appropriate for both the days of Lent and a year of Pandemic.

ISOLATED YET NOT ALONE

On this, as on all first Sundays of Lent, we find ourselves back in the wilderness with Jesus. Mark’s gospel only gives it a fleeting reference, just passing on the bare bones of the story: *The Spirit drove him out into the wilderness and there he remained for forty days, tempted by Satan. He was among the wild beasts, and angels attended to his needs.*

There are no less than 300 references to wilderness in the bible.

These bleak places came in all shapes and sizes and one of the largest runs like a giant spine up the middle of the country. Yet even in these inhospitable environments farmers would still look after sheep, the herd grazing on minimal vegetation and somehow surviving.

The closest I think I’ve ever been to desert life was during a manse exchange to Australia when we drove north from Adelaide up to the Flinders Mountain Ranges. It was an all-day journey along a seemingly never-ending straight road with the sun getting hotter by the hour as we made our way further and further into the silence of the outback and the crystal-clear sky of the bush. Once at our sheep station accommodation it became clear that any walking would have to be done before midday or after the sun went down in the evening. It really did feel unsafe to be outside in the afternoon with such unrelenting arid heat.

So, what is the appeal of deserts and the draw of wilderness?

It was common in Jesus’ day for radical communities, like those of Qumran, on the shores of the Dead Sea and at the edge of the Judean Wilderness, to set up home in such bleak places.

Maybe in battling to sustain life it becomes clearer what’s really important about life. Unencumbered by that which is perhaps, no more than a passing distraction, communities like those of Qumran got to grips with what they saw were the essentials of living.

So, in telling the story of Jesus having this rough and demanding ‘retreat’ at the beginning of his ministry, the gospel writers are making something of statement about him. They place him in this line of thinkers whose message isn’t forged in the comfort of religious academia, but in the struggle of wilderness. From day one Jesus is presented to us, rather like John the Baptist who also preached in the wilderness, as a voice calling from the margins, a true radical who would not just comfort the disturb but, prophetically, disturb the comfortable.

I recently saw a snippet of a programme the other day about that somewhat scarry mountain in the Lake District, Helvellyn. Its majesty can be a little daunting for walkers as they ascend to the summit via a path called Striding Edge – perhaps you have done it and lived to tell the tale.

Amid this desolate grandeur the programme followed a young woman in her mid-twenties who just loved spending a night now and then on Helvellyn. She called it *Rough Camping* and no doubt it’s at the opposite end of the spectrum from Glamping. She’d got near the top with nothing more than a rucksack on her back containing a tent and all she’d need for the next 24 hours. As the sun went down, as the walkers descended back to their guest houses, she remained alone with just the stars and silence to keep her company. It became her wilderness and she absolutely loves it. It constantly surprises her that its at these moments she feels most fulfilled. It’s in this return to simplicity that she works out what’s truly important to her. Unencumbered she settles into a deeper version of herself, more at peace and focused.

*Rough Camping* – perhaps the Retreat Association should take it on board!

When John the Baptist issued his call for repentance in the wilderness, he too was asking folk to reassess their lives. Repentance is one of those biblical and churchy words that we can find ourselves using but not quite understanding. One meaning of repentance is to re-focus. To bring the meaning back and regain a clearer definition of life.

Lent has always been a season connected to repentance, yet perhaps this year we might think of it as not simply becoming aware of our failings and fragility, but also as an opportunity to re-focus. To reaffirm our belief in God and love, to recommit ourselves to each other and community and to do all this in a spirit of refocused gratitude for the gift of life.

The Christian disciplines, if we can call them that, of both Lent and going on Retreat can be misrepresented as essentially private activities. Although they are to do with our personal faith journey the process of living a good Lent or participating in a reflective retreat are not ultimately self-centred.

Jesus didn’t spend forty days in the wilderness in an ethereal haze of quiet prayer singing worship songs! He battles with his demons. He confronts any tendencies he might have that could be seduced by power or popularity. These are days of hard work and honest self-assessment.

Jesus emerges from this time apart knowing three things better: himself, God and the mission before him. The reason for his retreat was so that he might re-emerge back into community refocused and refreshed, and Mark tells us his did that with great vigour and energy on Day One of his public ministry in Capernaum.

It’s become something of a tradition during the weekends run by the Baptist Union Retreat Group, that after two days of silence our time together often ends with a communion at which we speak again. After the bread and wine, the leader gives opportunity, unforced, for anyone who wishes to tell the group what the time away has meant to them.

I’ve always been impressed by the responses. As a leader, especially on a silent retreat, it’s almost impossible to gauge the reaction to your talks or the services in chapel. It becomes easy to think nothing is going on and people are just going through the motions. And then comes this moment of sharing when the twenty or so retreatants tell each other what they sense God has taught them since Friday night. Inevitably it is about being re-focused in some way, so that they can return to their family, church, job or society, more able to serve others and play their part better.

Jesus emerges from wilderness eager to serve and that’s a great model for our journey through Lent or a weekend spent on Retreat.

We invest a lot in the images and symbols that are connected with faith and used in worship. In today’s readings, as we embark on this new season of the Church Year, Lent, we encounter three.

There is the Rainbow in Noah’s story. The Wilderness that followed so abruptly after Jesus’ baptism, and The Angels who, we are told, cared for him during the forty days. Rainbows, wilderness, angels – as diverse a set of symbols as you could get yet there is a theme running through them.

The word Wilderness is best translated as *isolated place.* It’s not always a desert, it might be an island and today we might even say that such a sense of isolation can even be found in a crowd.

The message behind each of the three symbols from today’s scriptures is that even when we feel isolated we are never truly alone.

The rainbow reminded an ancient people that God is concerned about the planet, it was their way of saying this God is with us, will see us through the storm and bring us out the other side. That God cares, and will always care, about creation.

The angels in the desert along side Jesus have no more than a passing reference in Mark 1 yet what a picture of encouragement, that even at his most fragile these messengers from God draw alongside him and attended to his needs.

And that concept of wilderness as an isolated place? Well yes, a place to be apart from others for a time, yet the whole point of such temporary isolation is draw closer to God and sense his call and direction upon our lives.

There is no doubt that in some ways, over these last eleven months it just might have felt to us as if we’ve been living in this season of Lent since March 2020. Did Easter and Christmas really happen? Well, yes! But even these times had something of the sense of wilderness about them.

Our prayer and hope is surely that in all this, even at moments of isolation, we might have been sustained by the belief that God has never left us, and has travelled through this strange, even baffling time, alongside us. For surely that is the message of the rainbow, the angels and the wilderness: isolated, yet never alone.

May it be so for us in these Lenten days of 2021.