

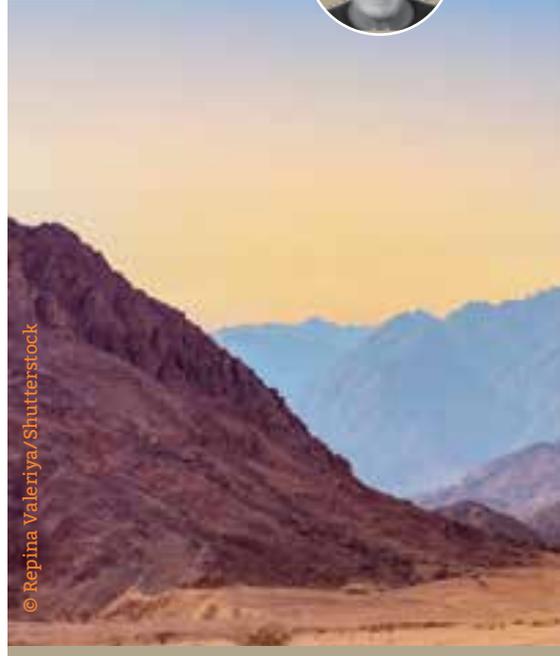


# Wild Beasts and Angels

Fr John Cullen writes of the time of Jesus in the desert and links it with desert times for ourselves.

The gospel stories in Lent remind us that God's Spirit led Jesus into a desert for forty days, similar to the forty years that God's people wandered towards a promised fulfilment. Different gospel translations use the words 'testing' and 'tempting' to describe the experience of Jesus in the desert. One word means 'checking you are up to it' and the other means 'trying to make you fail'. I remember Fr John Quinlan in a Scripture class in Maynooth College sharing this nugget of wisdom with us: 'In the Bible, God tests to makes you grow, Satan tempts to reduce you.'

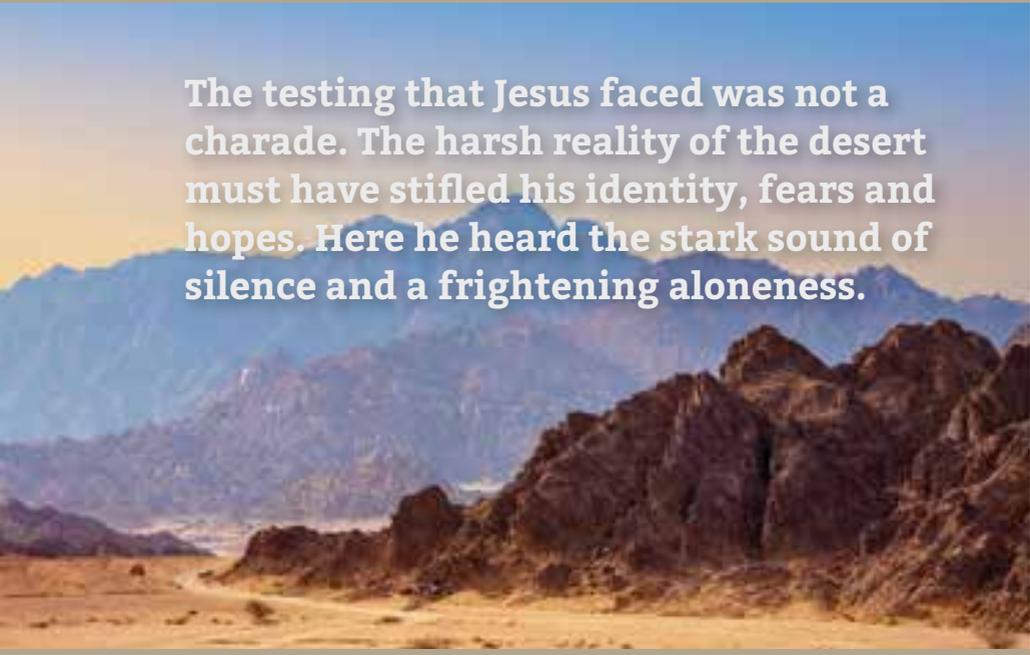
The testing that Jesus faced was not a charade. The harsh reality of the desert must have stifled his identity, fears and hopes. Here he heard the stark sound of silence and a frightening aloneness. If you doubt that, just think of all the ways we keep silence at bay: the car radio, the mobile phone, the television with its multiplicity of channels, the endless computer options, the music in every shopping outlet, the pub, the restaurant. Here in the Nazareth Care Home in Hammer-smith, I meet people whose experience of aloneness and quiet during



the lockdown was a real test of their inner strength that made them fruitful and not negative.

If we get our sense of self only from other people, if we only exist because someone notices us, then we literally dissolve in the noon-day heat of the desert. If we get our sense of self from what we own, if what we possess actually possesses us, then our self will collapse in the desert with nothing to hold on to. If we get our sense of self through an overblown exaggeration of ourselves, 'I am because I am better', then with no one to compare yourself to, the desert can only challenge you with yourself, and you may discover you're not quite what you thought.

Lent is the time for a subtraction of the self, of the soul, in this simmering mirage of the desert-wilderness,



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where so much is reduced down and where our worth, our dependence and our true possession is rediscovered as an oasis of the living, holy and eternal God.

To discover this involves much pain, passion and prayer: wild beasts and angels is one memorable gospel image. Perhaps this is a good project to consider for Lent: to spend a little more time in quiet, alone each day, and to work out what the 'wild beasts' in you are that need naming, claiming and taming, and to discover who are the 'angels' that minister to you. Where do you find peace and refreshment? Where do you find yourself growing no matter what your age is? Lent is a time to encounter 'wild beasts and angels' as they collide within us.

The temptation of Christ follows immediately after his baptism. Still soaking wet he moves into the wilderness. The echo of the voice from the clouds still whispering in his heart: 'You are my child. You are my beloved.' For us life after baptism has its many trials, testing times and temptations. All too often we have forgotten that each one of us is beloved by God.

During Lent, as our Church and the world goes through a desert-wilderness of chaos and climate change, let us live out God's love song that has been placed in our hearts and hear the rhythms, the eternal notes that free us from the deafening, distracting tunes that others want us to dance our lives to.

Face the wild beasts. Hold on to the angels. 