

# Homily for people and parishes...

Bishop Cam Venables – Lent 1

Readings: **Genesis 9:8-17**  
1Peter 3:18-22

**Psalm 25:1-10**  
**Mark 1:9-15**

One of the many gifts of living in Toowoomba is the opportunity to live in a place that has four seasons. When I lived in Papua New Guinea there was a wet season and a dry season, while in Rockhampton we used to joke that ‘winter’ never lasted more than four or five days! However, in Toowoomba there are long weeks of real cold, the deciduous trees lose their leaves, and foggy mornings become the norm. Then the cherry trees bud, the gardens are full of Spring flowers... and there is an ongoing rhythm to things: a time to plant, a time to weed, a time to harvest, and a time to prepare soil for further planting.

There is also a rhythm in our Church seasons, and today is the first Sunday in the season of Lent. We might be tempted to think that we’ve been here before and done this already – but things in our life have changed since last year. At the very least, we’re one year older!

In the seven verses of today’s Gospel Mark remembers Jesus being baptised; hearing a voice from heaven; being driven into the wilderness; before emerging from the wilderness into a time of ministry. Mark does not waste any time in his narrative! Unlike Luke and Matthew’s Gospels there is no description of the temptations, he simply says that Jesus was tempted; that he was with the wild beasts; and that the angels waited on him.

It is the meaning of ‘wilderness’ I would like us to think about on this first Sunday in Lent.

What comes to your mind when you think of ‘wilderness’? There are many wilderness areas in Australia so there is plenty to consider without having to imagine landscapes in another country. For we have lush tropical rain forests in the north, snow covered mountain ranges in the south, and vast areas of desert.

However, we imagine ‘wilderness’ I suggest that in any form of physical wilderness there are two consistent elements. The first is that they are difficult places in which to live, relative to the places we call home; and, the second is that there are significant risks or dangers in wilderness, relative to the places we call home.

I imagine some of you who visit wilderness areas regularly might think that I’m overstating the risk but that could be because we take pieces of ‘home’ with us when we go. We might tow a caravan into which we can retreat at the end of the day. Even a tent creates a shelter that protects us from the elements, snakes, and biting insects. We take torches, water, food, swags, and when we’re going really remote we might take a satellite phone so that we can call for help if we get into trouble!

What if we had none of these things and simply had to find our own water and food; make our own shelter; trusting that God's grace would see us through the night?

Now, I've spent some time walking in wilderness areas, and I don't mind filtering drinking water from streams or eating de-hydrated rations for days on end. But, if I had to live off the land, and find water to sustain me, particularly in desert areas, I know that I wouldn't last long. I think for most of us this would be way outside our comfort zone, and we would not know how to survive.

Jesus was in the wilderness and Mark's Gospel states that there were 'wild-beasts'. Think wolves, bears, and lions... and he had no torch, no gun... and no four-wheel drive to sleep in! There is a profound vulnerability about being in physical wilderness; our lives are less certain and our way forward is less clear. Everything is stripped away, and some-how we know we can't do life by ourselves. Safety through the night is no longer assumed, to the degree that each new day is recognised as gift. Water, food, and shelter have to be worked for, and fire can literally make the difference between life or death.

I think our experience and understanding of physical wilderness can be helpful when considering our experiences of emotional and spiritual 'wilderness'. By this I mean those times in our lives when we experience profound vulnerability, in which our lives are less certain, and our way forward is unclear. I'd probably go further and suggest that it's possible to feel emotionally and spiritually lost in such times, and that this is an important part of being human.

Addiction and unfulfilled longing can feel like wilderness!

Grief and loss can feel like wilderness!

Illness and injury can feel like wilderness!

Depression and anxiety can feel like wilderness!

Relationship break down and divorce can feel like wilderness!

Conflict and the experience of being bullied can feel like wilderness!

Unemployment, and even retirement, can feel like wilderness!

Things happen in our lives, and in the lives of others, which can leave us in some form of wilderness and all too often we lock the hurt of this away and hide it from others. We may feel ashamed that we're not going well, and that we can't seem to fix it – or, manage it – or, come to terms with it.

But part of the Lenten journey is an invitation to be more honest with ourselves, and with God. To be more honest about our brokenness, our need, and our longing... The experience that Jesus had in the wilderness has the potential to give us hope because the Gospel writer

tells us that God sustained him through that time, and that afterwards Jesus returned to Galilee more clear about who he was, and more in tune with God than ever before.

I think these are great goals for us to aim for in the coming weeks of Lent: that we will be clearer about who we are and more in tune with God when we celebrate Easter. We may already have a sense of being in an emotional or spiritual wilderness so our task, in God's grace, is to endure and find our way forward.

But, even if we're not conscious of being in a wilderness space there's always room for growth! Perhaps the traditional challenge of setting aside one or more pleasurable things... would be life-giving? I'm thinking about things like chocolate, coffee, sugar, wine, TV, and social media. If we fasted from these for six weeks with the intention of using the time we'd otherwise spend on them to pray, write, and study... would this be life-giving? And, if we took on a new activity for the six weeks of Lent, would it be life-giving? I'm thinking of activities like regularly visiting a lonely person, or creating a space for prayer at home, or keeping a daily prayer journal, and participating in a Bible study.

When we are brutally honest... I think you'll agree that we're all works in progress! May we each have the courage to acknowledge this in the coming journey of this Lent – and pray for the guiding of God's Spirit as we seek to be clearer about who we are, and what God calls us to do.

As I close, would you please join me in prayer:

Holy God we give thanks for each breath and heartbeat that makes our lives possible, and for your love. We give thanks that you sustained Jesus in the wilderness, and that you sustain us. We offer you the coming weeks of Lent... asking for your guidance and blessing, in the name of the one you called 'Beloved', Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen