**1st Sunday of Lent – Year C
10th March 2019**

Fr Jack Green

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Where is God? Why has he left me now when I need him the most? Why has he abandoned me?

Have you ever found yourself asking these questions? I’m sure many of you have. I’m sure many of us have been through moments in life where there is great darkness; where we feel an immense weight suffocating us; where everything is dry and we feel terribly alone. Or it may not even be quite that dramatic. Perhaps we just don’t feel anything when we are praying. Perhaps our prayer doesn’t feel like it used to, like we think it should. Perhaps it feels like God is very far away.

And in those moments we so often wonder why God hasn’t stepped in, why he hasn’t come to rescue us, why it feels like he has abandoned us. Surely now, we think, in this terrible crisis or in this difficult time in my prayer life God would make himself known; surely now he would let me feel his presence; surely now he will hear my prayer to be delivered from this suffering. And yet, he seems to stay silent.

If you are in such a moment, or if you have ever been, or when you will come to such a moment, do not think you’re alone. This gospel shows us that Jesus went through that very same experience. Here he is, forty days in the desert, with no food for that whole time, and he is afflicted by the devil. I don’t know about you but I would find it difficult to last four hours without food and be afflicted by the devil let alone forty days without food. We cannot imagine the difficulty Christ went through in these temptations, in these forty days in the wilderness. How alone we may have felt, how dry, how much suffering he endured.

But there is a really important detail in the Gospel that ought to encourage us. St. Luke tells us that Jesus was, ‘Filled with the Holy Spirit’, that he was ‘led by the Spirit’ in the wilderness. See, so often we associated God and his presence with nice feelings, with blessings, with abundance, with a really happy time. And so when it comes to a time of suffering, a time of dryness, we instantly think that is must indicate the absence of God.

No! Even in the great wilderness of his temptation, Jesus was not abandoned. He was full of the Holy Spirit. And so are we. It doesn’t seem like it, I know. It certainly doesn’t feel like it, but it is so true. God does not abandon us in these moments. He is actually living in us, really and truly abiding in our hearts. That means that he is closer to us in these moments than we could even imagine. We have only to turn to him and rest on him, lean on him, rely on him, and the wilderness we are in can be conquered.

That doesn’t mean that all we be instantly well again; it doesn’t mean that our suffering will instantly cease; it doesn’t mean that we will instantly feel his presence and prayer will be easy again. His presence is so far beyond feeling. But it does mean that the wilderness we are in and the afflictions we endure will not defeat us. That’s why that detail about the Holy Spirit is so important.

But that is also why we need to pay attention to the temptations Jesus endured. See, they each represent a temptation we all go through in the midst of difficulties and we have to overcome them. The first one, Jesus is offered bread. Imagine how much Jesus, after fasting for forty days, would have wanted to take that rock and make it bread and relieve his suffering. But Jesus resisted and in this he shows us that we ought not want an easy escape from our suffering. So often when we are weighed down by something we instantly want to be freed of it. Jesus teaches us today that we have to resist this desire because in the midst of suffering, the Holy Spirit is there leading us and he has something he wants to teach us in the midst of it. He uses these moments to strengthen our faith and make it impenetrable. The devil knows that if we go through these moments patiently with God then when we come out the other side, our faith will be too strong for him and so he tempts us to give up, to opt out, to take the get out of jail free card because he doesn’t want our faith to be strengthened. Resist the temptation to escape.

The second temptation offers us control. Jesus is offered the rule of all the cities of the world and how often in the midst of troubling times we would give anything to be able to determine the outcome, to know exactly what is going to happen, to be in control. The devil tempts us with this because he knows that in the midst of great trouble and darkness, if we offer ourselves really humbly to God and ask to be led by his will and not our own, then the devil’s hold on our lives is broken. When we ask to be led by God even in the midst of darkness, our faith is made so much stronger than the devil can handle, and so he wants us to try and take control back off God. We must resist the temptation to control.

The third temptation is about trying to dictate terms to God. How often in the midst of suffering we try to strike deals with God, or we think, ‘Well if you really love me, then you would take this burden away.’ And so we miss the opportunity to be led step by step on the path God has set for us. We grow impatient, we want to be really sure that God is there with us, and so we put him to the test. And the devil tempts us with this because he knows that if we abandon ourselves to the will of God even when we can’t really see what it is or where it might lead, then God will lead us to an immense depth of friendship and trust with him, and the devil doesn’t want that. So he tries to make us offer God ultimatums and to force his hand. We must resist putting God to the test.

It doesn’t say in this passage, but in another account of Jesus’ temptations it says that after Jesus resisted the temptation, he was ministered to by angels. This shows us that there is an end to our afflictions, there is an end to our dryness, our suffering, and it is an end filled with peace. But we don’t decide when that end will be. Our task is to enter into the wilderness with the knowledge that we are filled with the Holy Spirit, that we are led by him, and to resist deviating from God’s will. Because God leads us through these wildernesses to a land of great promise, a land where our friendship with him, our union with him is so much deeper, so much stronger, so much more delightful than it was before.

So if you are in the wilderness, or when you come to the wilderness, do not be afraid. Remember this Gospel, remember that the Holy Spirit is guiding you. Resist the devil, and turn to God, and just see what a great land God will lead you into.