

Wilderness takes many forms. An autistic child finds peace in nature because it is as it is, with no judgements being made on the child by nature itself. Wilderness is the place that lovers go to to find solace in each other, again with no condemnation from the woods and meadows. It can be a place of healing as we measure our mood against the step in our tread – solvitur ambulando. It can be a place of meeting for those on the margins – where differences are dissolved by the removal from the accustomed taint and tread of human culture – a relief from urban conformity. But it can also be a place of danger, a place of trial, a venture away from the normal rhythms that sustain us in an almost automatic way, to the terrors of the unknown where each step now matters lest we become irretrievably lost. I remember that experience as a very urban child being taken on a double decker bus on a dockyard outing to the New Forest. It was all right on the bus, countryside through a window, in the safety of others, including dad, but once out there on the flat plain of Stoney Cross Airfield, now covered with bramble and gorse and the occasional tree, the sudden desire to explore turned into a circumnavigation of the parking area always keeping the tops of the buses in view for safety – we couldn't make head nor tail of the scenery otherwise with no straight lines to guide us. A personal reminiscence of being lost momentarily which you no doubt could echo and the signature of wilderness as a threat to be avoided if one can. But this is the wilderness God calls us out into if we are ever to change from our 'stuckness', from our delight in routine distractions, that impediment we all suffer from because of our 'safe' upbringing, culture or religious climate. Sometimes it happens suddenly, other times as now, the gradual accumulation of crises that threaten to overwhelm us – first our break with Europe, then Climate Change undoing anything normal in our weather, and then Covid and now war in Europe: Christian on Christian, White on White... one might also add in a Church rocked by clerical abuse. These sorts of things were not meant to happen in our orderly view of the steady progress towards fulfilment as human beings – whether secular or religious. Where is the Kingdom of God now? we might ask. The Kingdom is the same. It hasn't gone away, or rather its invitation to belong, hasn't gone away but has rather been sharpened, made clearer in these desolate times. There's something going on here, like the Devil's temptations, that needs attention, or rather needs us to pay attention to that deeper call that is God's invitation to us to be truly ourselves as human beings, exercising the virtues of truth, generosity and steadfastness - in short of love; because this is our true nature as children of God. It's a call then to risk losing ourselves in that unknown desert of Stoney Cross and finding ourselves at home in Christ.

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