

Sermon for Easter Day, Sunday 12 April 2020

Christ Church Cathedral Grafton

Jeremiah 31:1-6, Colossians 3:1-4, Matthew 28:1-10

The Rev'd Dr Murray Harvey, Bishop of Grafton



Isaac Cordal ¹ "Sasiedzi" 4 Culture Festival

I walked about but was very weak, and withal, very sad and heavy hearted in the sense of my miserable condition ... Why has God done this to me? Why is it that I was not long ago destroyed? Why was I not drowned here, when all the crew perished but myself? ... I was struck dumb with these reflections, as one astonished, and had not a word to answer myself ... I had no inclination to sleep. ... I took up the Bible and began to read, the first words that occurred to me were these: "Call on me in the day of trouble, and I will deliver, and thou shalt glorify me". The words were very apt to my case. I began to say, as the children of Israel did, "Can thou spread a table in the wilderness?" ²

Robinson Crusoe reflects on his isolation, after many years on his desert island. I recently re-read Robinson Crusoe and can now see it in a new light. While it's a work of fiction, it's actually quite insightful into the impact of isolation on the human psyche. Crusoe identifies his experience with that of the people of Israel in the wilderness.

Wilderness is a theme of Lent. Because of the COVID-19 Pandemic, Lent this year has certainly been a wilderness experience for many. At the beginning of Lent, we reflected on Jesus' journey into the wilderness for 40 days and 40 nights (Matthew 4:1-11). In Crusoe's wilderness experience he resorts to the scriptures. According Matthew, so does Jesus here (vv 4, 6, 10). The wilderness is a challenging place. There are all sorts of dangers, amongst them doubt, guilt and fear. Psychiatrist Julian Boulnois ³ writes that the wilderness is at its most dangerous if we try to traverse it without meaning and purpose. Jesus had this meaning and purpose from the beginning and so Satan's offerings held no power over him.

For most of us, the wilderness, brought about by social isolation, disconnection or depression, is not a happy place and may not be our place of choice. Yet the wilderness can be a place of re-birth, if we reach out and find meaning and purpose. The Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:3-12) had its roots in Jesus' wilderness experience. It offers new meaning, a new perception of the world: *Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven* (Mt 5:3). Interestingly, the indigenous people of Australia see the wilderness not as a place of desolation, but a place where deep listening is required. Deep listening to the environment, to the land and attention to its creatures and plants. For them, the wilderness is a place rich with life, relationship and meaning. But we have to take it at a different pace, not the usual hurried pace of our busy lives.

As we struggle with the social isolation, disconnection and anxiety brought about by our current crisis, where do we seek and find meaning and purpose in this particular wilderness? I hope that in the scriptures we can find not only the peace and comfort that we need, but also meaning and purpose.



Spinifex, Simpson Desert, Robert Ashdown ⁴

If the wilderness is a place of rebirth and new beginnings, I wonder, what are we learning about ourselves during this strange time? Many are learning that their individual needs and rights aren't always number one. We can't always have what we want, when we want it. This has come as a surprise to many! The needs of others, especially the most vulnerable, have to be put first. This is a painful lesson for some. Many won't accept it, hence the flaunting of the restrictions in many places. The urge for self-preservation at all costs has sadly been evident amongst a minority of people (hence the toilet paper fiasco). We are rediscovering a concept that many seemingly had never heard of - the Common Good. It stands in contrast to the 'me' culture of individualism that has gone unchallenged for too long.

Sadly, it seems humans have always resisted the restrictions imposed by civil authorities to control plagues. I've been reading about the plague that afflicted the Italian city of Florence in 1629-1631. The measures that were imposed sound remarkably similar to ours: churches, taverns, shops, schools, barber shops and inns were closed. Games, socialising and gambling were prohibited. In his *Memoirs of the Plague in Florence*, Giovanni Baldinucci ⁵ described a melancholy city, with bare streets and churches, with ordinary forms of intimacy forbidden. Yet citizens flouted quarantine laws on a regular basis, with 566 people coming before the courts for breeches, resulting in fines,

corporal punishment and imprisonment. The authorities took a dim view of the ingenious Monna Betta d'Antonio who, when her son was quarantined on the floor below, rigged up a pulley system between the floors so items could be sent back and forth. Human nature doesn't like surrendering its freedom to the Common Good.

