

The Flowers that Bloom in the Wilderness (a sermon that will never be preached)

The other week an unfamiliar Biblical text came to visit me:

‘Israel went after her lovers and forgot me, says the Lord. Therefore, I will now entice her and bring her out into the wilderness and speak to her tenderly.’ (Hosea 2 vv 13 and 14)

Look carefully at those words. They are words of judgment. They are spoken with mercy.

In the Bible, especially but not exclusively in the Old Testament, natural disaster is God’s punishment when humans forget his laws. Some people, who revere, say, the Iliad and the Odyssey as high culture, nowadays mock the Bible.

For at least the last 20 or 30 years, many of us have sensed that there is something seriously wrong. We have even known that we personally contribute to it. But we have known (or I have known) that we are too feeble to do much about it, like addicts who want to be good but can’t.

Here are some random examples:

A shop appeared in Chelmsford a few years ago called **DUNKIN DONUTS**

For a moderate sum you could stuff yourself on doughnuts, feel happy for 20 minutes, and then begin to get depressed, and fat. We live in the first age of humankind when overweight and not underweight is a sign of deprivation. **DUNKIN DONUTS** was the first shop in Chelmsford as you approached from Moulsham Street. Where **‘Welcome to Chelmsford’** should have been written, we were invited, instead, to dunk. It was there for a few years. Then I cursed it just as Jesus cursed the fig tree. It disappeared.

Walking out in the morning, the air is sweetened by the smell of cannabis being smoked openly by people on the way to work. Most of the under 70s have had a squiff at some time in their life. There are worse crimes. But regular cannabis is an alternative to reality. It weakens the soul.

Why can’t the well off like me stop ourselves from flying aimlessly round the world when we know it burns up the atmosphere; or taking cultures prisoner on cruises – today the Caribbean, tomorrow the Far East, and eating, eating, eating?

Is there an inverse correlation between the expense of a wedding and the quality of a marriage? Why get married in Cancun or Florence? Granny won’t get there. Marriage used to be a covenant between generations, even between the living and the dead.

Hundreds and thousands of children are born today to casual relationships, with disastrous consequences sometimes for the whole of the lives of those children.

What might be the damage done to family life of supermarket workers who work all night, because the market rules. And to the idle rich (me) who have been able to put what we want in our trolley? And to our grandchildren, who cannot imagine not having everything they want?

Why can we do so little about the terrible gap between rich and poor?

That is my list for the moment. You will have yours. Some of these items may be open to the charge of snobbery. Not all.

As I understand it, there is no angry God out there beyond the skies. God's terrible judgment is that when we forget the moral law, we are left to our own devices. When we remember it with grace, something beautiful kicks in.

Coronavirus is the wilderness. The wilderness is the desert land where many have already died; where medical staff are in danger; their families in anxiety; the weakest (the elderly and the sick) terrified; the lonely lonelier still. I cannot imagine the life of large families in tower blocks where there is nowhere to exercise.

If we are the lucky ones, who have found flowers blooming in the wilderness; if there has been a voice that is speaking to us tenderly, we are in the midst of a wonderful opportunity. If it is hard but survivable, the wilderness is for us a place, or a moment, of sifting.

The gospels describe Jesus' 40 days in the wilderness as a time when he was given over to Satan for his own strengthening.

How is the lockdown coming along for you?

Perhaps isolation from family brings its own terrors. Perhaps loss of income makes the immediate future a great threat. Perhaps you know you are not ready for your own death or that of loved ones.

Are there no flowers in the wilderness?

Dare I tell you of the peace I have experienced as duties have diminished? That I am less distracted than I have ever been? That the present moment is eternal, rich and beautiful? That my thoughts are coming along one at a time and not in squadrons? That the sun is shining?

We are deprived of seeing our grandchildren. But they are spending much more time with their parents. We have moved my mother into our house. I would not have expected her to be the stranger to knock at the door and bring Jesus tumbling in with her. She may still be with us for her hundredth birthday in August, DV

And the Church is being the Church of Jesus Christ, almost, it seems, as never before. Every evening at 6pm, this week, we sit down, mum and Libby and I, to Evensong from Colin's front room and sing and pray along. It is one of the places where the fire of St Mary's now burns. Please join in. I feel strongly that the church that is faithful in the night will be ready at the dawning of the day. I look forward eagerly to us all worshipping together in St Mary's, even if that is a long way off. Our worship will be beautified by the flowers we plucked when we were in the wilderness.

'I will now entice her and bring her out into the wilderness and speak to her tenderly.'

Robert Wiggs, 26th March 2020

