At its purest, at its core, Lent is about rediscovering, or discovering for the first time in our lives, where our true strength comes from, which pillars are necessary and good and which are unreliable and incomplete. Lent is an invitation into God, or back to God again. To phrase it positively, God whispers to us in Lent: “Come near. Spend more time with me. Let us walk together through life and treasure each step together.” To put it equally positively but with perhaps more edge, Lent is the 40 day period leading up to Easter when we have the chance to realise and see for ourselves that alcohol and caffeine and crisps are not a solid foundation for who we are. And neither is rushing round and being as busy as we possibly can. And neither is our own appreciation of self. Our strength lies not in chemicals and self-image- it lies in God.

Which is why it feels so important that we do Lent well- it is a free offer of a vital corrective to the way we tend to live, the chance to pull down the walls we build between ourselves and God, as individuals and as a society. We build walls to keep our feelings, our true needs, our fears and our regrets out and in doing so, we keep God out as well. Lent means walls down and hand held outstretched to God.

And then seeing what happens. For Mark the narrative is clear of what happens next. In a story told in a way to delight all preachers who always preach in threes, Jesus is baptised and receives a special blessing from the Father, then he is in the wilderness for 40 days with the wild beasts and then he emerges form the wilderness and begins his ministry, proclaiming that the kingdom of God has come near in him and in his ministry.

From Jesus’ own life and ministry we can take our own keeping of Lent- a call from God, a call into the wilderness where God will be with us and a call to serve and bear witness. Each part of the short narrative poses a helpful and challenging question- when did we hear the voice of God calling us beloved? How have we known God in the wilderness? How do we show and speak God’s love? They are excellent questions not just for today, not just for Lent but always. Let me ask them again- and I have put them on the tables for coffee as well so you can pick them up there and discuss them if you would like to, or take them home and reflect on them…

When did you hear the voice of God calling you beloved? How have you known God in the wilderness? How do you show and speak God’s love?

If we stick with the idea of Lent as a time to take down the walls of self-comfort and self-reliance and open ourselves and our hearts to God then the fact that Jesus is led into the wilderness to find out more about himself and his mission makes good sense. In the wilderness we are more dependent on God, less distracted, less comfortable. In the wilderness we are more attentive and more present and more available to God, more open, more alert. In the wilderness God is less easily drowned out and less fully hidden from sight by the walls we build to keep our fears and feelings away. Sometimes the wilderness is something we choose- a change of lifestyle, a retreat, a Quiet Day (like the one coming up on Saturday)- and sometimes the wilderness is a complete collapse of our comfort brought about by disappointment, disease, grief, disaster, where we suddenly find ourselves thrust into an alien landscape by life as our fears break through and we cannot avoid our feelings any longer. However we get there, whether by choice or necessity, it can feel that God is more present in the wilderness because we are less defended and more available to his word and his loving truth.

Call and wilderness lead to a deeper understanding of God and a clearer sense of witness and mission. It is true for us in Lent as it was true for Jesus at the start of his ministry and as it was equally true for Noah and his shipmates back in the early chapters of Genesis.

When did you hear the voice of God calling you beloved? How have you known God in the wilderness? How do you show and speak God’s love?

Noah heard the call of God and went through a terrifying experience of wilderness and, at the end of it, had a far deeper sense of God’s nearness and provision which, encapsulated in promise and rainbow, he has borne witness to over millennia. The conversation God has with him at the end is not only a restoration of something of the original Garden of Eden- it is also a rainbow promise into the future, for generations to come, of God’s provision and protection for those who are faithful. This God, the God of Noah and Sarah, of Mary and Ezekiel and Isaiah, is the God we meet through Mark’s Gospel and the God we meet in our Lenten pilgrimage as we step out into this little wilderness.

It doesn’t matter how you do Lent- it just matters that you do. Take up something extra in the life of the Church, whether that is Morning Prayer or Friday Stations of the Cross or the Meditation Group on a Tuesday. Join a discussion group or a Bible study. Read something. Build quiet time in your day. Give up cigarettes or caffeine, take up walking or swimming. Change the pace and the rhythm of life and make room for God because God is there, constantly, always, with you- if only we made the space and the silence to notice and to hear.

And in the space, in the silence, as the walls come down, as we step into this little wilderness, these three questions, taken from the baptism, wilderness and launch of Jesus’ ministry are a fine set of trig points…

When did you hear the voice of God calling you beloved? How have you known God in the wilderness? How do you show and speak God’s love?

Hear the voice of God calling you beloved.

Know God in the wilderness.

Show and speak of God’s love.

May we, this Lent, and always do all of this- and in doing these things, may we truly be a blessing to the world, open, generous and kind. Amen.