

There I was, writing my sermon. It was going to be a good, well-rounded, eloquent piece of work. I had even prepared it way in advance; which was a good thing. Here we are, I wrote, in this first week of Lent. The season in the Church of forty days and forty nights; fasting, praying, resisting temptations, making room in our lives for others and God; as we follow Jesus in His footsteps, through the wilderness of forty days; to The Cross, and to the light of The Resurrection on Easter morning. That was the beginning of my first draft, so some of it got in. I then went on to talk about what it meant to give things up for Lent, what it means to make space; and it was going okay, not my best sermon ever, but it was okay. It all seemed fine, and then I made the mistake of looking on Facebook.

I looked on Facebook, and saw the page of a friend of mine, who is a priest in the United States, and he had posted a picture of the inside of his church; a huge procession, fogged up with incense, people praying and singing, the clergy practically doing backflips over the altar. Again, everything seemed fine (sort of...), until I pulled up the comments tab at the bottom of the page; and there it was, the quote, which ended my comfortable, cozy neat and tidy, sermon writing package.

“On the whole, I do not find Christians, outside the catacombs, sufficiently sensible of the conditions. Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke? ... churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT... It is madness to wear ladies’ straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping God may wake some day and take offense, or the waking God may draw us out to where we can never return.”

Wow. This quote is from Annie Dillard, an American writer who is Roman Catholic (which you can probably tell from her tone), although she is somewhat ambivalent in her public profile about her faith. The quote is taken from one of her collections of meditations on faith and life, and as you might have gathered, if she is ambivalent about what she thinks about some aspects of her faith, one of the things she makes very clear are her views on the power of worship, the power of the Church; the power of faith. And boy, does she make it clear. And I think she has a point.

I think I’ve found the passage, and possibly the book, which will become the focus of my Lenten reading for this year, and hopefully way way beyond. It’s not the first time this has happened, mind you. On a number of occasions in my little life so far, when I have found myself getting comfortable with my faith; just when I think I’ve got it all sorted out; that my prayer life is in check; that my understanding of The Bible is “okay...”; when I feel as though I can say the Eucharistic Prayer without garbling my words; when I don’t trip over my robes (which I do a lot, by the way)... Just when I get myself established, there’s that reminder; like God nudging me on the shoulder. **“In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan... And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness...”**

Just when you thought it was safe to go back into church, there were are, driven out, *driven in*, to tackle the wilderness. In a way, it's a bit like what the artwork in our church right now maybe tries to achieve. Whether you are a fan of this sort of thing or not, one thing it certainly gets us doing, is asking, "Where is my crash helmet?" I say that, not just because of the things hanging over us, but because as we begin this season of Lent, that is the question we need to ask. That is what Lent is for. It's the one time in the church's year, aside from Advent (although we all know what *actually* happens then) when we should be reflective, ask those difficult, probing questions. Re-organise our prayer life. Re-think how we read Scripture. Re-think how we think and feel when we enter this building, and look to that altar; and wonder, what would happen if the roof came in, right now?

And if you're sitting there thinking, "Okay Fr Ed, this is a bit much," then be assured that I say this very much as someone who desperately needs that reminder themselves, pretty desperately. I think every priest, when he or she approaches the altar, should be shaking, trembling; and not just because they're nervous, but because, as Annie Dillard reminds us, of the power they're invoking. A power which we all share as a congregation. The power of prayer. The power of song. The power of worship. It's potent stuff. And it's real.

Going to church is dangerous. It's the place where we daily explore and seek to understand the wilderness. And the first thing we see when we enter this building, is either the font where our journey begins, or the altar where the journey leads, and where it ends. Again, whether we like it or not, it's a good thing to be reminded, even if it hurts; and it's a good thing to be reminded by the work shared in this room over the next few weeks; to be reminded of how in Lent, and wherever we are on our journey, worship is not an idle gesture or an idol. It's not a game. And it's not just hollow words, sweet music or an interesting, comforting old ritual. This is the work of the Church. Baptism, Lent, the whole journey of our life with Jesus is not safe. Christians are not safe people; because our God is not a safe God. Examining our core beliefs, there's nothing normal about Christianity. And not only is it dangerous, but it makes us accountable; so accountable, that if we take our faith seriously, any moment now, the roof could fall in, and He's here.

Some of you seem scared... I certainly am. But that is the power of The Church. The power of worship; the power of the music, the singing, the prayer, the movement, the genuflecting, the whole thing. That is the power of Lent. We stop, and we look around us, and we embrace *the wilderness and the wildness*, so that one day, we will look around and everything will make sense. Someone stopped me in the street the other day, and said, "Ha, being in Church is boring." And I had to say, "Not in mine, it's not! Have you seen it?!" They were even more surprised when I told them I worked for the Church of England. But that's how it should be. We should come here, and come away from here, every time, feeling as though we've been hit by a thunderbolt. So let us pray. Faithful, holy, and eternal God, look in mercy upon your people, grant us the wisdom and courage to worship you with all our heart, to dare to look for you, and to follow your Son through the wilderness. From the bewilderment of these forty days, through the darkness of the Cross, to the light of the Resurrection, may we follow and embrace our Cross, and when we falter pray for your help. Through Christ, our Lord, Amen.