

The wilderness within

Most people's wilderness is inside them, not outside. Thinking of it as outside is generally a trick we play upon ourselves – a trick to hide from us what we really are, not comfortingly wicked, but incapable, for the time being, of establishing communion. Our wilderness, then, is an inner isolation. It's an absence of contact. It's a sense of being alone – boringly alone, or saddeningly alone, or terrifyingly alone.

Our isolation is really us – inwardly without sight or hearing or taste or touch. But it doesn't seem like that. Oh no. I ask myself what I am isolated from, and the answer looks agonizingly easy enough. I feel isolated from Betty whom I love desperately and who is just the sort of woman who never could love me. And so to feel love, I think, must be at the same time to feel rejection. Or I feel isolated from the social people who, if noise is the index of happiness, must be very happy indeed on Saturday evenings. Or I feel isolated from the competent people, the success-boys who manage to get themselves into print without getting themselves into court. Or I feel isolated, in some curious way, from my work. I find it dull and uninviting. It's meant – it used – to enliven me and wake me up. Now it deadens me and sends me to sleep.

Is it to go on always like now, just – tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow – a slow procession of dusty greyish events with a lot of forced laughter, committee laughter, cocktail laughter, and streaks of downright pain?

This then is our Lent, our going with Jesus into the wilderness to be tempted. And we might apply to it some words from the First Epistle of St Peter: 'Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal which comes upon you to prove you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice, in so far as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed.'

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