

Sermon – Lent 1 Cathedral of the Incarnation

Mark 1: 9-14

Ash Wednesday was for me, and I hope for you to, a solemn day. Our services here at the cathedral started at 7am with a service for those heading early to work or school. At 12.15pm Bishop Provenzano presided and preached and led us in the Litany of Penance.

Bishop Larry followed in the Dean's footsteps and opened his sermon by singing. He sang, "what the world needs now is love sweet love, it's the only thing that there's just to little of." We all said Amen to that. We then celebrated the Eucharist as a penitent and contrite people.

Two hours later 17 mostly young school students were killed in Parkland Florida and another 16 or so physically injured. How many were psychologically injured is yet to be determined. It was another horror mass slaying of the innocent, another school terrorized, another community added to the long and ever growing list of places where mass shootings have occurred.

When the news flashed on my phone I was shocked, deeply saddened and then very angry. When I went online to find out more details I was taken by a photograph of two women embracing each other in tears of anguish. One of the women had an ash cross marked on her forehead. She had done what most of us did on Wednesday. She headed to a church, prayed and had herself marked as we did, as fragile, organic people. Any one of us could have been the person in that photo?

The repetitive nature of these events can make us numb to the shock and deep feelings associated with trauma. Will our politicians only get outraged and do something when the horror arrives at their doorstep, or to their children or grandchildren's school or to another church. 3,000 or so families were driven into the wilderness of shock and grief by this very preventable tragedy.

Indeed, "what the world needs now is love sweet love!"

In our reading from the gospel according to Mark we hear in a few short sentences Jesus' journey from baptism to the wilderness to his journey to Galilee. So much experienced by Jesus but recorded in so few words. Mark records the journey sort of matter-of-fact. Jesus did this, then he went here and then travelled up to here. But that's Mark just facts with hardly any emotion.

At the end of January I was blessed to accompany Bishop Wolf and thirty other pilgrims on a journey through Israel and Palestine. We started in the lush green hills of Galilee, and then worked our way down through the Jordan Valley where the landscape changed to rocky desert, before we went up 3,500 ft in elevation to Jerusalem.

On the fourth day of our pilgrimage we went to the place that many believe is the site of Jesus baptism in the river Jordan. It had been raining up in the north and the river was muddy brown. At the site the river is no more than 20' wide and it meanders slowly south. The kingdom of Jordan is on the other side. We imagined Jesus being baptized there, renewed our baptism vows and headed off.

We drove a few miles west to Jericho and after stopping at a sycamore tree, and trying to imagine Zacchaeus climbing the branches to see Jesus, we headed out of town to a vantage point that overlooked a dry plain and a mountain in the distance. This we were told was the wilderness where Jesus was driven by the Spirit and spent 40 days being tended by angels.

The mountain was dry and rocky and caves dotted the hillside. The only sign of life was an orthodox monastery literally built on the side of the mountain. It was wholly inhospitable, devoid of water, a wilderness of rocks, dust and wind. I couldn't imagine anyone surviving a few days out there let alone 40. The companionship of angels would indeed be required to make the stay bearable.

Mark tells us that it was the Spirit that drove Jesus to the wilderness. Once unified with God through baptism it was Jesus' destiny to be immediately challenged by the forces of darkness in the wilderness.

The temptation of Jesus by Satan would have surely tested his resolve to live. As he weakened both physically and mentally, the temptation to seek relief would have grown exponentially. No one, not even Jesus I would contend, wants to stay in the wilderness experience, especially the wilderness of emotional despair.

In Chapter 4 verse 15 of the Book of Hebrews the writer says of Jesus— "for we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weakness, but we have one who in every respect has been tested, as we are, yet without sin."

In those 40 days on that rocky mountain Jesus experienced what it is like to be emotionally and physically tested and the struggle to resist the temptation to flee the emotional stress and physical pain. Obedience to the Spirit, the companionship of the angels and faith in God his Father was his balm.

The wilderness of grief, like the wilderness of despair or the wilderness of addiction can be a place of physical and emotional trial. None of us are immune from it no matter how much we try and avoid it. It is an uncomfortable place to be but can often be a place of personal growth, and a place of contemplation and reflection.

There are many life experiences that can take us into an emotional wilderness. Managing a serious illness, suffering grief from a significant death of a child or a parent or a spouse, or experiencing a traumatic event, are all experiences that can drive us into the wilderness of despair and numbness.

There must be thousands of parents across the country entering or re-entering the wilderness of emotional pain brought on by the Ash Wednesday shooting. There must also be countless other people comforting and supporting them in their darkest hours.

Dr Alan Wolfelt has written extensively on grief and what he calls “the wilderness of the soul” experience. He acknowledges, and many of us would agree I think, that the liminal space that is the wilderness of the soul “is a spiritual space where most people hate to be, but where the experience of grief leads them.” We call the wilderness experience a liminal space because it is a place in between, a threshold if you like between one’s previous life experience, and what lies ahead.

Dr Wolfelt says that it is in this liminal space “where the griever’s worldview – the set of beliefs about how the world functions and what place they as individuals occupy, comes into question.” He goes on to say that piecing back together one’s shattered worldview “requires companions that do not think their helping role is to fix or give answers or explanations.” There is no one-way to pass through this testing time of suffering.

Jesus was not out in the wilderness alone; angels accompanied him. It was his experience to live and they didn’t try to shorten his time there.

Usually, most people dislike pain, sadness, anxiety or loss of control. Often our desire is to move others or ourselves out of any painful or sad experience as quickly as possible. It is hard to stand by a loved one or friend and watch them suffer.

To that end we can often find ourselves encouraging the mourner or the sick to cheer up, to move on, to be less emotional, or to acknowledge it’s really not that bad. Probably the worse thing to say to anyone suffering is for them to think of others who are suffering more. Often we say unhelpful things because as a companion or friend we are uncomfortable because we may not know how to relate. We might never have had a wilderness of the soul experience ourselves.

The challenge for us is to accompany those that grieve or are sick on their journey through the liminal space and time of their wilderness experience, and to stay with them wherever their emotions take them. This may also trigger in us pain and suffering due to our unresolved grief and sadness. We cannot be true companions until we are also able to embrace the fear and unknowing of the wilderness experience.

When we can truly walk with someone as a companion on his or her journey we too will be changed. We will learn to respect the process by enduring the discomfort of others. We need to lean into the experience despite all our senses telling us to move on.

The wilderness experience is a powerful experience that is different for everyone. Healing will eventually happen if we allow it to take its course then new life will begin. Jesus experienced his wilderness time and learnt about suffering and endurance, a lesson he would inevitably draw on later in his life.

As we live into our Lenten journey you might take some time to reflect on your own experience of being in the “wilderness of the soul.” As Christians grounded in love and hope we are well equipped to learn from our experiences and become better companions to those that suffer.

Please pray for the 3,000 or so families that today are experiencing the shock and grief from Wednesday’s tragic event. Pray for the wider community of Parkland Florida, the teachers of the school, the EMS workers, community leaders and the chaplains and counselors who will work with the traumatized. Pray also for those that you know who are living in their own *wilderness of the soul* time that they eventually will find healing and strength to enter their new life.

Our faith and baptism brings us hope and healing and reassurance that Jesus does indeed know our suffering and through the Holy Spirit, is present with us during our most vulnerable and sad times of life. Let us give thanks for that.

Amen