

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

Entering Lent

By what spirit should we be sustained as we enter into Lent? To answer this, the Church shows us Jesus entering into the wilderness. I'm choosing the words carefully; it feels more like *going out* into the wilderness, leaving behind things that are precious to us. But I believe Jesus was led into the desert for a purpose: not to rob him of anything, but for a specific encounter, the encounter with his own human condition. So there is an idea for us, as we start this season: *enter the wilderness, so as to enter into the condition of being human.*

Gifts From The Desert

We feel that the desert has little to offer us. It is dangerous, uncharted, unfurnished: there is a reason why no-one goes there. It is inhospitable to us, and to be there makes us afraid – *afraid for our life*. That seems to be the specific value of Lent: it brings us to the brink, the borderline between death and life, good and evil, hope and despair. Such a place is fitted for making choices, decisions, judgments: in that harsh light truths, welcome and unwelcome alike, stand revealed. And no trivial truths either: giant, elemental truths appear, in an uncluttered landscape, under an infinite sky. In the wilderness we see what is left, when everything inessential is taken from us. It is a place to meet our true self. Unnervingly, it is the place to meet Satan.

The Work Of The Spirit

We are told that Jesus was filled with the Spirit after his baptism, and that it was the Spirit who led him through the wilderness. Surely this must give us courage as Lent begins. Although we are afraid to face the whole truth, the Spirit has our penance in his care, loving us faithfully, guiding us with divine wisdom. Although we are far from home, we are not lost or alone. The testing to which we are subject will only end one way, in the victory Jesus spoke of before his Passion: *In the world you will have hardship; but do not be afraid! I have overcome the world.*

The Desert Paths

How do we reach this wilderness? Not by familiar paths: we are not at home there, we are not desert-dwellers. The three ways of entering Lent are prayer, and fasting, and works of love. They are not alternatives, but go together, modifying and strengthening each other. How is my prayer? Strong and indispensable, the most vital

relationship I have, the pillar upholding me? Or a nice idea, like the book I bought but never opened, the scheme for the garden I never managed to complete? What is it like if I *go into my inner room, close the door, and pray to my Father who is in that secret place?* Once I've unwound a little, and assuming I've avoided falling asleep, it's probably a bit off-putting. The longer I stay at it, the more I will find myself in the wilderness. Fasting, too: get past the charm of losing weight, keeping a clear head, spending less money, living simply, and the degree of my dependence on small innocent pleasures becomes clear. I begin to feel the cutting edge of desire, which is deeper than casual greed, and I find myself hearing voices which may be far from innocent. The work of love, which divests me of earthly aims and possessions, also hits a tender spot. This school of the desert teaches big lessons, and with amazing speed; the complacency and calm we pretend to is a very thin veneer, easy to rub off; thank God for that. We should look upon the loss of cosmetic cover as a source of joy, because the people God has made are loved by him, not for their capacity for deception or disguise, but for themselves. Lent isn't a charm-school, or a course in self-assertion. It is a desert, where we go with Christ, the Son of God, so that we may be close to him in the paschal mystery we are so soon to celebrate. Enter it courageously, and you will enter your humanity, and inherit it anew. *Fr Philip*