



**A sermon for the Cathedral Eucharist at Wells
Cathedral, preached on Sunday 22 February by the
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The First Sunday of Lent

Lent begins with ashes, with earthiness, with the stuff of our existence, with a reminder of our mortality. A smudgy cross and the call to turn away from sin and be faithful to Christ.

And now, almost immediately, we find ourselves with Jesus in a place that speaks too of human finitude, of the basics of being, of physical limitation. In the vast, arid, lonely place of wilderness. The place that will become the arena of his testing.

For Jesus these desert days follow straight on from his baptism, and very intentionally – we read that he is led from there into the wilderness by the Spirit.

Straight after hearing affirmation of his identity as the beloved Son of God – remember the words from heaven *‘This is my Son, the beloved, with whom I am well pleased’*. Straight away comes this time of solitude, of extremity, of testing.

Straight from being proclaimed as Son to a time of understanding what that Sonship must look like.

And so, after many days, enough to make anyone weak and desperate and on the verge of giving in to anything, the tester, the accuser is straight in there offering his own distorted ways in which that divine Sonship might be lived.

If you are the Son of God . . . he says. ‘If’ you are, but there is no doubt, this has been heard directly from his father. The testing is about what that sonship will look like, how it will shape who he is and what he does.

So if/since you are the Son of God, says the satan, how about doing it this way:

Satisfy your own hunger, use your power to meet your own needs, turn these dry stones into bread. And how about getting your God to show that he is as powerful and as ‘well pleased’ with you as you think – throw yourself from a high place and let him save you. Be ready to do whatever it takes to exercise supreme and unassailable human power.

But being Son of God looks nothing like any of this.

Jesus refutes with words from the book Deuteronomy, inspired by all he understands of the father's will.

This is not who he is. This is not how the Son of God will be.

His ministry won't take the easy or flamboyant route. His ministry will be shaped by meeting the needs of others, not putting his own first. He will have clear confidence in his father, in his words, and that relationship of obedience and service will be at the heart of all he is.

We hear this story of the temptations, or testing, of Jesus every year on this first Sunday of Lent. The 40 days of Lent echo the 40 days Jesus spent in the wilderness, which itself echoes the 40 years that the people of Israel spent wandering in the wilderness.

For followers of Christ these days are fundamentally about preparing, preparing ourselves in heart and mind that we might be ready to enter fully into the days of Holy Week and our celebration of the Paschal mystery. In Lent, we pray that we may become more open to God and more focused on our life in God. What does it mean for us to be children of God, sons and daughters of God?

It may be that we find particular practices or disciplines helpful in this, tuning our focus on God and the things of God. For some, this might be fasting, whether from particular foods or drink, or an unhelpful habit. Perhaps it might be a greater openness to prayer or to spiritual reading. Do consider whether the sessions on prayer here over these weeks of Lent might be something you'd find a helpful part of your own Lent.

Lent has for us something of the call of the desert.

And desert places have been important for Christians down the centuries.

For the desert fathers and mothers of the early Christian centuries, seeking the deserts of Syria and Palestine, looking for a simpler life and freedom from distractions and the trappings of an increasingly institutional church. For the Celtic saints a little later seeking out their own desert places on the edge of the world as they knew it. Think of Columba and his few companions, deliberately setting sail in a small boat on a vast sea, not knowing where or if they would find land, but seeking the desert place to which they trusted God was leading.

Or the earliest Cistercian monks, disenchanted by the ways in which much of Benedictine monasticism was becoming distorted, and seeking simplicity and clarity in out of the way and deserted places. No Cistercian house could be set up within several miles of the nearest settlement and the places they chose were remote and wild places, often in damp, misty river valleys.

Before we came to Wells, we lived very near to the site of the first Cistercian foundation in this country, built at Waverley Abbey in the early 12th century. It was my favourite place to walk the dog and it was quite something to be there, early on a misty dank morning, in the ruins of the abbey with no one else around. The centuries fell right away.

So what is it about the desert that has compelled or drawn men and women over the centuries to follow Jesus into the wilderness? Many across the years will testify to something very powerful about the desert experience, these wilderness places, whether in reality or metaphor, where men and women, led by the Spirit, have sought to draw closer to Christ and to his way. Places that have become their own arenas of testing, of trial, of discerning, of clarifying God's call and God's way of being for them.

The desert for them - and perhaps for us too as a Lenten metaphor – offers a place of simplicity, a place of starkness, a place where some of the props or comforts that we usually rely on are stripped away or left behind. Where our dependence on God becomes much clearer and we are freed from some of those props which may feel good and life giving but are actually weighing us down.

Perhaps the beginning of our own desert journey this Lent might involve a recognition of all the 'stuff' we have around us - and finding a way that helps us to pare that back in one area or another.

On this first Sunday of Lent, for those hearing the call to follow the way of Jesus, might our invitation also be to the desert? To find the echoes of desert simplicity and stripping away in our own Lenten practice. That through deliberate focus in our prayer we might find it to be for us too a place of discernment, a place for learning more about the God we seek to follow, about ourselves and the shaping of our own life with Christ. That it might be a place for us too to understand what being a loved child, a beloved son or daughter of God, is all about. May this Lent be a time when we are able to accept more and more that amazing truth that God does in fact love us, and love us for who we are not as some future perfected version; that God's love can't be earned; that we will fail God, but that God never fails us. Love will always welcome us back with forgiveness and grace.

The smudgy cross in ash has faded, but the reality of the Ash Wednesday words goes on – 'remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return; turn away from sin and be faithful to Christ'.

All we need do is to accept our humanity and to change direction – that Greek word *metanoia* usually translated as repentance, meaning just that - 'change direction' or 'turn around'. Turn around from what holds us back, turn away

from those siren voices offering pale imitations of love or life in all its fullness,
turn our back on all that pulls us down or causes us to be less than we might be.
And turn to Christ whose arms are open in love and forgiveness and welcome.
Amen.

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