

Have you ever been disappointed by something that you so wanted to see or experience only to find it didn't quite live up to expectations? A dream trip that wasn't the delight you had imagined? The amazing meal which wasn't the culinary feast you had envisaged?

As children we receive toys we believe we absolutely have to have only to find the advert bore little resemblance to the reality – Mr Frostie springs to mind.

As teenagers we have to have the latest trainers – they will be the gateway to coolness and acceptance into the 'in crowd' – only to find the trend has moved on and the trainers are actually pretty uncomfortable.

Or what about the holidays to destinations described as sheer paradise and unspoilt, promising untold tropical birds and waking up to the aroma of jasmine and the sound of gentle waves lapping white sands – the reality is poky rooms and a bus ride to the nearest municipal beach.

This week's lectionary reading takes us to the banks of the river Jordan and it caused me to remember a trip to the Holy Land which included a promised, never to be repeated opportunity to walk in the footsteps of Jesus- right into the water. The baptism of Jesus is a well known and well loved story within the new testament. We all love the sky opening and imagining God's booming voice – it is always booming isn't it – saying this is my own Son with whom I am well pleased.

I don't know what I had expected but on arriving in an overcrowded car park along with dozens of other tourist buses I very quickly accepted this was not going to be the intimate reflective time I had hoped to experience.

Instead there were queues everywhere – queues to get into the changing rooms to don the white gowns required for entering the river. Queues which snaked round turnstiles as folk waited patiently for their turn to be dunked under water. Queues to get the obligatory photo to capture the event and queues to get out of the car park as more

coaches arrived to take our place. It was virtually impossible to find any place of quiet and solitude which would have allowed for prayer or pondering.

I was glad to get on that bus and leave without having dipped a toe in the water.

So the scene Mark sets before us for the baptism of Jesus is one I need to think about, immerse myself within, in order to erase the memories of a tourist attraction which held no poignancy or insight.

In Mark there is no evidence of great crowds – it is simply Jesus and John nor is there any discussion with John as to the wisdom of Jesus being baptised by him. Jesus is baptised and on coming up out of the water the heavens opened and the Spirit descends in the form of a dove.

In the Gospel according to Mark we see a direct link between the start of Jesus earthly ministry and the end as He died on the cross, a link we sometimes miss in the English translation. When Mark declares that heaven opened, he uses the same word in Greek to describe the tearing of the curtain in the temple when Jesus died. The curtain that separated the people from God's presence, in being torn, now signified the way to God was open to everyone.

In the heavens opening to anoint Jesus to his earthly ministry, the relationship with God was also now possible for everyone through His Son.

And between the opening at the start and the tearing at the end, Mark – the earliest Gospel writer sets out what lay between – Jesus ministry of healing, preaching, forgiving and teaching.

Now the Jewish people believed that all prophecy had finished with the last of the prophets – Malachi – but it would be restored at the end times. In effect, God had chosen to stop speaking directly to His people – no direct communication from heaven. So Mark emphasising that the

heavens opened and the Spirit descended is a brave and daring affirmation. Mark was stating – this was God choosing once more to speak directly to His people.

This was further emphasised by the comparisons which his listeners would have made with their spiritual history. Jesus was made to go into the wilderness by the Spirit just as the children of Israel were tested in the wilderness. They spent 40 years – Jesus spends 40 days and nights. Just as God's nation was created and taught, prepared and honed in the wilderness, so too God's own son would be tested, preparing him for all that lay ahead. No details are given as to the tests endured – for those we have to look to other Gospels – but Satan was involved and Jesus, ministered to by angels endured and defeated evil in that wilderness.

Stark, without embellishment, in a few short verses Mark launches Jesus into his ministry - a ministry beginning in the wilderness with scarcity and suffering, hunger and thirst, isolation and aloneness and a ministry that has been passed down to generation after generation since.

It's our turn now. But if we are honest we are fed up with this wilderness. The wilderness of the pandemic, the wilderness of uncertainty, the wilderness of pain and suffering and loss. The wilderness of boredom. The wilderness of despair. Surely we have been tested enough? Surely there can be no more lessons for us to learn? Surely we are not expected to go through another Lent with this enormous burden upon us?

When will this end? When will life return to normal? When will we be able to enjoy the things we took for granted? When, when, when?

If this was a children's story we would finish with and they all lived happily ever after but it isn't.

But before we get too disillusioned or despairing – let me remind you as I have to remind myself – this is a period of repentance which we are called to journey through every year. The wilderness is not unknown territory for any of us. We have already sojourned in our individual deserts before this time, enduring heartache and bereavement and disappointment and failure.

The difference this year is we are all in the same wilderness and it appears bigger and wilder and scarier than before. There is no easy way through the wilderness but there is an understanding companion who will minister to us if we allow it. There will be wild animals of frustration and anger and apathy and pain but they do not have to be fought alone.

Jesus survived the wilderness – he entered it knowing he was God's own Son, that He was loved and that he did not endure alone and when his time of testing was over He was ready to begin His ministry – able to touch lives and heal illnesses and restore relationships and provide dignity and worth by breaking societal norms and speaking out against injustice and bigotry, bringing hope and assurance that no-one, no-one no-one is ever outside God's love and forgiveness.

We will survive this wilderness time and we will do it by caring for one another, being gentle with one another, looking after one another. We will survive this wilderness time by reassessing priorities, taking little steps, putting one foot in front of the other. We will survive this wilderness time for we know the covenant of baptism, the new relationship with God. And we will survive this wilderness time, not because we God is waiting to embrace us as His beloved children at the end but because God is holding us through this wilderness time right now, holding us until we are strong enough to step out again, holding us in our darkest pandemic lockdown moments, saying you are my own children you are my beloved – the wilderness will not last forever.

