

Homily 1st Sunday Lent Year B 2024 b

In *Fratelli Tutti* Pope Francis invites us into the Lenten theme which is also the theme of the Jubilee year to be celebrated in 2025. The Theme is **HOPE!**

"I invite everyone to renewed hope, for hope "speaks to us of something deeply rooted in every human heart, independently of our circumstances and historical conditioning... Hope is bold; it can look beyond personal convenience, the petty securities and compensations which limit our horizon, and it can open us up to grand ideals that make life more beautiful and worthwhile." Let us continue, then, to advance along the paths of hope. (#55)

Following Jesus along paths of hope will lead us to the common home of God's heart. Let us begin by joining Jesus in the wilderness and discover the true humanity of Jesus and seek his help.

The wilderness where Jesus went was a very barren and inhospitable place. It was filled with rocky hills and valleys; nothing grew there because there was little or no rain. Occasionally in winter small streams would run along valley bottoms giving rise to hardy vegetation. The wilderness could be unbearably hot by day. To enter the wilderness was to enter a very hostile environment.

Not only did Jesus find the wilderness physically demanding but also spiritually demanding. Mark is silent about what the temptations were, but Jesus had just been baptised, seen the Holy Spirit come down upon him and heard God his Father say, *'You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased'*. It was this intimate relationship with God that would have been tested. He would have also gone through an intense spiritual struggle about who he was, about his purpose and mission and how he would fulfil it.

We can all find ourselves in some kind of spiritual wilderness. Our relationship with God can seem to be undermined and weakened at times. Prayer becomes very difficult. If we manage to pray at all, our prayer can seem dry and unsatisfying. We no longer have a sense of God saying to us, *'You are my son, my daughter, the beloved, with you I am well pleased'*. God seems remote, distant and silent. When our relationship with God is put to the test, the life that flows from our relationship with God can also be put to the test. We find ourselves completely lost, with nowhere to turn and we can take paths completely alien to God. We may even feel that we have drifted away from God and ceased to be the person God wants us to be, the person we desire to be in our heart of hearts. Thus, we find ourselves in a kind of spiritual wilderness. Like Jesus we are being put to the test in a very fundamental way.

We find it easy to believe God was near to Jesus, taking care of him and protecting him. It is much harder to believe that the same God is present to us at such times or that the Lord is always more powerful than the spiritual forces putting our faith to the test.

On leaving the wilderness, Jesus' first words were words of good news, *'The time has come and the kingdom of God is close at hand'*. The kingdom of God is close at hand. God's sustaining, protecting and strengthening presence, is very near! Being called to ***'repent and believe in the good news'*** means turning towards God and entrusting ourselves to him. The Lord is our good news powerfully present to us at all times, especially when our faith, all that is best in us, is being put to the test.

As we begin our Lenten journey let us become aware that we have the help of the word of God, the sacraments and our community of faith here in Hitchin. Yes, *'the kingdom of God is at hand'*. God's empowering presence is at hand. God's power continues working on our behalf all the time and is stronger than the forces that work against God's purpose in our lives. In the struggle to be faithful to our baptismal calling, never lose heart. We face the powers that are opposed to the gospel **in the company of the Lord and his followers.**