

‘The Spirit drove Jesus into the wilderness.’ So says St Mark; you will hear the reading on Sunday but I’m going to talk about it now. Jesus had just been baptised, commissioned by God for the role he was now to take up, and immediately went into the wilderness. Perhaps we might have expected that he would start his ministry straight away, but no; first he went off alone. This was an essential time for preparation.

As a long-serving project manager I’ve always envied this. My experience has always been that as soon as the contract is signed, furious activity begins. I would have loved to have forty days – or even a couple of weeks – for careful thinking and planning before the real work started. But every time it was the same – if the customer couldn’t see troops of people, sheaves of plans and a procession of meetings within a day or so of signature, they would start to complain that we were falling down on the job.

Jesus had forty days in the Israeli wilderness. This was a pretty desolate place, without human inhabitants, a barren, rocky landscape with sparse vegetation, little vegetation and almost no water; a desert. It would be the ideal place to think, as there were no distractions; but of course there was every distraction. If you’ve ever been on a silent retreat or even a quiet day, you’ll know what happens. There you are in a lovely quiet place. Nobody is going to phone, or need you to come and sort out a crisis, or walk in on you unexpectedly. There is nothing you have to do. You’ve got the whole of this time, which you’ve probably worked very hard to carve out, to spend with God. So you settle down to some spiritual reading, or some serious thought or prayer. And your nose itches. Then you wonder if you locked the front door properly. A little later you find yourself considering what may be for lunch, or whether you remembered to send Beatrice a birthday card. And if you’re not very careful the entire hour, or day, or week goes by without you ever getting past the things that your unconscious mind persists in pushing in the way of you getting closer to your real self, and to God.

Jesus went into the wilderness and fasted. This is one of the oldest and most widespread spiritual disciplines. Every religious tradition has some element of fasting contained within it, and it isn’t always, or only, fasting from food. Silence is fasting from speech. Poverty is fasting from possessions. Obedience is fasting from having everything our own way. Nobody fasts for fun. It is a means to an end, and the end – like going away from normal life into the wilderness – is to confront the reality of who you are, who God is and what God wants of you. True fasting causes no physical harm, but greatly improves mental and spiritual focus.

This means that we must each choose our own wilderness carefully and perceptively. Maybe it is a dependence on sweets (or crisps, or cigarettes), or the consumption of too much food or alcohol. Maybe it is something less obvious – a pernicious habit or a long-festering relationship that must be confronted and healed. Maybe it’s watching rubbish television, or being so determined to get the next promotion that you’re ignoring the family. Maybe it’s checking your phone and your email every thirty seconds, but never spending any time with the people you’re connected to. Maybe you should ask someone who knows you really well to tell you what it should be. Whatever it is, it will be something that you really justify doing, and letting go of it will hurt.

Several years ago I did a guided retreat with a very wise elderly nun. She talked to me for a few minutes on the first evening and then gave me my instructions. I was not to read. I was not to read anything, at all. For a week.

She'd nailed it. She'd spotted the way in which, without even thinking about it, I've always been able to shield myself from myself. I couldn't sit still, I couldn't concentrate, I was on my own so I couldn't talk to anyone, and if I went and walked in the garden the single written word on a large noticeboard said 'Silence'. By the third day I was climbing the walls. Two days later she gave me a couple of verses from the Bible. They were like an oasis for someone dying of thirst. I read and re-read and revelled and wallowed in those verses, and prayed them, and came closer to God as a result than ever before.

That absence of reading was my desert. Anyway, what could possibly have been wrong with reading? I'd even brought good books with me. Hadn't people been encouraging me to read ever since I'd deciphered that sugar packet when I was three? Not reading really hurt. Compared with that, giving up chocolate was a doddle. It still is. But what I learned from that experience has been very important, and has stayed with me.

So we must each find our desert and live in it for Lent. It will be somewhere difficult to go to – the Spirit drove Jesus into his desert. It will probably be a virtual journey – outwardly we will be where we are every day, but something will be missing. It will hurt. We will be tempted there, as he was, with ideas which are particularly attractive to our personalities. But if we can stick to our resolve, with God's help, we will emerge from it with something which is hugely more significant than the renewed ability to have a couple of gins and tonics before lunch on Easter Day. We will have a deeper, fuller, more rewarding relationship with God, which will last for a lifetime.