

Into the Wilderness

Lent, which we begin observing this year on 14 February, is a period of reflection and self-denial, serving both as a commemoration of the forty days that Jesus spent in the wilderness before beginning his public ministry and as a preparation for a joyous participation in the celebration of Easter — a kind of spiritual spring-cleaning. The early church had a practice of very strict self-denial to prepare for Easter, but at first this only began on Good Friday. It soon extended to a week (what we now call Holy Week), and by the fourth century, when the liturgy was increasingly structured to reflect major events in Christ's life, the period of penance was extended to forty days to echo Christ's time in the wilderness. At first this extended period of Lent started on a Sunday, which gave forty days before the commemoration of the Crucifixion on Good Friday, although Good Friday and Holy Saturday remained days of extreme fasting, as they had always been. But in the latter part of the seventh century, recognising that Sundays weren't fasting days, Lent was extended back into the previous week to compensate. This means that, with Lent now starting on a Wednesday, there are forty fasting days. Sundays are not counted, but Good Friday and Holy Saturday are, so the forty days run right up to Easter Eve.

John's gospel makes no reference to Christ's withdrawal into the wilderness, and in Mark it is only mentioned briefly. It is from Matthew and Luke that we have the account of three temptations, although they are not in the same order. Both start with the temptation to turn stones into bread. Matthew's second temptation is for Jesus to cast himself down from the pinnacle of the Temple and be saved by God; and the third is to receive at Satan's hand all the kingdoms of the world in return for worshipping him. In Luke these last two are reversed.

Withdrawal into the wilderness, which in Palestine meant the barren desert, was an ascetic practice known in Judaism. But following the example of Christ, it became a major movement in the Christian church, starting in Egypt and Palestine towards the end of the third century. Solitaries withdrew to live a life of extreme self-denial in the desert, where they wrestled with temptations that often appeared to them in the form of demons. These holy figures, known in later times as the Desert Fathers, were the first 'monks' (the word comes from the Greek monos, meaning 'alone'). Over time some began to live in scattered colonies, occasionally coming together for worship, and so monastic communities began. What we are more familiar with in the west, however, is monasticism as a withdrawal from the secular world into a dedicated close-knit community — a rather different concept from the 'wilderness' life of the early monks of the Middle East. Even so, a tradition of withdrawal and self-denial to meditate and to wrestle with temptation continued to have an important place. St Cuthbert often withdrew to Cuddy's Isle, the small tidal island off Lindisfarne, and for more extreme isolation and self-denial went to Farne; others, such as St Guthlac, withdrew to the wilderness of the Fens, not then drained and so notably inhospitable. Christian history provides us with many examples of such forms of withdrawal, and there are still monks in the east who spend time alone in the rugged wilderness, even if they then return to their monastic community.

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