

**February 18, 2018 The Wilderness Homily:** Brothers and sisters, the recent tragedy in South Florida, the senseless killing of seventeen innocent people, has provoked a spirited and occasionally caustic reaction from the pundits of the print and electronic media. So much of their commentary has zeroed in on the likely reasons for the catastrophic incident, such as the influence of social media, the decline of religion, outdated gun laws, the failure of law enforcement, moral relativism and the collapse of the nuclear family. Serious consideration ought to be given to all the above points. But let us remind ourselves that, as Christians, we are living in a harsh and dangerous environment, a place of testing of human weakness. In truth, we are living in the wilderness. Enduring life in the wilderness is a daily challenge. It is the realm of evil powers and of predatory beasts.

In 1922, a mere four years after the First World War, the American born English poet, T.S. Eliot, composed his famous poem, "The Wasteland", which is considered a classic by virtually all modern critics today. For the poet, World War I represented a precipitous decline in western civilization and the death of Christian culture. Bear in mind that the use of chemical weapons was introduced to warfare by supposedly Christian countries.

Jesus is driven into the wilderness and the camp of his adversary in today's gospel. (Mk. 1:12-15) His sojourn in the desert reminds us of the people of Israel, who, after leaving Egypt, wandered through the desert for forty years until they reached the Promised Land. Undoubtedly, Mark's account of Jesus' time in the wilderness was likely a consolation to Christians in their own wilderness in days of anguish and doubt.

Mark tells us that Jesus was in the company of wild beasts. (Mk. 1:13) For the early Christian community, who were under the thumb of the evil Roman emperor, Nero, they may have been reminded of the wild beasts in Roman arenas where Christians were being tested by the forces of evil and martyred for their faith.

But the Good News is that paradise was beginning to dawn in a most unlikely place. Why? It is simply because Jesus was obedient. He followed the Will of God without hesitation. Living in peace with the animals is linked with the recovery of paradise as found in the first book of the bible, Genesis, and the narrative of the creation and the fall of Adam and Eve. Recall the words of the prophet Isaiah, "And the wolf shall lie down with the lamb and the leopard with the kid". (Is.11:6-8) In many of the legends of St. Francis of Assisi, the great saint conversed with the wild animals and became friends with them.

Jesus was not untouched by the storms that so often make our life a misery. But in all our temptations and trials we are not alone. We walk in the wilderness with Our Lord. As St. Luke reminds us in the Acts of the Apostles, "Christians must endure many trials before entering the kingdom of God".

But even in the wasteland, there are signs of life. In the desert, the Chosen people encountered the Living God. The same is true of Christians as we make our way through the desert to the Promised Land of Heaven. We are on a journey to God. But to reach our destination, we must embrace the mystery of the cross. Our life does not end in the wilderness. As Jesus said to the good thief, "Today you will be with me in Paradise". (Lk.23:43)

Amen!