

# Sermon 21.2.2021

Genesis 9.8–17; Psalm 25.1–9; (1 Peter 3.18–22); Mark 1.9–15

“You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

A couple of years ago, I spent some time in a Benedictine monastery in the west of England. On the day before I left to go there, my mum gave me a short book for my stay, a diary by the Dutch priest Henri Nouwen. He had kept it during his time living, although not himself a monk, in a Trappist monastery in New York State.

It is wholly unpretentious, a very honest and humane account of the hardships and occasional graces of early mornings, manual labour, constant prayer, and of his own failure to notice much of a change most of the time. His diary ends, more or less, with this reflection:

If I were to ask about my seven months at the Abbey, "Did it work, did I solve my problems?" the simple answer would be, "It did not work, it did not solve my problems." And I know that a year, two years, or even a lifetime as a Trappist monk would not have "worked" either.

I think it is sometimes tempting to imagine that to be a monk is to retreat from struggle, to shelter from the storm of adult life in the comforting surrounds of a charming monastery, to live with little but to live comfortably and well. In fact, the opposite is true.

Emptiness has always been the place where we encounter most sharply, most irresistibly the darkness of the world. It is the place where our defences, our addictions and comforts, no longer work, where the distractions of work, television, alcohol, drugs, food, sex and gossip have disappeared, and we are left with the darkness that we try to keep at bay.

And that darkness, much of it, lies within. Monks and nuns, men and women who lead the most virtuous of lives, are, in my experience, often those most attuned to their own sinfulness, the depths of their own desire and cruelty. The monks I met were clear eyed, almost witty in fact, about their own temptations and failures. One told me that the reason we woke up so early for matins was because it was when we were tired that our souls were the most unguarded.

When Jesus enters the wilderness, in the reading from Mark that we just heard, he was ‘tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts’. I think we have to believe that the temptation was real. That, like a monk, like us, he felt human desire, he was hungry and wished to eat, thirsty and wished to drink, powerless and wished to be powerful, scared and wished to be safe.

---

The monks I stayed with *were* remarkable – not for their goodness but for their willingness, their courageousness to encounter themselves, shorn of all the passing satisfactions of status, wealth or pleasure. Or, rather, not merely to encounter themselves but to endure themselves, to stay submerged there, year after year, to trust so fully and blindly in God, certain that he would come to them even in the midst of their sinfulness.

Meister Eckhart, a Dominican friar in fourteenth-century Germany, located the place where God touches us in the furthest-most reaches of the soul, beyond our perceptions, beyond our personalities, beyond even our thoughts, in a small place of nothingness he called the spark.

It is common today, even among spiritual writers, to talk of our 'true selves', of finding out who we really are. It is a phrase, however, more rooted in Freud and, I think, in the logic of consumerism, than in Christianity. To Eckhart it would have been meaningless: the truest part of ourselves was not our character or personality or childhood, but a place of emptiness, a place that God might fill from outside. Our core was a kind of mirror that shows nothing but a reflection of the image of God.

Eckhart preached that the monk must pass through his character and personality, must risk entering this patch of wilderness, trusting only in the grace of God, who will meet us, fill our absence with his presence.

---

It was about a year ago that we realised with gathering certainty that Austria, that Europe more generally, would not be spared the corona virus. At that time, I preached on this unexpected change to our Lenten practice, how much more severe it would be, how much longer, how much harder to recognise the ebb and flow of the liturgical seasons.

Now a year has passed, Easter, Pentecost, Trinity, All Saints, Advent, Christmas, Epiphany – and we have returned to Lent. It has been a long wilderness, albeit not an unbroken one. There have been births and baptisms and marriages, moments of relief and gratitude, but some of our congregation have hardly left their homes in this time, some of us have lost friends or family to this virus, some, jobs and economic security. All of us have felt the constrictions on travel, socialising, shopping, working, singing.

Let me guess that we have been hungry for contact, thirsty for touch, longing for security. We have been stranded in the wilderness, we have known the company of Satan and wild beasts.

Let me guess too that many of us are still in the midst of it, that the journey home seems far off. If we feel the relief of vaccination or of the lightening of restrictions, we still know the threat of resurgence, the possibility of joblessness, of bereavement, of sickness.

We have encountered, more sharply than many of us anticipated, the darkness of the monastery and the desert, the darkness that comes of not having our ordinary routines and distractions, the darkness of being left with the dangers and perils of human life. I have watched interviews with nuns on YouTube who report that, for them, the lockdown changed life very little, there were simply fewer guests to feed. Instead, many of us have been forced nearer to the wounds of the world, the darkness without and within.

---

How, then, did Jesus manage? How do monks and nuns stay, giving up so much for, it seems, so little?

They manage because they do not do it alone. They have the community and they have God.

When Christ was tempted by Satan in the wilderness, 'the angels waited on him'. When the Israelites wandered in the desert, God went before them as a pillar of fire. When Noah, as we also heard this morning, looked over nothing but water, God sent a rainbow.

Mark, as we just heard, writes, 'immediately', 'immediately', 'the Spirit drove him out into the wilderness'. Immediately after what? After Jesus heard 'a voice come from heaven,' and say, "'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'" That great voice of love was still sounding in his ears as he entered the desert.

God says this to us too at the start of our Lenten observance. To each of us, he says, 'You are my Beloved; with you I am well pleased'. Immediately, we are in the wilderness, but we can imagine that voice ringing in our ears.

It does not free us from the demons – Jesus was waited on by angels at exactly the same time that he was tempted by Satan; Noah saw the rainbow over a borderless sea; the Israelites followed the pillar and still were hungry, were tempted to worship idols. As Eckhart knew, the wilderness, the monastery, Lent itself, brings us closer to darkness and to God, to our own sinfulness and to his grace.

When I read to you from Henri Nouwen earlier, I read in fact, only part of the paragraph. I left out one sentence, the sentence that makes sense of everything, that pulls it all together. I will read the whole quote to you now.

If I were to ask about my seven months at the Abbey, "Did it work, did I solve my problems?" the simple answer would be, "It did not work, it did not solve my problems." And I know that a year, two years, or even a lifetime as a Trappist monk would not have "worked" either. Because a monastery is not built to solve problems but to praise the Lord in the midst of them.

Our problems will continue, many will not be resolved, not any time soon. But this Lent, in the midst of them, surrounded by anxiety, grief and turmoil, we can follow the monk and the nun and praise the Lord anyway.

Amen.