

21st February 2021, First Sunday of Lent: 'A Spirit-led journey' (Deuteronomy 8, Mark 1:9-13)

This week I read a fascinating article about an American church leader called Todd White. Pastor White was dramatically converted back in 2004 after 22 years of drug addiction, since when he has led many people to faith and planted a large church. The church has a reputation for teaching what is known as the 'prosperity gospel' – the idea that God wants you to flourish not just spiritually but materially. Put bluntly, in this kind of gospel, it's good to get rich – indeed getting rich is part of what spiritual flourishing might look like.

This kind of teaching is far more prevalent around the world than you might expect – not just in America, you'll find it in Asia, Africa and plenty of it here in the UK as well – and not surprisingly it's growing rapidly. After all, it's the best of all worlds, isn't it: you don't just get pie in the sky when you die, you get steak on the plate while you wait as well. Or for the vegetarians among us, you get to have your cake and eat it.

But what was striking about this article, and why it got reported in the Christian press was that in the summer of last year, Pastor White repented publicly during his main Sunday sermon in front of the whole church for not preaching the true gospel. He'd been reading the work of the great church leader of the 19th century, Charles Spurgeon and was, in his own words, 'rocked to the core.'

He went on to say: "I'm really overwhelmed so I hope this goes over well... I've been rocked for a whole month... I've been asking Jesus to take me deeper into the Gospel. There's no way for a person to realize their need for grace if they don't realize they've offended God... I am so convicted I can't even tell you... I'm trembling inside... The American church has lost its need for repentance."

Todd White had come to realise that he'd been preaching an unbalanced message – whilst as Christians we carry the great hope of resurrection, the path to this resurrected life is through the cross. **We die to ourselves, to live in the abundant life of God found in Jesus.** We are called not just to receive the salvation and forgiveness of Jesus, but to live our lives like Jesus too, in humility and selflessness, sitting lightly to all the trinkets of the world.

The season of Lent is the time in our year when we pay most attention to this idea of dying to self in order to live. It is a season when we commit ourselves most clearly to following the way of Christ, of humility and self-denial, of spiritual practices which, while challenging, lead us into growth and freedom, and renew our sense of joy, gratitude and purpose. And today I want to make focus primarily on this one simple observation: that **Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness.**

We all experience wilderness times in our lives. Seasons where we feel dry and distant from God, seasons where other things in life don't seem to succeed or bear fruit. Sometimes these just happen to us, and our job is to discern the will of God in the midst of it. But there are other times, when we can make a conscious choice to go into the wilderness, in order to encounter God.

And that's the point isn't it: **Jesus goes there to meet with God.** Yes, he's tested, but it is his time of preparation for all that lies ahead.

Take a look at the text and this choice is more surprising than it at first appears. What comes immediately before it is Jesus' baptism by John, where the heavens open, God's voice is heard and the Spirit descends on him like a dove. Surely *this* is the moment he's ready to step into all that God has for him? He's been commissioned, he's been filled, and all this has happened publicly in front of others – it's time to get going, surely?

Apparently not, not quite anyway: the Spirit first leads him into the wilderness, and it's only *after this* that Jesus returns in the power of the Spirit (as Luke says) to begin his public ministry.

You see, in the kind of theology taught by prosperity gospel preachers, this step is missing. You go straight from being baptised in the Spirit to a life of authority and power. There's no dying to self, it's all resurrection. And don't get me wrong, we do need to live in the resurrection life of Jesus. But **the way we fuel that is to keep dying to self. We die to live.**

The reason is found in our first reading in Deuteronomy. I love this passage because it's so brutally honest. The old man Moses doesn't pull any punches with his listeners, but what he said to the Israelites 3,000 years ago is just as true now. And it's this: generally in life, we give the credit for our successes to ourselves, and put the blame for our failures and challenges on God. Or as Moses says in the text, when things go well for you, you're likely to say: 'My power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me.'

We all do it, and we might as well be honest about that. The only way to grow out of this spiritual infancy is to learn humility – to learn dependence and gratitude: that every good thing comes from God. That doesn't mean that we don't work hard, or do our best, but the constant refrain of the text is *remember, remember, remember:* 'remember the Lord your God, for it is he who gives you the ability to produce wealth,' or anything else for that matter.

God humbled the people in the wilderness that they would learn this very simple lesson, out of which abundant life with all its love, joy, peace, purpose, gratitude and power would come.

And that is true for us today, as well. May God grant us grace this Lent to humble ourselves, and so to rediscover God's abundant life coursing through our veins too. **May we too be led by the Spirit into the wilderness, and there find life.** Amen.