

SERMON AT YORK 1/3/98: GEOFF CHADWICK: LENT 1: Lk 4:1-15
"IN THE WILDERNESS"

What does the word "Wilderness" conjure up in your mind? Perhaps it prompts a picture of barren land, of open spaces, of dry horizons and of lonely places. Wilderness, it seems, is a place where we humans would rather not be. Even so there is a fascination with wilderness. Many a tourist dollar is to be made in visiting the wild places of the earth - they are places we like to visit but we wouldn't want to live there.

This is what Lent is about. It is about visiting a place in which we are both fascinated and repelled. (There are no corner shops in the wilderness!) The wilderness attracts us because it is a place of testing. The wild places of the earth remind us of our primitive selves. Of a time when we humans had to live an unsanitary life in the rugged terrain of the earth. Where gathering food was a matter of life and death, where danger was real, where nature was in control of us, and where survival was more than needing to have a cup of coffee in the morning!

Wilderness too, is a place of transformation. Anyone who has visited a wild place of the earth and has not been transformed by the experience has not really visited it. This, in fact, used to be the point of travelling. It was to be transformed by the place one visited, not simply to take a curious but superficial glance at it.

In days gone by, young men, in particular would be taken at the time of puberty into the wilderness. They were taken to be tested and transformed. Initiation ceremonies have developed in many cultures to honour this principle. Young Australian Aboriginal men would be led off to secret sacred places to be initiated into man-hood. There is an ancient practice in some parts of Italy where a boy leaves a village with his grandparents to go into the wilderness to split a sapling in two. Once split, the boy is passed naked through the tree and is symbolically "reborn" into manhood. Once "reborn" the now young man's first task is to bind the tree back together so that it will live. Here the boy has been tested and has been transformed.

Furthermore, his first task as a man was to bring new life. On return to the village he is granted all the honours of man-hood and is expected to live a new, adult life.

Similar rituals also exist for the coming of age in women.

And so I come to our present culture. It seems that in Australia the ritual of the wilderness experience for the coming of age is enacted out in a rather strange way. Instead of visiting the real wilderness, young men and women are invited to visit the "blackboard jungle" of the TEE. Perhaps this is a place of testing and of transformation. Another coming-of-age ritual is the gaining of a Driver's licence. Maybe this, too is a place of testing and of transformation. (Especially of the relationship between parents and offspring). And then there is the ritual of being able to hold down one's liquor - or not hold it down, as the case may be. Perhaps this too is a time of testing and of transformation. You may think that I am drawing a long bow, but I do think that these things are a modern form of initiation into adulthood. I say this because I believe there is an innate part of us that drives us into the wilderness for transformation. If the wilderness is not a physical one then we are inclined to create one of our own.

Wilderness, although being a place of testing and of transformation. is also a place of danger. Today's gospel reading points out at three of these dangers. The first is the temptation rely on material goods for satisfaction. ("Turn these stones into bread. The second is to seek after fame and fortune through corrupt means ("If you, then, will worship me it will all be yours. and the third is to try and defy one's own mortality ("Throw yourself down from here. These, dangers (or temptations as we call them), are not foreign to our own experiences. The desire for riches, the desire for fame and the desire for immortality are never far away. If we are honest with ourselves we all want these things.

Interestingly, the wilderness that brings about these temptations is also the place which brings about our ability to overcome them. This wilderness teaches reliance on things other than the physical. The wilderness demonstrates that being faithful is all that is needed. Also the wilderness proves the limits of our mortality. It reminds us that we need God.

Many people are in this wilderness. The unusual, yet necessary coming of age ceremonies of our young people demonstrate their wilderness to us. The dangers are real, and so is the transformation. Ah! but it is not just young people who come of age in the wilderness of their activities. So do we all. The wilderness of the empty nest, the wilderness of retirement and the wilderness of old age are all expression of our human

need for danger, testing and transformation. (Is it not significant that people travel when they turn 40, or when their children leave home, or when they retire. Perhaps this is a physical expression of an inner need to travel through a wilderness; the outer journey reflecting the necessity of an inner one.)

How's your wilderness at the moment? Go and enter it. Don't be afraid of the danger, for it will test you and don't be afraid of the test because it will transform you, and don't be afraid of the transformation because it will bring with it a greater maturity. It may even bring you closer to God!

Allow wilderness to be your friend.

The Lord be with you.

And also with you.