

HOMILY PREACHED AT SJH LENT 1 YEAR A 5 MARCH 2017

I've often observed that to understand more about the readings we hear in church we should read them in context. Reading a chapter before and a chapter after at home on a Saturday will prepare us for what we hear on Sunday. That approach certainly helps with today's gospel of Jesus being tempted in the wilderness.

The event that precedes Jesus' temptations is his baptism. He goes down into the water, rises from it, the Spirit descends on him, and the voice from heaven declares, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased." Then the Spirit drives him into the wilderness. After those forty days, Jesus proclaims repentance and the coming of the kingdom in Galilee, and calls his first disciples. S. Matthew's gospel continues with a summary of him teaching, preaching and healing, before, in chapter 5, the Sermon on the Mount begins.

Matthew is presenting Jesus as a new Moses. Think of all the parallels.

Jesus' baptism in the Jordan corresponds to the Israelites crossing the Red Sea.

Jesus was in the wilderness for forty days; the Israelites spent forty years in the wilderness on their journey from slavery in Egypt to the promised land of Canaan.

In his replies to the devil, Jesus quotes words of Moses.

Moses received God's law for the Israelites on Mount Sinai; Jesus reinterprets the law in the Sermon on the Mount: 'You have heard it said,..., but I say to you,...'.

It may help us to think of Lent as a journey. Standard questions about Lent are 'What are you giving up?' or 'What are you taking on?' We could ask a different question: 'What will help me grow?' Grow, that is, in our faith, or in the way we put it into practice, our discipleship. We will need to reflect on where we are and what would be good for us. This self-examination may be uncomfortable to some extent if we are honest with ourselves; we may find a wilderness within. But space is a defining feature of wilderness, a space within which we can grow.

We are not without support as we seek to grow. As members of the church there are patterns of prayer and reading we can engage with. It may be that we can join in one of the church's activities, the services and study groups happening during Lent. Or we could offer ourselves in some ministry – anything from cleaning the church, to joining a committee, to pastoral visiting, to administering the sacrament. We will find that we receive far more than we give; such is God's grace. Growth is

not just something that individuals do; churches, Christian communities, must also grow. May God be with us all on our journeys together!