

The Lenten season is like a journey through the wilderness. It is an opportunity to see our lives in a different light, and from a different perspective. As we travel through this uninhabitable and unfriendly land, let us take a short break and ponder the reality of our life.

The reading from the book of Numbers we heard this morning is just one of the stories of how the children of Israel seemed to be living in an ever-repeating pattern of disobedience, punishment and repentance. And as the Israelites' story goes on in the books of Judges, Joshua, and indeed, all the history books in the bible, the pattern remains. Astonishing, isn't it. But if we stop and take a closer look, we shall see that this is more or less a snap shot of the human story. We too can often live a pattern of disobedience, punishment and repentance in a life of grace. Why is that? A dialogue between Lucy and Charlie Brown from the well-known Peanuts cartoon strip may shed some light on this:

One day, Lucy said to Charlie Brown, "Do you know what your biggest Problem is?" After a moment of thought, Charlie Brown said, "How would I know?" Lucy replied, "You know Charlie Brown, the problem with you is that you are you. YOU are your biggest problem!"

What a typically Lucy remark. Still, it is true that to some extent, the biggest problem of human existence is our humanness.

Similarly, the biggest problem of the Israelites was their humanness. The Lord promised to lead them to the Promised Land and was with them wherever they go, but He did not guarantee that their way would be without challenges. The people were complaining about the lack of familiar food they had back in Egypt. If we take a closer look, we can understand their grumbling. In the wilderness where there were no grains or fruits to gather, they had to depend entirely on God for their daily provision. Wearied by the journey, the people became discontented, despite the faithfulness of the Lord to provide for them day after day. With this lingering sense of insecurity, the people's memory of the past was romanticised, playing up the good bits while pushing aside the hardship. They spoke distrustfully against God and against Moses. And God was provoked.

True, it was God who wanted them to leave Egypt. It was God who wanted them to go and live in the Promised Land. But it did not mean that once they left Egypt, they were free to do whatever they want. It did not mean that there would only be rosy days ahead. After all, the journey between Egypt and Palestine only takes a few months' time on a forced march. Yet the Israelites spent 40 years to reach their destination. During all this time, the people were sustained by the grace of God. For them, the journey through the wilderness was an education process. As Rick Warren, the author of *The Purpose Driven Life* puts it, "transformation is a process, and as life happens there are tons of ups and downs. It's a journey of discovery – there are moments on mountaintops and moments in deep valleys of despair." Yet the process was made possible by God's grace.

Peter F. Drucker was one of the most important thought leaders in management. In his memoirs, *Adventures of a Bystander*, he recounted that one of the people who influenced him most deeply was his primary school teacher. This teacher noticed that Drucker did not write at all badly, although his penmanship left a lot to be desired. And so, teacher and pupil sat down to discuss the problem and worked out a plan of action. The boy stuck to the plan and practiced his penmanship

daily. A year later, his penmanship was greatly improved. This learning process had a profound impact on Drucker. Since then, he would sit down and plan out a solution whenever he faced any problem. He had learned to overcome his shortcomings and problems step by step. As Drucker's experience shows, it takes time to plan, overcome, and equip oneself.

With tears and laughter, through light and darkness, we live; we experience; we grow. And little by little, we become who and what we are. We might not be aware of it, but this process is made possible by God's grace.

It is the same with biblical figures. Abraham was over 100 years old, but God was still testing him by telling him to sacrifice Isaac, his son of promise. Moses was 40 when he went out to his people, and as a result he had to flee Egypt and become a shepherd in Midian. At 80, God called him to lead the Israelites out of the land of slavery. During the 40 years in the wilderness, God continued to test him, so that little by little, he would become God's servant whose life changed the life of a nation-to-be.

For the children of Israel who wandered in the wilderness, the inhospitable region was more than a training ground, but a place where the Israelites developed their wilderness-traditions. It is such traditions that led and are still leading the nation of Israel to learn to know their God, and to experience their God's love, righteousness and mercy. These are not something that can be learned from books, but must be acquired little by little through life's experiences.

Every one of us leads a different life. Yet in our different wilderness, God is testing us so that we may learn and grow. And as we wander in the wilderness in the Lenten season, we are to seek and to ponder how far we have come, where we are heading to, and how close is our relationship with God.

Let us pause for a moment to reflect on how well we know our God. From your experience, what is God to you? How is God supporting you as you explore the next stage of your life? If we just barge blindly forward, we could end up like the Israelites, pining for the good old days once we find ourselves in difficult situations. But what is wrong with romanticising about the past? Well, it could mean glorifying the bondage that bound us. In the case of the Israelites, it's their captivity. In the wilderness, they were no longer slaves, but a free people experiencing how it was to be God's chosen. But they longed to go back. They were lost in sin while experiencing God's grace. Come to think of it, this is exactly what most of us are doing. We might feel that if we were not so heavily committed to church activities, we could have managed our time much better. We might feel that if we were not bound by Christian values, we could have done much better at work. The thinking pattern of "If we were not...then we could have...." holds us back spiritually, making us forgetful about God's grace in our lives. As today's reading from Ephesians says, "For we are what He has made us", our whole life should have been in Him and shaped by Him. All bits and pieces of our life, no matter how small, are not coincidental, but happened because of our own choices. Whether we allow God to guide us in our choices, it is ultimately we ourselves who decide how to act. And in this process, our life is shaped.

The journey through the wilderness is not an easy stroll. God has not promised skies always blue and flower-strewn pathways all our lives through. Some might trip over small rocks. Others might have big rocks to climb. Yet God allows all these to happen, because He wants to mould us and shape us so that we could grow into the fullness of all He created us to be. God has not promised a smooth path, but He has sent His own Son to go before us. John tells us that "For God so loved the

world that He gave His only Son, so that everyone who believes in Him may not perish but may have eternal life.” Jesus’ journey on earth was anything but smooth. In a few weeks’ time, it will be Good Friday - a time of the darkest suffering. If even our God who goes before us walked a path of suffering and hardship, how could we expect our journey to be without difficulties and frustrations?

However, we are not without hope even in the darkest of night. Our God is merciful. In today’s readings, we heard that “just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up”. Even when our life hit rock bottom, if we look to the mercy of our God just like the Israelites looked at the serpent Moses lifted up, we know that we will be saved and our strength will be renewed. God’s grace is our hope. Knowing that God in His grace and mercy is going to give us the strength for whatever we face, we have the hope and courage to face every day.

US evangelist Billy Graham passed on last month. He used to say, “My home is in heaven. I am just travelling through this world.” Indeed, Life is but a journey. A journey through the wilderness - an uninhabitable place with big rocks to climb and little rocks to stumble over, and milestones to mark the grace and surpassing peace of God which guard us in Christ Jesus all the way through.

May God be our guide and companion, so that in our journey of life, even as we step into unknown places, follow unmarked paths, and face uncertain dangers, we can be assured that we are stepping out with Him. Amen.