

Homily for people and parishes

Bishop Cam Venables – Sunday 9th March 2025, Lent 1

Readings: **Deuteronomy 26:1-11**

Romans 10:4-13

Psalms 91:1-2, 9-16

Luke 4:1-15

I wonder what images come to your mind when you hear the term ‘wilderness’? Within my imagination I initially think of physical places in which there are no people. I think of the Simpson Desert which begins in the far west of this Diocese; I think of the granite rock formations of Girraween National Park; and, I think of the unyielding Atacama Desert in the north of Chile. Tough places to travel through yet in each there is great beauty. Not easy places in which to sustain life, and yet life in each place is abundant, if you look for it.

If we were dropped into these places unprepared most of us would be in trouble. Where would we find water, food, and shelter? Do we remain in the one place where we were dropped, or do we risk travelling onwards in search of greater abundance and security?

With these experiences of physical wilderness in mind I think we can helpfully consider other forms of wilderness. The emotional wilderness that may be experienced because of relationship breakdown, grief and loss, injury and disease. The psychological wilderness that may be experienced because of abuse, loss of work, or, a mental illness. Then there may be spiritual wilderness that can be experienced when life goes badly wrong or we’ve simply drifted far from where we used to be anchored. In this we may have a crisis of faith – a ‘dark night of the soul’ - that can seem never ending.

For people in Australia who have family members in Sudan there is a wilderness of not knowing if those family members will be safe from harm this day or tomorrow. For a person in Australia whose wife, husband, or child has died this week; or, been diagnosed with an aggressive cancer this week... there can be wilderness. For what was previously secure and certain, is now uncertain or forever changed.

With Tropical Cyclone Alfred coming to South-East Queensland this weekend there is understandable concern and fear. People are hoping for the best while planning for the worst so that risk is mitigated. Schools, Anglicare, and Parishes have all been working to ensure that the impact on people and property is minimised. Sand bags have been put in place, evacuation centres have been opened, volunteers are ready to respond... and, supermarket shelves, in some places, are empty.

For friends in South Lismore and other communities of the Northern Rivers in New South Wales there is some sense of *deja vue*, for many have been advised to evacuate and the

memories of being twice flooded three years ago are still fresh. It is estimated that 20% of homes and businesses across Australia are un-insured or under-insured so there is much uncertainty and real potential to feel 'lost' again.

So, it's encouraging that in the Gospel this weekend we hear about Jesus being led by the Spirit into the wilderness where he stayed for 'forty days', which is a Hebrew way of saying 'a long time'.

In this experience of wilderness Jesus was forced to leave behind what was familiar and comfortable, and when he was most vulnerable – the Gospel says he was 'famished' - he was tested. Tested to see where he placed his value, what he aspired to be, and who he relied upon. Was he someone who would only believe in God if God met his need for food, social position, and safety? Or, was he someone who would trust in God no matter what was happening in his life?

After that wilderness experience, I think it's fair to say that Jesus returned to the society of his time a changed man. For he had new clarity about his identity as a child of God, and his life's purpose: which was to *proclaim good news to the poor, release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, and freedom to those who were oppressed.*

Lent calls us each year to journey, and deliberately set aside some things which make our lives comfortable and certain. In this, I'm not sure if we create a mini wilderness or if we spiritually flirt with genuine wilderness.

We might choose to fast from something which we take for granted each day, or each week. It might be a meal, which would give us the gift of a little hunger, and through this find ourselves a little more grateful to God, and to primary producers, for the food in our fridge and pantry. We might also find new empathy for those forced to fast because of flooding or war... and even respond to their needs through generosity.

In addition, we might choose to fast each day, or week, from the technology enabled distractions that fill our minds with compelling images, stories, music, and advertising. I wonder if you have a distraction of choice, and what gift there might be in such a fast?

Whatever fast we choose – I think we should seek and anticipate new encounter with God and with self over the next six weeks of Lent, and in God's grace become a little clearer, or a little more renewed, about our identity as God's beloved children, and what we are called to do with our lives.

The Episcopal Bishop of Washington, Marian Edgar Budde, quotes the Benedictine author, Joan Chittister, in her reflection this week and I think there is great wisdom in her insight as we look ahead to the journey of Lent this year. Chittister writes, "*Courage, character, self-*

*reliance, and faith are forged in the fire of affliction. We wish it were otherwise. But if you want to be holy, stay where you are in the human community and learn from it. **Learn patience. Learn wisdom. Learn unselfishness. Learn love.***"¹

Bishop Budde continues in her words, "As we learn these things, we can face almost anything, and we also let go of some of the things that, in the end, don't matter. **In the wilderness, our focus becomes clearer on what we have time for and what we don't.**"²

Would you please join me, as we close in prayer:

Holy God, we give thanks for your love, and for the challenge to be faithful in times of wilderness. We ask for your blessing on all experiencing wilderness because of flood or war or disease – that they get the support they need.

We lift to you our own journeys this week, and ask for the guidance of your Spirit, as we fast from some level of comfort and distraction. Through this activity we ask for renewal, new insight, and peace.

We ask for the grace to become more compassionate, and even more like your son Jesus, in whose name we pray. Amen.

¹ Joan Chittister, *The Rule of Benedict: Insights for the Ages* (Crossroad Publishing Company, 2004), 33.

² [Finding Ourselves in the Wilderness](#) (click to follow link to reflection)