

# Holy Trinity & St Peter South Wimbledon Sermons

First Sunday of Lent (Deuteronomy 26:1-11; Luke 4:1-13; Ps 91:1, 2, 9-end)

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I wonder if you have ever tried to sit quietly, *really* quietly, and be still, to listen to the silence. All of a sudden, you become very aware of your surroundings. You can't believe you live somewhere so noisy. There's an incessant hum of traffic, perhaps playground chatter wafts through your window from a local school, sirens wail in the background, and aircraft roar their way into Heathrow. There's no such thing as silence.

Or maybe you're in a more idyllic setting. There's the sound of larks, singing high up above you; a gentle breeze rustles the grass. Or perhaps you're in the desert; you can hear your feet struggling for a grip on the sand; you can hear the regular rhythm of your own breathing. There's no such thing as silence.

And then there are the inner sounds. The thoughts, ideas, feelings; the memories, dreams, anxieties – fleeting or persistent – that form an internal soundtrack to our life. There's no such thing as silence.

Even if you find your way into the wilderness of a desert, there is no such thing as silence. And yet, the concepts of wilderness, desert and seeking silence are some of the strongest themes that we are offered during Lent. Lent is a season of self-reflection, of self-examination, and to do that, we need to set time apart, we need to experience silence...?

Lucy Winkett – in the Archbishop of Canterbury's Lent book for this year – talks about how our world is saturated with sound, and the impact that this has on us. She says,

*“Our lives are lived against the backdrop of external and internal soundscapes. The sounds, noise and music with which we are surrounded in modern life have spiritual implications. What are these soundscapes, and how do we listen for the voice of God within them?”*

The Lenten journey that Lucy Winkett offers isn't so much one of seeking silence but one of seeking God's voice amongst the many sounds that make up the soundscape of our lives. We are called to hear God's voice, to trace God's story, in the sounds and stories of our lives and in the lives of our communities. And we are called to respond to what we hear, to what we encounter.

We can see this in the reading from Deuteronomy. The people of Israel are remembering their time in exile, their time in wilderness. They are remembering who they are, where they have come from, what they have experienced, and what God has done for them and continues to do for them. And in response to God's action in their lives, they offer the first fruits of their harvest, because God, *“heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression.”*

And this is something that we do in our church communities. We try to make sense of who we are, where we've come from and where we should be going. I know this is something that some of you will have been thinking about now that Holy Trinity is part of a new Team Ministry. What are your shared stories and your shared values? And what might God's vision be for your future as a Team?

This reading from Deuteronomy – placed in our lectionary for the First Sunday of Lent – reminds us that Lent offers us all a time to take stock of our life together *as a community*. We are called to hear God's voice, to trace God's story, in the life of our community.

In Luke's account of the temptation of Jesus, we are given an individual account of a wilderness experience. Jesus has just been baptized by John in the river Jordan. We will next encounter him in the synagogue in Nazareth, reading from Isaiah, "*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor...*" This is his "mission statement" if you like; this is what his ministry will be about, "*Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.*"

So the account of Jesus' time in the wilderness is an in-between time. His baptism confirmed him as the Son of God. His proclamation in the synagogue is effectively the start of his public ministry, of what he will do. So, what is the wilderness time for? It is always titled "the temptation of Jesus", implying a testing time, a negative experience. And yet the first verse is intriguing. "*Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness...*" The Holy Spirit isn't just present with Jesus, the Spirit is leading Jesus. This would appear to be a God-intended time.

So what is the wilderness time for? A preparation, a taking stock? It is a very vivid account, with two key players in Jesus and the devil. There is the verbal sparring in their dialogue, as the devil attempts to trip Jesus up with his rhetoric. And there are the dramatic changes of location, far from the wilderness, as the devil shows Jesus all the kingdoms of the world, and then takes him to Jerusalem to the pinnacle of the Temple.

Can we imagine experiencing temptation in this way? Tom Wright suggests another way of seeing this, as an inner dialogue in Jesus' mind and imagination. In the inner soundscape of his mind, he is trying to discern the voice of God. Now perhaps this account of temptation is transformed into something we might be able to identify with more easily. The devil's voice of Luke's account becomes that inner voice, one that can speak so convincingly to us. *Why not do this rather than that? It would be much easier; it would make much more sense...*

The temptation of Jesus in the wilderness is a reminder to us of his humanity. He wasn't superhuman; he was fully human. And the temptations he encountered in the wilderness were universal, human temptations: of power and influence, wealth and consumption, personal appetite and greed. If Jesus had responded differently during his wilderness experience, would he have gone on to fulfil his mission of bringing good news to the poor? And so, this time of wilderness, whilst it was testing and difficult, was somehow necessary, and it enabled Jesus to fulfil the mission that God had chosen for him. You could say that it enabled him to be who God intended him to be.

I wonder what there is in Jesus' wilderness experience that we might be able to reflect on this Lent. How will we discern the voice of God this Lent? How will we be able to hear it amidst all the other voices that combine to make the soundscape of our inner and outer worlds?

I think the first clue may be in that intriguing first verse. Jesus was led by the Holy Spirit into the wilderness. It was a God-intended experience. Part of the challenge of Lent for us is this first stage. Are we willing to take on the challenge of a wilderness experience? Will we let the Holy Spirit lead us there? Self-reflection and self-examination are not easy. We may be fearful or anxious of what will happen, what we

may experience or find out. It may not feel like a very safe thing to do. I certainly find it easier to spring-clean my home than my soul.

By taking on this challenge, we will be more open to listening out for God's voice, to tracing his story and how it links with ours. Our very willingness to be led by the Spirit into this strange, wilderness place, will itself open us up to the possibility of discerning God's voice within the soundscape of our life.

God does not promise to spare us from difficulties or from suffering. But he does promise to be with us, in whatever direction our lives go, in whatever we encounter. And that is what the Psalmist portrays so vividly in today's Psalm. We will hear it later, sung by the Music Group at communion, "*You who live in the shelter of the Most High, who abide in the shadow of the Almighty, will say to the Lord, 'My refuge and my fortress; my God in whom I trust.'*"

As we enter the wilderness of Lent, we are offered the assurance of safety and refuge in God. It is his promise to us, just as it was his promise to the Israelites when they were in exile, and just as it was his promise to Jesus in the wilderness.

As the American pastor John Stendahl comments: "... the desert is not god-forsaken, nor does it belong to the devil. It is God's home. The Holy Spirit is there, within us, beside us. And if we cannot feel that Spirit inside of us or at our side, perhaps we can at least imagine Jesus there, not too far away, with enough in him to sustain us, enough to make us brave."

Lent is a serious season. But it is also a season shot through with hope. We can only reach Easter through Lent, but *there* is our hope. We are an *Easter* people; we know that it does not end at the cross on Good Friday; we have the resurrection, the hope of the empty tomb.

This in-between time of wilderness, whilst it might be testing and difficult for us, may also have unexpected joys. As we travel through Lent and Holy Week, allowing God to speak clearly to us, so too we travel the road to resurrection and new life.

I would like to close with a prayer by Janet Morley: *Spirit of integrity, you drive us into the desert to search out our truth. Give us clarity to know what is right, and courage to reject what is expedient; that we may abandon the false innocence of failing to choose at all, but may follow the purposes of Jesus Christ. Amen.*