



St Mark's Lenten Study 2009

## Forgetting Jesus

*And at once the Spirit drove him into the desert and he remained there for forty days, and was put to the test by Satan. He was with the wild animals, and the angels looked after him.<sup>1</sup>*

### To know the place for the first time.

At the outset of this journey let me make it clear that everything I say is up for grabs. I make no claims to being in possession of all the answers; indeed, I shall often be offering only questions or suggestions. I am happy to be challenged or questioned. This is not a systematic theology but rather some musings along the way. My method of study is in the theo-poetic tradition of using the imagination, story and reflection rather than the rational, left side of the brain analysis and dissection of the text. For some this will be frustrating and for others it may be liberating. The important thing to keep in mind from the beginning is that Jesus told us that it would be the Spirit that would teach us and lead into all truth.<sup>2</sup> But before you get too excited about that, he also said that the Spirit blows where it pleases and nobody knows when or where<sup>3</sup> – so, we make this journey with open hearts and minds in trepidation and trust.

The following words from T S Eliot's poem *Little Gidding*, which is the fourth poem in the collection known as *The Four Quartets*, has become my own personal mantra over the many years that I have been searching for the person of Jesus in the desire to find faith and grow in my relationship with God. It speaks of the need for us to set off on our journey of unceasing exploration in the knowledge that when we 'arrive' we will be back where we started but without knowing it (and of course the suggestion is that since our exploration is unceasing then our arrival will be at the end of our life's journey);

*With the drawing of this Love and the voice of this Calling  
We shall not cease from exploration,  
and the end of all our exploring  
will be to arrive where we started  
and know the place for the first time.<sup>4</sup>*

The title of this first session may seem strange to many of you. Why should we begin our Lenten studies by forgetting Jesus? Surely the purpose of any serious study should be to remember and reinforce our knowledge and understanding of Jesus? Perhaps, but I am proposing that in order to learn anything we may first have to be prepared to unlearn everything. In his wonderful and poetic book, *The Poet, The Warrior, The Prophet*, Rubem A Alves quotes Roland Barthes (a French Philosopher) who said,

*I try, therefore, to allow myself to be taken by the force  
of all living life: forgetfulness . . .  
There is an age when one teaches what one knows. But there follows another when one teaches what one does  
not know . . .  
It comes, maybe now, the age of another experience: that of unlearning . . .<sup>5</sup>*

His book is then an account of how he had to undergo a complete transformation of all that he thought he knew as an academic in order to discover what he really needed to know as a disciple. How he had to 'unlearn' all he thought he knew before he could truly discover what he most needed to know. Jesus makes a similar suggestion when he says,

*Anyone who wants to save his or her life will lose it;  
but anyone who loses their life for my sake,  
and for the sake of the gospel,  
will save it.<sup>6</sup>*

Put another and more succinct way we might say, *cling to it and you'll lose it - let it go and you'll find it*. In John's gospel Jesus makes the same point through the illustration of the seed that must first of all fall into the earth and die before it can take root and grow into fruitfulness.<sup>7</sup> This idea is also beautifully illustrated in the story of Mary Magdalene's encounter with the risen Jesus. Having visited the empty tomb with Peter and John she remains behind when they leave. She is distraught and weeping at the thought of the body being stolen and removed. Jesus approaches and asks her why she is weeping but she does not recognise the man as Jesus and pleads with him, "They have taken away my Lord and I do not know where they have placed him". "Mary", Jesus says softly and she immediately recognises him as her Lord and throws her arms around him holding him tightly, her tears of sadness now turned to tears of joy. "Do not cling to me Mary", Jesus says, as he gently eases her arms from around his neck, "I have yet to ascend to my Father after which I will return to be with you always". Until she was prepared to let go of him she was unable to truly hold on to him.<sup>8</sup> It is when we are able to let go that we are then able to truly take hold. So, we begin our journey with Jesus by entering the wilderness willing to let go, to unlearn or forget all we thought we knew. Confident that anything that is of any real value will return to us along with some new insights and we shall '*know the place for the first time*'.

First of all I will spend some time thinking about the image of the wilderness in the hope that we can set the scene for the landscape of our Lenten journey together. We will look at what we can learn from the experience of Jesus in his encounter with the wilderness. We will then look at how the wilderness is the starting place for our forgetting Jesus.

### **The wilderness.**

In the synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke) we read that immediately following his baptism by John the Baptist, Jesus has a revelation affirming him as God's son and is then compelled to withdraw into the wilderness (often described in the gospels as the desert or a lonely place) for forty days and nights. I use the word 'compelled' because in Mark we are told that *the Spirit drove him into the wilderness*.<sup>9</sup> This suggests that following his experience at his baptism there is an urgent need in Jesus to make his way to a place where he can be alone with God. This is commonly referred to as the temptation of Jesus. However, I want to suggest that it is much more than some arbitrary test to see if Jesus is up to the job of being the Messiah. It isn't some sort of cosmic face off between superheroes like a scene from Star Wars or X-Men. Rather it is a deep and urgent need in Jesus to be in a place where he can confront not only his demons but also his God. Indeed, this is not the only time Jesus will feel this compulsion - reading through the gospels we will see that Jesus frequently withdraws to a lonely place to be alone before his Father.

