Lent can seem a hard slog, a dismal forty days, grimly trying to remember and keep to the giving up; is this the year of alcohol or chocolate or whatever, trying to remember and keep up the extra ascetical prayers taken on in already busy, hectic and pressing lives. Still we have good examples before us: God bade Noah to flee a wicked, rotten, rotting world, grown old in sin and to ride forty days, a tiny remnant, upon the waters of the deadly flood. Jesus is ‘driven out’, Mark’s phrase, by the Holy Spirit into the wilderness, into that wilderness we have made of the paradise garden of the world he gave us and he is there for us, forty days, tempted by Satan, a grim hard battle against a wily, malevolent, implacable enemy. It seems we have every reason to think our Lent a hard slog. We may know only too well just what a wilderness we have made, we see it maybe in our lives, we certainly know of it in the wilderness world around us.

And yet outside it is spring, early signs yet, but there to comfort, sustain, make the perseverance lighter. In the first reading the dark and cold rain waters of the flood meet the sunlight and the resulting rainbow is a sign of a covenant beyond the devastation and wilderness of sin between God and man. In the psalm we heard, ‘The Lord is good and upright. He shows the path to those who stray.’ There is a path for us from our sin, a way through the wilderness. In the second reading from St Peter, the water of the flood, is a sign of the cleansing and healing water of baptism. In the Gospel Jesus endures and triumphs in the wilderness. He emerges from it to proclaim the Good News that the time has come, the kingdom of God is close at hand. Perhaps most striking of all, but so brief, quickly passed by, and easily missed, was the short phrase from the opening prayer of the Mass, which prayed that through the yearly observances of holy Lent, we may grow in understanding of the riches hidden in Christ and by worthy conduct pursue their effects.

The riches hidden in Christ. I have benefited greatly from and am most grateful for these two terms spent in St Benet’s, now coming to a close. Among my occupations has been catching up, well just a little, on neglected reading on the writings of some of the early monastic fathers. I am struck that this phrase ‘the
riches hidden in Christ’ was something of which those monks and nuns of the 9th to 12th centuries, meditating on the words of Scripture and contemplating the mysteries therein, saw below the surface and appearances of things. Our fallen condition necessarily makes of this meditation and contemplation of the riches hidden in Christ, something of a hard labour, but it leads us to a joy.

God creates for us a garden, a paradise, of beauty and delight. We take it and in tragedy we make of it a wilderness. Christ comes to us, he comes into our wilderness, and he faces there what we face. He faces it in the wilderness of temptation and then again, yet more poignantly in the garden of Gethsemane, entering into the full anguish of what we can do and have done. But hidden in this is a transforming power, to make of the wilderness a garden again, the garden of the resurrection. As St Augustine liked to say, Mary Magdalen was right, Jesus is the gardener, transforming the wilderness back into a paradise.

So we labour on, but sustained by a joy, a joy in our prayer, a joy in the giving up of self, a joy in love shown to others. This journey of prayer, fasting and loves takes us from our wilderness to the garden that Christ longs to make for us, a journey though hard yet nourished and sustained by the traveller’s food, the manna in the wilderness, Christ himself.