

A Meditation for the Wednesday Ember Day in Lent  
Delivered at St George's Round Church, Halifax, 2015  
BY BENJAMIN LEE

Today, Wednesday, together with Friday and Saturday of this week, make up the Lenten Ember Days. The Lenten Ember Days are in fact part of a fourfold cycle of Embertide seasons, so named after their Latin title in the ancient Church in Rome: *Quatuor Tempora* or "Four Seasons." The history of these days of penitential observance is very old indeed, and harks back, on the one hand, to the prescription to the Israelites by the prophet Zechariah of a fourfold fast to consecrate the year to God (Zech. 8:19); it also seems to hark back, on the other hand, to the early Church's tendency to co-opt pagan rites and festivals, in this case involving offerings to agricultural gods, and to convert them to Christian purposes. Thus from their origins the Ember Days are times of *seasonal prayer*, which coincide with and commemorate the start of the four natural seasons of the year: spring, summer, autumn, and winter. By so tying the liturgical year to the natural cycle of the year, the teaching of the Church reminds us that the salvation of God in Christ for the *human creature* cannot stand apart from his plan of salvation for the whole world that he has made, the *universal creation*: God's reconciliation is indeed cosmic, and ultimately includes the consecration of all nature.

But there is another chapter in the Church's history of the Ember Days. For it was another Roman custom, instituted by Pope Gelasius the 1<sup>st</sup> in 494, to use Ember Saturdays as the day for conferring Holy Orders. Thus ordinations would normally take place only after the community of the faithful would join together with the candidates, in prayer and fasting, for God's blessing on their vocation.

In placing the Springtime Ember Days immediately after the first Sunday in Lent, we may glimpse something of the practical wisdom of the Church's liturgical calendar: that is, we pray especially for vocations in the church—for "all those who are to be called to any office and administration [in God's church]" (BCP, 211)—immediately after we have heard the call, in the Gospel from the previous Sunday, to journey out into the wilderness, to fast and pray, and to confront our devils. There is a definite teaching implied in this ordering, and it is this: the discernment of vocation—the call of God upon one's life—is intimately tied to the discernment of spirits. The Gospel accounts place Jesus' temptation in the wilderness immediately before the beginning of his public ministry. For it is here in the wilderness, hungry, among the beasts, and tempted by the devil, that the character and purpose of his vocation is clarified. All discernment, fundamentally, is the discernment of vocation; it is pure perception, clarity of vision, of one's ordained place in the world according to God's purpose. All clarification of vision is a casting away of devils, the dispelling of those spirits which obscure and darken the mind. In this sense, clarification of vision, or purification of heart, must take place in the wilderness. And this applies to clergy, religious, and laity alike.

In the *Verba Seniorum*, the Sayings of the Fathers of the desert tradition, Abba Antony, also known as Saint Anthony the Great, is recorded thus: “Who sits in solitude and is quiet hath escaped from three wars: hearing, speaking, seeing: yet against one thing shall he continually battle: that is, his own heart.” In our Anglican tradition, we acknowledge this ongoing battle daily, each time we repeat the general confession at Morning and Evening Prayer: “We have erred and strayed from thy ways . . . We have followed too much the *devices and desires of our own hearts*” (BCP, 4, 19). This battle is the age-old battle, of which St Paul speaks, between the flesh and the Spirit.

We are not, of course, and needn't be, in a literal sense, desert dwelling ascetics, yet the Lenten season nevertheless sounds the call of God to his people to journey out into the wilderness, to practice a certain ascetic discipline. That wilderness is the barren wilderness of our hearts, when we struggle to become silent and wait upon God, when we strive to put busyness aside and strip away distractions. Thus are we called to follow Christ into the wilderness—there to confront our demons, to unmask the illusions that darken our minds, and the fantasies and self-deceptions of our hearts insinuated by the Prince of Lies.

The call to the wilderness is the leading by the Spirit of God to a renewed sense of vocation. It requires of us renunciation and purification. Let us pray, for ourselves and for all those called to be ministers of God's church, that we may so mortify the flesh as to live in the Spirit, that the desert of our souls may be changed into the paradise of God. Amen.+

bpl

In his meditation on Renunciation of Life, St John Climacus describes withdrawal from the world as “a willing hatred of all that is materially prized, a denial of nature for the sake of what is above nature.”