

High St Uniting Church Frankston

Time in the Wilderness

Matthew 4:1 - 11



When you hear the word 'wilderness', what comes to your mind? I think for most of us, thanks to the environmental movement and the Wilderness Society, the image of wilderness is Kakadu, or the Daintree, or the South West of Tasmania. Wilderness as wild-ness, places that are full of life but not people. However, when the text says the Jesus was led into the wilderness, we are not talking about the Daintree, we are talking about the Outback. From the

time of the wanderings of the people of Israel in the deserts of Arabia, wilderness is the place where all that stands between you and death, is God. And wilderness then becomes a metaphor for all the times and places where we see no way out. Not a wilderness like the Daintree where you are surrounded by life and food options and comfort and security, but an Outback wilderness. You may not like the word temptation, and prefer testing, but it amounts to the same thing in the wilderness. Our innate sense of self preservation makes it very difficult to take a deep breath, relax, and rely on God. The testing, the temptation, is to do something. Turn this stone into bread? Right, throw it through the baker's window! Jump off a building? Right, the compo will fix me up! But isn't that exactly what this story of the newly baptised Jesus is warning against? Don't do something, trust in God.

This story of Jesus in the wilderness sits at the start of Lent because of the 40 days, and the ideas of piety and preparation, but it is also much more than a convenient opener for Lent. The repeated question – "If you are the Son of God" exposes wrong ideas about what 'Son of God' means, leaving us to contemplate in Lent both the identity and mission of Christ and what we think Son of God means for our identity and mission.

"If you are the Son of God, turn these stones into bread"; the temptation to think of Jesus as our personal 'miracle man', providing for our comfort and our physical needs.

This maybe at its worst in the so-called Prosperity Gospel, but it is also present in all churches seeking wealth and comfort at the expense of ministry and mission. There is an arrogance to "If you are the Son of God, give me what I want" that says, "I am more important than other people", and denies the call to love your neighbour. It equates 'Son of God' with 'source of power for me'. Following Jesus is not the path to comfort and wealth. There are no stories of Jesus miraculously feeding just the disciples. Rather, when he sends them out on mission, he tells them to rely on the generosity of those they minister to. Jesus was not a well-dressed, well-fed guru that people went to visit for miracles, he was a homeless, travelling teacher, meeting needs in the will of God. Jesus is not the miracle man, but the one in whose name we pray for what is in the will of God. Not "If you are the Son of God", but "If it is the will of God".

"If you are the Son of God, throw yourself off the pinnacle of the Temple"; the temptation to think of Jesus as our personal 'security force' for whatever actions we take.

Ignore the commandments, ignore the guidelines, risk everything for a plan you devised; it's okay, God will rescue you if something goes wrong. We don't need to pray and discern and discuss, God is our safety net. This was the attitude of the people of Israel through the

period of the Kings, “we are the people of God, so we can do what we like because God is on our side”. The Gospel calls us to follow Jesus; not to live as if Jesus is following us, with the dark suit and the dark glasses and the little earpiece to a pocket radio, ready to step in when we get ourselves in trouble. Jesus didn’t risk his life by jumping off the Temple, but he did go to the cross, where the people goaded him in saying, “If you are the Son of God, save yourself”. But the will of God, the way of God, was through the cross and not around it. In the Prayer of Jesus, we are called to pray that we are not led to temptation or brought to hard testing, but that is in the context of the will of God and not about temptation or testing through our own actions. Jesus is not our security force, but the one who calls us to risk all for the kingdom of God. Not “If you are the Son of God”, but “Show us the way, Lord”.

“If you are the Son of God, bow down and I will give you all the kingdoms of the world”; the temptation of thinking that Jesus is the path to power and control. The Holy Roman Empire and all the other versions throughout history where the church has nestled up against the government and imposed control. Or where the church has paired with government and remained silent in the face of injustice, for reasons of power and privilege, the path of Christian Nationalism. Jesus neither sided with the zealots nor with the Romans, he walked another way. The way of the reign of God. Following Jesus is not about exerting our way, our beliefs, or our understanding of morality on the world. Rather it is to live the life of the reign of God in love, mercy, compassion, and justice and demonstrate to the world that there is a better way. If Jesus had sided with the Romans or the Sadducees, he may have avoided the cross, but that would have also avoided the will of God and the way of salvation. This temptation also speaks to the wider world’s misunderstanding of God and Christ. “If God is all loving, why is there evil? If Jesus was the Son of God, why did he have to die?” Jesus didn’t come to take charge and destroy evil or evil people; he came to bring the possibility of another way. The way of the reign of God; the way to conquer temptation and evil through faith. Not, “If you are the Son of God”, but “Yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory”.

As we enter the season of Lent, considering who we are before God and the depths of our need, we begin by contemplating who Jesus is and why he came to be one of us. The season of Lent is the way to the cross, and the way of wilderness, in that we are called to place our reliance on God alone.

Jesus is the Son of God, but not the mighty, miracle working, God-in-human-form, come to solve all the problems of the world. Jesus as the Son of God is the faithful, suffering servant, God with us, come to lead us to the better way, the way of faith, trust, obedience, sacrifice and love.