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

Every year on the first Sunday of Lent, the Church rehearses the story of Jesus’ forty days and forty nights spent in the Judaean wilderness and the temptations he faced there.

Mathew, Mark and Luke all tell the story, although each evangelist has a slightly different way of telling it.

Common to all three accounts, however, are the temptations – all of which directly relate to a struggle over identity and vocation.

You might remember that story of Jesus in the wilderness follows on immediately form Jesus being baptised in the River Jordan by John the Baptist.

As soon as Jesus has been revealed as the Son of God, the Messiah, the Lamb of God who comes to take away the sin of the world, do we see him, like the Goat on the day of atonement sent out in to the dessert.

Once every year, at Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, the holiest day in the Jewish Calendar, the High Priest would
first sacrifice a bull as a sin offering to atone for sins he may have committed unintentionally throughout the year. Then, he would take two goats which had been chosen by lot and present them at the door of the tabernacle.

One would be "for THE LORD", which was offered as a blood sacrifice, whilst the second, the scapegoat, was sent away into the wilderness, pushed down a steep ravine where it would meet its death.

The dead goat’s blood was then collected and taken into the Holy of Holies and sprinkled on the mercy seat, the lid of the ark of the covenant, behind the Temple Veil to take away the intentional sins of the Jewish people.

But Jesus simply led out into the desert, he is ‘thrown out’ by the Holy Spirit! And the Evangelists use the same word in Greek to describe this as the word which would be used to describe the throwing of a ball!

Here in the wilderness Jesus does not die like the scapegoat, that would come later on Good Friday, he wrestles with his identity.

Here in the wilderness, in and through a time of testing and trial, Jesus accepts his God-given calling and is formed and shaped by the Spirit for all that will follow: from the calling of the disciples, which is the next bit of the Jesus story, through his years of ministry in Galilee, to the final showdown with the gathered forces of darkness and death on the cross of Calvary.

Parallels between Jesus’ 40 days and nights in the wilderness and the forty wilderness years of the Hebrews are not accidental.
The river Jordan, the place of John the Baptist’s ministry, replaces the Red Sea, and the Judaean wilderness replaces the Sinai desert, and the similarities and the inferences the Evangelist set before the reader are laid out very clearly for all to see.

Water, wilderness, hunger, power, identity, calling, formation, the testing of faithfulness, multiple temptations are common and central to both narratives, albeit separated by some 1600 years.

Throughout scripture, wilderness places are the places where God meets and shapes his people.

Like two boxers squaring up in a ring, Jesus in the red corner and the embodied forces of all that fights against love and light and life in the blue corner, the protagonists engage.

From the blue corner, in the form of the temptations, come the offers of self-indulgence, self-aggrandizement and self-serving religious identity, but Jesus, filled with the Holy Spirit, parries them with scripture: proclaiming life to more than food; that God alone is worthy of true worship and service; that the God who is the creator and the sustainer of all that is, is not to be tested or challenged; proving that, unlike the people of the Old Covenant, Jesus knows his utter dependence on God and will never rely on self for life, glory, and identity.

Whilst the people of the Old Covenant kept losing their identity in the wilderness, kept denying their God-given identity, Jesus not only holds firm to his, but discovers the richness and fulness of its depths.
Out of their wilderness wanderings, the Hebrews emerged as the people of God’s Covenant promise.

From his wilderness wandering, Jesus emerges as God’s Covenant promise - both the agent and the very incarnation of wayward, sinful creation’s salvation.

After his baptism, Jesus entered the wilderness as the Builder Carpenter from Nazareth, but emerges as the Saviour of the World - the Messiah, the New Israel, the Promise and the Promised Land into which all peoples from all places throughout all time would now be invited to settle securely and for all eternity.

Through Jesus’ forty days of faithful obedience in the wilderness, the Old Covenant finally gives way to the New, and the Gospel, is proclaimed; John the Baptist’s work is done and the work of the Church – our work – begins.

Let’s get on with it!