Our wilderness of course is not necessarily a geographical location. There is no reason why at specific times we should not seek out a place where we can go on retreat in order to pray and reflect on our relationship with God. But for the purpose of this study I am referring to what Harry Williams refers to as *the wilderness inside* each of us rather than outside. He goes on to say that *our wilderness, then, is an inner isolation. It's an absence of contact. It's a sense of being alone - boringly alone, saddeningly alone, or terrifyingly alone*.<sup>10</sup> I want to suggest it was also these things for Jesus. The wilderness becomes for us a metaphor for facing our demons and entering into the silence of forgetfulness or what St John of the Cross referred to as *the dark night of the soul* and what an anonymous 14th century English Monk referred to as *The Cloud of Unknowing*.<sup>11</sup>

The wilderness then will be the landscape of our journey together. It was in the wilderness that Jesus faced his demons and the wild beasts of his imagination. He was also filled with his vision of God and ministered to by angels. If we are willing to follow Jesus into the arena of our own hopes and fears, faith and doubt, our dreams and even our nightmares, we can be sure that we too will be filled with a new vision of our God as we are ministered to by angels - *angelos* - messengers of God. The message is simply the revealed word of God to each of our hearts. Speaking through the prophet God says to his bride (the Church),

*I remember the devotion of your youth,  
your love as a bride,  
how you followed me into the wilderness,  
into a land not sown.*<sup>12</sup>

And again,

*I am going to seduce her and lead her into the desert and speak to her heart.*<sup>13</sup>

The wilderness then becomes the underlying image for all our reflection throughout this season of Lent. If you are serious about embarking on this journey of Following Jesus then you will need to consciously make time each day to enter into your internal wilderness. First thing in the morning with a cup of tea taking five to ten minutes alone in the silence reflecting on the weekly themes will allow for you to hopefully hear the voice of God. Or if you're a night person you could do the same thing with a glass of milk or some other nightcap. It is also handy to have a journal to write down any thoughts you may have, be they doubts, questions, revelations or simply reflections on the journey. We will return to this theme again and again throughout our exploration.

## Forgetting Jesus

Why forgetting Jesus? Because sometimes what we think we know about Jesus can actually get in the way of what we may really need to know about him. As the quotation from Roland Barthes above says, there comes a time when we will need to *unlearn* what we have learned so that, in the words of T S Eliot, we can *know the place for the first time*. Marcus Borg, a Historical Jesus scholar, expresses this aptly in the title of his book, *Meeting Jesus again for the first time*. You may be familiar with the account of Jesus exhorting his disciples to *seek and you shall find, knock and it shall be opened, ask and it shall be given*.<sup>14</sup> In the Greek the grammar of this passage reads as **keep on seeking and you shall find, keep on knocking and it shall be opened, keep on asking and it shall be given**. The challenge of following Jesus is that we are *always* being called to **keep on** and in order to do that we have to be prepared to **let go** of some old insights in order to embrace some new insights.

Think of it like this, a child often inherits the physical features of its parents - it also adopts values and attitudes in an uncritical way. This can be both a strength and a weakness. There comes a time in our lives when we have to unlearn values and attitudes we have learned that do not serve any good purpose in our lives. In fact they can even be a hindrance to us as we seek to grow in our self-awareness and character. It's the same principle with what we have learned about Jesus from childhood (or even in adulthood). Much of what we have learned will be helpful but there will also be things that are not helpful and can become a hindrance to our growth in faith. A silly example would be the Christmas carol *Away In A Manger*. When we sing, *The cattle are lowing the baby awakes but little Lord Jesus no crying he makes* we are subconsciously reinforcing an image of Jesus. Whether this image is a helpful one or not is questionable. This simple phrase in a sentimental song may actually be instrumental in reinforcing ideas not only about Jesus which are unhelpful but also ideas about ourselves that are unhelpful, for after all, we all cried as babies when we awoke in the night so why should Jesus not? This may seem like I am laboring an insignificant point but in reality we have to understand that our image of Christ shapes our image of ourselves. The suggestion that he didn't cry as a baby implies that this was a virtue and therefore the fact that we did suggests that something is lacking in us. This then becomes another brick in the wall of our negative self-image, which potentially works against the good news of Jesus for our lives. There are many such examples of images or ideas about Jesus or God that we may have to forget in order that we can move on in a broader, more creative faith journey.

