

IN THE WILDERNESS WITH GOD

Matthew 4:1

After his baptism, Jesus is in the wilderness. There he is tempted.

The word that is used for 'wilderness' is *ermos*. It can mean *desert*. It simply means *abandoned, lonely, desolate*. We get the word *hermit* from it: someone who lives alone and secluded.

It isn't necessarily a bad place to be. Jesus often went into the lonely places to pray and recuperate from having crowds around him all day.

But it is also a place of temptation, as happened with Jesus after his baptism: *Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.* [TNIV]

The theme of being in the wilderness runs all the way through scripture:

- There is Cain, when he pleaded with God that he would end up endlessly wandering on the fringes of civilization (4:13-14),
- The Israelites, wandering for 40 years in the wilderness;
- David, before he became king, was an outlaw in the wilderness;
- Elijah, when he hid in the cave, thinking he was the last true Prophet of the Lord left in the world (1 Kings 19);
- The Israelites again, though they were in the opulence of Babylon, felt they were in a spiritual desert (Psalm 137);
- Ezekiel is brought to a lonely place – the Valley of Dry Bones;
- When the Israelites returned from Babylon, they found Jerusalem had become a wilderness – utterly desolate;
- There is the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness, and on the Mount of Olives, where, though his disciples were with, he felt utterly alone; and the desolation of the Cross: *My God! My God! Why have you forsaken me?*
- And there are St Paul's words to the Christians at Rome, who felt utterly desolate:

¹⁸*I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.* ¹⁹*The creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed.* ²⁰*For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope* ²¹*that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God.*

We call our wilderness, the Outback.

I find it rather ironic that the Outback can mean different things, depending on where you live.

In our first parish, Booleroo Centre, we lived forty kilometres south of the limit of local council areas. Beyond that was the outback.

Brisbanites seem to think anything west of Toowoomba is the Outback!

But talk to someone in Roma or Goondiwindi, and they talk about the Outback being a lot further 'out back'!

It seems to me "The Outback" is more a concept than a place.

Mind you, there is nothing quite like being far away from towns and cities, even farms. Somewhere with no mobile phone or tv or mw radio reception. Then all one can do at night is stare at the camp fire or look at the stars (or huddle in the tent if it's raining).

It doesn't surprise me that the wilderness is the place of temptation, but also the place of intimacy with God.

The wilderness is a place of temptation and trial. There is nothing to distract one from what are the 'raw nerves' of one's life as one strives simply for existence. For Jesus, the raw nerves centred around his mission to be our Saviour. So he was tempted to shortcut and fast-track the saving work: feed the millions by turning stone into bread; make everyone believe by performing impossible things, like jumping off a tall building and surviving; and force your rule onto everyone, just let the devil sort them all out.

But the wilderness is also a place of closeness with God. God likens those years to a honeymoon! (Jeremiah 31:32)

It is in the wilderness that Jesus goes to pray after a busy day.

It is out of the wilderness that God's people come, singing joyfully, as they enter Zion (Isaiah 51:11). Which is an image behind Jesus entry into Jerusalem (Palm Sunday) and the image behind God's people entering heaven (Revelation, various verses).

The Outback, then, is a precious place for us.

And it is a wondrous place in its own right.

Many people think deserts are dead places. But it couldn't be further from the truth.

When Europeans first settled in Australia, they thought they were in a desolate place. And they began to starve and have terrible illnesses because of a poor diet. The local Aborigines thought it was weird to see people starving hungry when surrounded by an abundance.

And the landscape of the outback itself is amazing. I grew up in Toowoomba. So I was used to looking at vistas of the blue-grey shrouded mountain ranges of the Great Dividing Range. At Booleroo Centre, the ranges were coloured according to their underlying rocks: shades of red and brown and black, range after range; and sometimes dotted with old prospectors diggings.

When I was in Grade 7, the teacher taught us how to paint landscapes the same way Albert Namatjira painted. So we'd paint these outback

landscapes, never having actually seen any! To actually see such scenery, like the Flinders Ranges, after many years, was wonderful.

What astounds me, though, is the Outback is such a fragile environment. You'd think such a tough place to live would be tough. But it isn't. It is very easy to destroy outback environments. Simply clearing a bit of scrub for farming or grazing can have devastating effects. For we need to remember that much of Australia's inland was the floor of a shallow sea for millions of years, and there is a lot of salt in the ground. Change the water table, and the effects are terrible; large tracts dead soil – saltpans. Or a heavy shower of rain can rip the topsoil away in minutes, leaving erosion gullies metres deep. Or strong wind can blow the topsoil out into the sea, in a huge dust storm.

And yet, I can't help but think that the wilderness tells out the glory of its creator, just as we do.

When the rain comes, and the wildflowers bloom – amazing.

When we consider what an ancient landscape there is in the outback; like the Finke River – geologically one of the oldest rivers in the world. Amazing.

When the day can go from below zero to above 40 degrees – amazing.

When at night, the stars seem just beyond one's finger tips when reaching up – amazing.

And just the vast expanse –where the horizon is truly far way – amazing.

I wonder if Jesus, when he went out to his lonely places to pray, just lay on his back and looked at the sky – seeing shapes in the clouds or counted the stars – and enjoyed the quiet.

Today we are encouraged to remember the Outback.

We remember its remoteness.

We remember its harshness for those unprepared to be there.

We remember its fragile beauty.

But most of all, we remember that God is close to us in the wilderness.

Amen.

