



St Marylebone  
Parish Church

## Ash Wednesday 2019

*In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

On Ash Wednesday we enter the wilderness with Jesus.

But today, wildernesses and deserts are for dune surfing, glamping, exotic safaris to see the Tuareg: the stuff of glossy holiday brochures and luxurious spa holidays.

One might, I suppose, still seek out the designer-desert in order 'to find oneself' or to 'detox', but such things will come very carefully packaged and extremely heavily price-tagged.

Having a 'holiday of a lifetime' 'desert-experience' is not what Ash Wednesday and Lent is all about!

For our forebears, wildernesses and deserts were places of terror and danger.

Even the shortest crossings - for anyone foolish enough to enter a desert or wilderness in the first place - had to be carefully planned and fully thought-through with nothing left to chance:

provisions had to be gathered and trustworthy guides or 'dragomen', who knew the terrain intimately, engaged.

But even with the best planning, those foolhardy enough to venture into the wilderness could never be assured of reaching their destination in one piece: the distinct possibility of wild beasts tearing them apart, being ambushed by gangs, being bitten poisonous snakes and spiders, or disappearing into treacherous quick sands always stood betwixt traveller and destination.

Yet, it was into the desert, into the wilderness, in the long tradition of the sage and the seer, that Jesus took himself to wrestle with his identity and to find his true vocation.

Lent provides us with forty days in which we can try to discover our true identity, our vocation – without even leaving the comfort of our homes.

Forty days (hopefully without the attendant wild beasts, robbers, scorpions or shifting sands) in which we can take time to take a good hard look at ourselves and discover - or perhaps discover afresh - who we are as God's beloved children and what it is that God calls us to be and do for him and for his Kingdom.

Few, if any of us, I guess, this Lent, will be called to make life-changing radical choices – although, if we are honest about keeping a Holy Lent, some of us might be asked to do so – instead, we must be open and honest enough to the possibility

that God is calling us to do very little; perhaps something which might seem almost irrelevantly insignificant.

God does not ask us to change the world - well, actually God does ask us to change the world, but is unlikely that God will call us to change the world in a spectacular bangs-and-whistles, all-stops-drawn kind of way. More likely, God will call us to change the world by changing ourselves *incrementally*; bit by tiny bit, step by halting step.

Through the forty days of Lent which lie ahead of us *en route* to Holy Week and Easter, God calls us in the 'wilderness' with Jesus so that we can pen our ears to hear God speak, open our eyes to see God at work, to reorient ourselves so that we can reach the other side safely and with new resolve.

We have God's gift of forty days, walking more closely with Jesus, in order to discover what changes – however small or seemingly insignificant they might seem – to change ourselves and in the process change the world.

Listen to what God is saying: be kinder to the postman, come to church a little better prepared to receive Holy Communion, take a little extra time when saying your prayers, read the Bible a little more often, be open with friend or colleague about the fact that you go to church - none of these things are in or of themselves spectacular or 'sexy' but they are world-changing.

These are the tiny things which usher in God's Kingdom; the seemingly insignificant things which proclaim that Jesus is Lord; that once he was dead, but that he now lives; that he who

was betrayed and rejected and crucified is now seated on his throne of glory.

Don't do much this Lent – in fact, do very little – for it is the many very-littles which will not only transform who we are, but which will transform the world. *Amen.*