

WEEK 1

A journey into the Wilderness



Preamble

This Lent resource, like so many, is a journey into the wilderness. A journey that takes us from a home that we know so well, into a fascinating and often challenging landscape in which we learn what it means to be enriched, enlivened, challenged and (we hope) renewed. We journey with Jesus, for he is driven into the wilderness, and ultimately compelled towards Jerusalem, to a seeming worldly defeat, yet ultimately God's triumph.

The journey is an exploration of how Christian faith can be deepened and enriched by an encounter with people of other faiths. Buddhists, Hindus, Jews, Muslims and Sikhs are people of faith who sometimes share common things with us, but more often than not have a view of the world which differs from our Christian perspectives.

This Lenten resource is drawn from the experiences of Christians who have long experience in dialogue and social action with other faiths and who have found their own faiths strengthened and deepened, rather than muted or compromised.

It might be helpful in this first session to state clearly what we are not trying to do. This is not about saying 'all religions are the same' or 'who is saved and who is not', nor is it about offering guidance as to how best to engage in dialogue with people of different faiths.

So what are we trying to do? Quite modestly to focus on two simple questions: what happens to the faith of Christians when they encounter the religious beliefs and practices of others? And does Christian faith take on a new and exciting perspective? Let's find out!

Our Lenten Journey

Read: Matthew 4.1-11

We begin our Lenten journey in a traditional way, by listening together to the story of the temptations of Jesus in the wilderness. This is the beginning of his ministry, and so we find this young Jewish carpenter's son driven into the wilderness for forty days and nights, where he is challenged and provoked to determine what sort of Messiah he would be.

So here is our first encounter with another faith – Judaism. Yet this was no 'other faith', for Jesus was Jewish and like many others before him he would be tested and tempted. Rabbinic tradition says that Abraham endured 10 trials, and in Deuteronomy we read that Moses fasted for forty days and nights whilst on Mount Sinai (Deut 9:9, also Exodus 24:18). The length of Jesus's temptation finds connection with his Jewish past: Noah and his family were in the ark for 40 days and 40 nights

(Genesis 7:12), Moses and the Israelites spent 40 years in the wilderness and Elijah also endured a spell in the wilderness for 40 days and 40 nights (1 Kings 19:8).

Question: Are we accustomed to reading the life of Jesus only through our Christian eyes? Do we forget that Jesus was a Jew, for whom the only scriptures he had were what we call the Old Testament (which were also the only scriptures of the early Church)?

The temptations that Jesus endured concern the kind of messiah Jesus would become - a mighty King, a mighty ruler, the one who would please by offering effortless bounty...or...? Jesus' response is to resist this, and what emerges is one who would go on to heal the broken, eat with the outcast, proclaim the Kingdom of God and ultimately suffer death and rise from the grave.

Lent therefore is a time when we are invited to reflect upon our Christian faith, as we live it in the world. One important temptation that we traditionally reflect upon in Lent is the temptation to 'own' and 'possess'. This is a primal human instinct; anyone who has visited Jerusalem will know that religious people are no exception to it. The city is claimed by three world religions, and these claims do not always sit comfortably with one another - yet we know that if there is to be peace in the Holy Land there needs to be mutual respect between the faiths that revere the Western Wall, the Temple Mount and the Church of the Holy Sepulchre.

Surprised by Fresh Insights

Throughout this Lenten resource we will hear a number of stories and testimonies from Christians who have been surprised by how fresh insights have been inspired by an encounter with someone of a different faith.

This can happen in different ways. It can be in quite a deliberate way where we learn how someone else reads our scripture. A good example of this is in the encounter with Judaism. What do Jews make of the New Testament? For most of Christian history Jews would hardly ever read the New Testament, for understandable reasons. But they would none the less have known about some passages, hearing them in school perhaps, in popular discourse or through literature, art and music. In recent decades some Jewish scholars of the Bible have turned their attention to the New Testament and have some interesting insights to offer. An example of this is in Jesus' disagreements and clashes with the Pharisees, where they see a classic way in which disagreements happen amongst Jewish scholars and teachers, and they

ask whether it might be possible that Jesus too was trained as a Pharisee? If so these passages can be read in a different light.

Other times new insights come about through chance encounters, and we shall read plenty of these. But then there are the unusual unexpected insights. Consider this experience:

'An ongoing and deepening dialogue with another faith can not only increase one's respect for that faith but sometimes yield an unexpected fresh insight into the faith of Christian sisters and brothers of a different Christian tradition to my own. Let me explain: Coming from an evangelical background I was always puzzled and perplexed as to why devotion to Mary was so important to Catholic and Orthodox Christians: surely our devotion was to Jesus alone? Yet through my dialogue with Muslims I had grown to respect why Muslims honoured their prophet Muhammad, even though I could not honour him in the same way as they do. I learnt that Muhammad is often described in Islam as the 'bearer of the word (Qur'an)' and that is why he is honoured in Islam with the words 'peace be upon him'. In Christianity it is Mary who is the 'bearer of the Word', this time the Logos, the Word made flesh. It was through my dialogue with Muslims, understanding why they honour Muhammad as the 'bearer of the word' that I have been helped to understand why Mary is so important for my fellow Christians. This is how I came to appreciate, understand and respect Marian devotion by my Christian sisters and brothers, even though it was not something I was likely to incorporate into my own spirituality or practice of prayer: a respectful dialogue with Muslims had also helped me by growing closer to my fellow Christians.'

Questions for discussion

1. What has been your experience of speaking with someone of a different faith? Reflect upon what sort of feelings it aroused. Did you feel confident speaking about Christian faith?
2. Think about the idea of Jesus being trained as a Pharisee: what is your reaction to it?
3. Have you had any personal experiences of an encounter with another faith that has deepened and strengthened your own, or helped you to appreciate some particular aspect of Christianity?