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In the last four years, I have got lots of great memories in this parish. Conducting a baptism service is one of those memorable things. During my 4 years I have baptised 10 children and 1 adult in this placement. I baptised Tyson Reidy, then a 6-month-old boy, in June 2015, which was my first baptism in this parish as well as in my whole ministry. Shona and David, Tyson’s parents, heard of this and gave me a baptism picture as a special gift. It is still hung in the vestry.

Helen Baum’s baptism service was also memorable. Through preparing together for the baptism with Helen, I had thought a lot about being baptised and baptising someone as a minister. She was baptised in the morning of an Easter Sunday, which was a great symbol of Jesus’ death and resurrection.

In Christianity, baptism has been valued as a faithful act declaring that our old life is dead and a new life in Jesus Christ will begin by being immersed in the water and emerging out of it. Being immersed in the water and coming out of it means being cleansed and restored. This Christian tradition started from Jesus Christ our Lord.

According to Luke 3, today’s Gospel reading, Jesus was baptised by John the Baptist. Today is the first Sunday of the Epiphany focusing on and celebrating the baptism of Jesus. While reading the story of Jesus’ baptism, a question comes to our mind: ‘Why was Jesus baptised?’ He was the Son of God who had no sin; then, why did he come and have John the Baptist baptise him?

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We can find a clue in Luke 3:22; it says, “The Holy Spirit, in bodily form, descended on him like a dove. And a voice from heaven said, “You are my dearly loved Son, and you bring me great joy.”

From this passage, we can see that Jesus’ baptism was directly connected to the Holy Spirit. Yes, Jesus received the Holy Spirit through the event of baptism. As I said last Sunday, the Eastern Church has considered the baptism of Jesus as the first revelation of the divinity of Jesus to the world.

Here another question arises; if Jesus’ baptism is related to receiving the Holy Spirit, wasn’t he full of the divine Spirit before? Perhaps not. Since he was born

as the Son of God, he would have been deeply associated with the Holy Spirit from the beginning. Then, why was he baptised? Why did God send to Jesus the Holy Spirit as a bodily form on that occasion? I think that the Triune God wanted to reveal clearly that the baptism isn't only about water but also about the Holy Spirit.

More accurately speaking, the baptism of water is for receiving the divine Spirit; being baptised with water is like preparing our heart and mind to be ready for accepting the Holy Spirit, which is a starting point for beginning a new life realising God's will and His plan for us. In this Christian journey, the role of the Holy Spirit is indispensable.

Seeing what had happened to Jesus after being baptised, we can see the role of the Spirit more clearly. After the baptism, Jesus went to the wilderness, where he was tempted by Satan and overcame it. The temptation in the wilderness was a critical time for Jesus' ministry. Jesus reconfirmed his divine identity and mission for saving the world through the forty days' fasting and temptation.

What we shouldn't miss here is that the Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness after the event of the Baptism. Luke 4:1-2 records the situation like this: “Then Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan River. He was led by the Spirit in the wilderness where he was tempted by the devil for forty days. Jesus ate nothing in all that time and became very hungry.” At this point, the third question comes out: ‘Why the wilderness? Why did the Spirit guide Jesus into the wilderness?’

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About 20 years ago when I visited Egypt our team moved to Israel from Egypt after finishing our schedule in that country. We went to Israel by riding a bus through the wilderness called Wilderness of Zin. It's my first experience in the wilderness. If I select a word describing the desolate area, it would be *barrenness*; the land was lifeless and unproductive. There was a lack of water, extremely hard to find trees and flowers, let alone fruits and crops, and it looked so difficult for human beings as well as animals to live there.

Thus, traditionally the wilderness has been depicted as a symbol of death, pain, loneliness or hardship. Yes, the wilderness is the place of suffering. The Bible

also describes the place like that. However, the biblical meaning of the wilderness is something worth our attention.

In the Bible, there are many narratives regarding the wilderness. One of the representative stories is the event of Exodus. The Israelites escaping from Egypt had lived in the wilderness for 40 years. It would have taken at most less than a year for the Israelites to arrive in the new land, even considering the day's transportation, the huge number of Israelite people walking toward Canaan, and military threats from the Canaanites on the way.

But they had to stay there for 40 years until all the people who had escaped from Egypt died in the wilderness except for Joshua and Caleb. That is, except for those two persons everyone who had entered Canaan was born in the barren land. Then, what had happened to the Israelite people there?

They had learnt who God was and who they were there. The wilderness was a place of hunger, thirst, danger, and death to them, but at the same time, it was a space for them to meet their God and learn who they were through experiencing God's grace and mercy amidst sufferings and difficulties. Whenever suffering from hunger and thirst, they were supplied with foods and water by God; when they met dangerous situations, they were protected with the divine power.

Likewise, the wilderness in the Bible has a double meaning. It means a place of death, but it also means a place of life; it signifies suffering, but suffering there can be a channel of grace; we can be lost or alienated there, but can encounter God existentially at the place of loneliness and hopelessness.

Therefore if we want to meet God deeply we need to go out to the wilderness. For hardships can prepare us to be humble and ready to meet and accept God. This is the reason the Holy Spirit leads us into the wilderness in our life from time to time as he did to Jesus. Indeed, the Spirit drives us from our comfort zone; unexpected or sudden hardships afflict us and make us suffer and cry as the Israelites experienced in the wilderness.

However, we should remember the purpose of those difficulties that God allows is to make us realise again who our God is, our identity as a people of God and our particular missions in life. Furthermore, we need to remember that when the Spirit leads us into a place of wilderness, he also provides us with the power and wisdom to overcome those sufferings without big problems. Jesus was also

given the divine power from the Spirit when he was faced with Satan’s temptation for forty days, through which he became stronger and ready to complete his mission on earth.

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Sisters and brothers,

Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, the author of Little Prince, said, “What makes the desert beautiful is that somewhere it hides a well.” We Christians can say, ‘What makes the wilderness, the place of suffering in our life, beautiful, is that God’s grace is waiting for us somewhere.’ Amen.