Scripturally, the wilderness is a place that brings us face to face with uncomfortable realities like this one. Many of us will experience a sense of disappointment or even anger with God, the universe, with life, the government and those around us. The challenge is to listen to that disappointment or anger but also to listen to the gentle voice of hope that comes to us in the wilderness if we are alert to it. It's good news that despite the challenges, many in this and other communities are looking out for people and making pastoral contact with the vulnerable and helping in practical ways.

Today's Old Testament reading is from Jeremiah (31:1-6). God's people have suffered, been broken apart and driven into exile. But despite this wilderness experience, a new future is foreseen. Our lectionary portion for today could have been written for our current situation:

At that time, says the Lord, I will be the God of all the families of Israel, and they shall be my people. Thus says the Lord: The people who survived the sword found grace in the wilderness; when Israel sought for rest, the Lord appeared to him from far away.

We too seek his grace in the wilderness and need to be reminded that we are God's people. This identity as God's people, as a Christian community under God, who is present with us in our sufferings, can help us to be alert to the richness to be found in the wilderness, and keep meaning and purpose alive, as faith and hope.

After Mary Magdalene encounters the Risen Christ on that first Easter morning (Mark 16:9-11) she tells the disciples the news "while they were mourning and weeping. But when they heard that he was alive and had been seen by her, they would not believe it". A subsequent appearance by the Risen Jesus is also not believed (vv. 12-13), resulting in a third, in which he "upbraided them for their lack of faith and stubbornness". While we suffer anxiety and all sorts of confusing emotions in this strange 'wilderness' type space created by COVID-19, let's not allow it to blind us to the gentle breeze of Resurrection hope. Jesus comes to us in this wilderness space and spreads a table. He says to us, as he said to the disciples, 'Do not be afraid'. Perhaps you're not ready to enter fully into the joy of the resurrection this morning. That's okay, don't push yourself. But at least be like those disciples on the Road to Emmaus whose hearts were open to meet Jesus there and talk to him.

What can we take forward from this year's unique celebration of Easter?

Firstly, thankfulness. We have many challenges, but there remains much to be thankful for. A good public health system, biomedical research, an efficient government with a safety net for those financially affected, essential services. The internet!

Secondly, a heightened awareness that the vulnerable of our society need to be protected and that their needs override the needs of the individual. A renewed appreciation for the Common Good. Thirdly, we'll have plenty of stories and experiences to share.

Finally, as a church, it has taken us into some new spaces as we explore how to 'be church' without a building. These new ways of being church are actually reaching more people with the Gospel than the in-person approach. On average about 1000 people have tuned in to the Sunday morning services Livestreamed from here at the cathedral – just a few more than would typically be in the building on a typical Sunday! Similar results have been seen around the diocese, and I thank the

clergy and lay people who are using their creativity and other gifts to make these new ministries possible. But for some, faith is about the building rather than about the mission of the Gospel, so while we've shown that some can flourish and thrive without a building, those whose faith is the building need to do some hard thinking about the meaning and purpose of this kind of faith.

May we all be challenged by the Angel's message to the women at the tomb. It's a reminder that God is not always where we expect to find him. He's always a step ahead, beyond the bounds of our church doors, our pre-defined ideas and expectations.

But the angel said to the women, 'Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples, "He has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him."' (Matthew 28:5-7)

+Murray Harvey
7 April, 2020

Notes

1. Image of Isaac Cordal's installation, "Sasiedzi" 4 Culture Festival. Lodz, Poland. June 2015. (photo © Isaac Cordal) Reproduced with permission. brooklynstreetart.com
2. Daniel Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe*, Harper and Row, 1965, pp.89-92
3. Julian Boulois, *And the Walls Came Tumbling Down*, Spectrum, 1983.
4. <https://www.robertashdown.com/blog/?p=7771>
5. *London Review of Books*, 42 (4) 20 February 2020, pp. 5-6.

Resources for Further Study and Reflection

A Voice in the Wilderness

In 2017 the Anglican Church of Australia responded to the historic Statement from the Heart made by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representatives at Uluru. ABM has an 8-part study designed to help the church listen to the Statement from the Heart and to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Christians.

<https://www.abmission.org/resources.php?action=list-items&catId=31>



Bible Study for Easter Day 12 April 2020

Based on today's Lectionary readings, from the Episcopal Church of the United States

<https://episcopalchurch.org/library/bible-study/bible-study-easter-day-april-12-2020>