The process of forgetting is a process of emptying. The wilderness within our selves is only really entered into as we learn to empty ourselves. True wilderness begins when we learn to silence our selves. This is not because there is really any magical quality or virtue to silence in itself but because silence becomes the place from which we are able to be attentive to the presence of God. In this place we are more likely to encounter the Spirit and our true selves. As Norvene West says,

Silence is not valued for itself, as some sort of magic tool. Rather, silence creates an environment in which God can be heard and welcomed.<sup>15</sup>

We live in a world full of noise and distraction. The hustle bustle of the traffic, the shopping malls, the TV, the crowds of people, even our loud worship songs! All of this conspires to keep us from hearing God, and welcoming the creative and revealing word of the Spirit. If we allow the Spirit to drive us into the silence and stillness of the wilderness within us we are more likely to have that encounter. Malcom Mugggerige knew this all too well and says,

I love the wilderness because when all these pursuits of mind and body have been shed, what remains -- insofar as this is attainable in our mortal condition -- is an unencumbered soul, with no other concern than to look for God.<sup>16</sup>

## Stepping into the Circle of Uncertainty

In the video clip we saw<sup>17</sup> we were confronted with the image of Jesus drawing a circle on the sand of the desert and praying, “I’m not going to leave this circle. I’m not going to leave here until you speak to me. No signs, no pain, just speak to me in human words. Whatever path you want I’ll take, love or the axe or anything else. If you want me to stay here and die I’ll do that too, but you’ll have to tell me”. Of course this is one man’s interpretation of what it may have been like for Jesus to enter into his own wilderness in order to hear from God. What we learn from this interpretation is that we too may have to step into that circle if we intend to follow Jesus. We too may have to be prepared to wait in the silence for some clear indication that God is present to us. This can only happen if we are willing to make some space in our lives to, as we read earlier, create *an environment in which God can be heard and welcomed*.<sup>18</sup>

The film I took the video clip from is a good example of why it may be necessary for us to forget Jesus – to loose preconceived images from our childhood or adulthood that have fixed an image of Jesus that keeps us from new insights. I am by no means suggesting that Scorsese’s film is without fault or beyond criticism but I am suggesting that if we over react to the portrayal of Jesus in his film where it clashes with our preferred portrayal, then we may miss out on some valuable insights that could help us better understand the breadth, length, depth and height of who Jesus is<sup>19</sup> rather than the often two dimensional images we have of him. The point of following Jesus into the wilderness after all is to confront our selves, our demons, our God and maybe even our many conflicting images of who Jesus is.

Just a final word about forgetting Jesus. We are not really forgetting Jesus, and that is not what I am suggesting, we are forgetting false images of Jesus. I am using the idea of forgetting as a precursor to remembering, this is the same idea that lies behind Jesus words about losing and finding. Until you lose you cannot find – until you forget you cannot remember. Losing and forgetting become opportunities for us to step out in faith. True faith has to be prepared to let go and acknowledge uncertainties. I have always been challenged by this lyric from a song by Peter Gabriel;

*I'm hearing right and wrong so clearly, there must be more than this  
it's only in uncertainty that we're naked and alive*<sup>20</sup>

Too often in the church we have been bombarded with the need to be certain. Imagine for a moment that faith were certainty – who could have such faith? Even Jesus could not have been certain that he would experience resurrection following his death on the cross. It was by faith through obedience that he submitted himself to the cross not by certainty. Indeed if he was able to be certain that his crucifixion would merely be a stepping stone to a sure and certain life beyond death then he has nothing to offer us. In fact, his death then becomes at best nothing more than an arbitrary event or at worse, a necessary transaction based on the idea that there had to be blood shed for the forgiveness of our sins. These are current and widespread understandings of the cross, which we may have to be prepared to forget in order to remember what it may really be all about. But I am rushing too far ahead. We are after all just at the start of our journey through the wilderness. We will in time approach the dark day of the cross and we shall return to this theme. One last point, once we have been prepared to forget Jesus or lose him – we are then able to continue on our journey and find him. Which is a nice way of segueing into next weeks theme – Finding Jesus.

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<sup>1</sup> Mark 1.12,13

<sup>2</sup> John 16.13

<sup>3</sup> John 3.8

<sup>4</sup> T S Eliot, The Complete Poems and Plays

<sup>5</sup> Rubem A Alves, The Poet, The Warrior, The Prophet.

<sup>6</sup> Mark 8.35

<sup>7</sup> John 12.24

<sup>8</sup> You can find this story in John’s gospel chapter 20

<sup>9</sup> Mark 1.12

<sup>10</sup> H.A.Williams, True Wilderness

<sup>11</sup> Both of these books were written over 500 years ago and the language is difficult but both authors speak of the need to enter into a place of wilderness (darkness and unknowing) to be alone and exposed before God.

<sup>12</sup> Jeremiah 2.2

<sup>13</sup> Hosea 2.14 – wilderness motifs are common in the dealings of God with his people throughout the OT

<sup>14</sup> Matthew 7.7-11 and Luke 11.9-13

<sup>15</sup> Norvene West, No Moment Too Small

<sup>16</sup> Malcolm Muggeridge, Twentieth Century Testimony

<sup>17</sup> Taken from Martin Scorsese’s film *The Last Temptation* based on the novel by Nikos Kazantzakis.

<sup>18</sup> Norvene West, No Moment Too Small

<sup>19</sup> Ephesians 3.18

<sup>20</sup> From the song *That Voice Again* on the album *So*