

Year A Lent 1 22<sup>nd</sup> February 2026

Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7. Romans 5: 12-19. Matthew 4: 1-11

What makes wildernesses so attractive? Our best holiday was going to three wildernesses – first to Chile’s Atacama Desert, the driest place in the world, and down to Patagonia and finally to the Falkland Islands for a wedding.

They were all very different kinds of wildernesses. While each was breathtaking, all three are very testing places to live.

As indeed is the wilderness where Jesus was led by the Holy Spirit. The terrain between Jerusalem and the Dead Sea is as inhospitable as anywhere I have ever seen.

In today’s Gospel reading the Holy Spirit took Jesus into the wilderness immediately after the spiritual high of his baptism where he was declared to be God’s beloved son. Perhaps to the wilderness precisely because it was the one place in Israel where he could be sure of being alone.

Isn’t that how it so often happens – success immediately followed by a really hard time? Take Elijah – one day he triumphs over all of Baal’s prophets and the next he is fleeing for his life and wants to die.

That’s something we need to watch out for. So often testing rears its ugly head in the immediate aftermath of a triumph.

Translations generally say that Jesus was tempted in the desert, but many scholars would argue that the correct equivalent of the Greek original is that Jesus was tested. Either way, the Holy Spirit’s involvement means God was ultimately in control.

While the traditional version of the Lord’s Prayer is ‘Lead us not into temptation,’ a common alternative probably closer to the original intention is ‘Do not bring us to the time of trial’.

Jesus’ 40 days of fasting evokes memories of Moses and Elijah enduring similar privations. And its purpose? To see what sort of Son of God he was going to be, indeed Satan immediately challenges Jesus’ identity by saying IF you are the Son of God, the same challenge thrown at him on the Cross.

Was he going to be someone like us who all too often make decisions on the basis of what requires the least effort? The temptation to do what's easiest is only too familiar. That was the first test Jesus faced.

The second test was whether Jesus was willing to look spiritual in order to garner popularity. First century Jews believed that when the Messiah came it would be on the Temple roof. Did Jesus want to be what the people wanted or what God wanted?

The final test was whether Jesus was willing to compromise to get what we all want – success – however you define worldly success.

As we know, Jesus showed he really was the second Adam, deliberately quoting Scriptures from Deuteronomy, referencing Israel's 40 years in the wilderness.

The point of testing or temptation isn't to drag us down and make us feel guilty, rather to strengthen us for God's purposes for us. Jesus was strengthened not weakened by his wilderness time.

We must also remember that the Devil didn't give up. As Luke puts it, the devil left Jesus – until the next opportunity came.

Think of Jesus telling Peter Get thee behind me Satan, let alone Gethsemane where the testing was so great that Jesus had to pray the same prayer three times. So don't suppose that Satan will give up on us either.

No wonder the writer to the Hebrews says Jesus understands our temptations because he has been tempted just as we have.

This is crucial stuff, REALLY important. Why? Principally because Matthew, Mark and Luke all record the story, yet there were no human eyewitnesses, so Jesus must have regarded it important enough to tell his disciples about it in considerable detail.

Our personal wildernesses can come in many forms – for some it will be major – for instance in spiritual form, as it did for Jesus, others may find themselves in an emotional or financial or physical wilderness such as the breakdown of a key family relationship, redundancy or a serious illness.

And those are just some of the big wildernesses that people face. Speaking from the experience of two redundancies, I know that if we truly hand the situation over to God as being too big for us to handle then we will eventually emerge stronger for the experience.

Equally, temptations can also often seem quite reasonable – a nicer car, a bigger house or a better job – and therefore not always so easy to spot.

Isn't that what happened to Adam and Eve? Yes, the serpent lied, but the opportunity to become self-sufficient didn't seem that dangerous to Eve. What was clever was that the serpent played on their insecurity, on their feeling of being incomplete. Not that they were incomplete but the serpent sowed the idea in their minds that they were

It seems that original uncertainty existed even before original sin. The sadness is that Adam and Eve chose to rely on the serpent rather than God to fill what you might call their empty hole. As Blaise Pascal, the 17<sup>th</sup>C French philosopher, said, that God-shaped hole was deliberate as a means of tethering us to God. And St Augustine argued that God created a restlessness in our hearts that could only be settled when we rest in God.

On the other hand,, while we are free to choose what to do, we are NOT free to choose the consequences of our choices – as Adam and Eve discovered to their cost.

C.S. Lewis puts it brilliantly in *The Screwtape Letters*, when Screwtape advises his nephew Wormwood about the best way to secure the damnation of a young man.

Doubtless, says Screwtape, like all young tempters, you are anxious to be able to report spectacular wickedness. But do remember, the only thing that matters is the extent to which you separate the man from the Enemy. It does not matter how small the sins are provided that their cumulative effect is to edge the man away from the Light and out into the Nothing. Indeed, the safest road to Hell is the gradual one—the gentle slope, soft underfoot, without sudden turnings, without milestones, without signposts.

And that's probably where most of us are, doing those sorts of things that take us away from the light towards the darkness without either meaning to or even realising we are.

The more spectacular falls from grace often seem to involve those with the greatest gifts. Jesus' tests were so huge precisely because his gifts and power were so great.

Sadly, we see this in almost every walk of life, whether politics or business or sport or the arts where power has corrupted people by replacing a sense of what is right and wrong with a sense of entitlement.

It's even sadder and even more shameful when it happens to spiritual leaders. And it's happened to so many. No wonder the Roman Catholic Church and the Church of England to name but two Churches are in such turmoil.

Their problems have created a real sense of betrayal of trust. It reminds us that even those who appear to be among the best humanity has to offer are also broken and have their dark side and just how hard even for them to walk in the light.

It reminds us that ultimately it is only God that we can truly trust.

But we must remember, and if you take anything away from this morning I pray it is this, that whether the temptations we give into are large or small, God's grace is more than sufficient – MORE THAN sufficient.

On our fridge we used to have the wonderful saying familiar to many of you I am sure.

Justice is when you get what you deserve

Mercy is when you don't get what you deserve

Grace is when you get what you don't deserve. Think about it.

Recently I read hundreds of non-churchy definitions of grace, and several really stood out.

Christian writer Annie Lamott wrote – I do not understand the mystery of grace – only that it meets us where we are and does not leave us where it found us.

And this. Grace is the unconditional gift of the love we think we don't deserve

And my last example – I could have chosen dozens more – the wonderful acronym Gifts Received At Christ's Expense.

Gifts received at Christ's Expense.

Isn't that the Gospel of grace in a nutshell? We are redeemed, saved, covered by grace, call it what you will by Christ's total refusal to be sidetracked by Satan either in the desert at the start of his ministry or on the Cross at the end.

That's why we can rely on God to fill our holes of uncertainty rather than any of the false gods that surround and tempt us.

The gift we receive? Well that's the Holy Spirit – the same Spirit whose power enabled Jesus to conquer Satan in both life and death, the same power that is now freely available to us.

Yes we must try hard not to succumb to all the temptations facing us, but what a comfort to know that however often we fail – and we will – we are always ALWAYS covered by God's grace and for that surely our only proper response is to worship and give thanks to our Holy God.