

First Sunday of Lent, Year B

Genesis 9: 8-17

1 Peter 3:18-22

Mark 1:9-15

In our gospel reading today, we have Mark using a typical economy of words to convey three events at the start of Jesus's ministry. There are three verses on his baptism in the Jordan, two on his temptation in the wilderness and two on his proclamation of the good news of God in Galilee.

Now today is the first Sunday of Lent, a Sunday when we consider Jesus's temptation in the wilderness. But Mark gives us only two verses to work with! He doesn't give us the detail concerning the temptations that Matthew and Luke do, so I think we must resist the temptation, if I may say so, of going there. Even so, in his characteristically brief style Mark gives us several snippets of information.

First: the temptation occurs immediately after Jesus's baptism and his endorsement by the Father. Second, it is Holy Spirit who sends him into the wilderness; it is not a random act on Jesus's part. And then Jesus spends forty days in the wilderness being tempted by Satan.

Mark tells us that Jesus was attended by angels, just as Matthew does, but only Mark writes He was with the wild animals. Which is fascinating. I've even read a suggestion that maybe they snuggled up to Jesus at night and kept him warm! We'll come back to the wild animals in a moment.

First, I want us to imagine that we are in a similar situation to Jesus at his baptism. Say, an occasion where we know that we are being commissioned by God for important ministry ahead. And, just like Jesus, we see, perhaps with our mind's eye, the heavens torn open and the Spirit descending on us. Like Jesus we sense that the Father is saying You are my beloved, I love you and am well pleased with you.

Think about it. We're commissioned! What will we do? I think we would say to ourselves: Great! Now that I have the power of the Spirit and the blessing of the Father I will go out into the community and proclaim the Good News of the kingdom of God.

But, of course, that's not what Jesus did. He was far more responsive to Holy Spirit than we are. Even though he was empowered by the Spirit for ministry he didn't rush into it. He didn't ignore the Spirit's leading and skip the wilderness. Instead, he responded positively to Holy Spirit and went away into the wilderness.

Before Jesus can minister effectively, he needs to face up to, and overcome, the stumbling blocks that could otherwise trip him up and destroy his ministry.

Matthew and Luke give us indications of what these stumbling blocks might be. Mark merely says He was with the wild animals. Now I Wonder if this is this Mark's euphemism for temptations. Is Mark saying that the temptations that Jesus faced were like wild animals that could tear him apart or grievously wound him in a way that would seriously detract from his ministry? I think possibly he is.

Now in his gospel Mark is fond of sandwiches and quite possibly we shall come across some of them as we go through Mark during this Lectionary Year. Our verses today are not a typical Markian sandwich as are some of the other sandwiches. Nevertheless, these three accounts are linked together.

The bread of the sandwich, as it were, is the inbreaking of the kingdom of God. In verse ten we read that the heavens are torn open, and the Spirit comes down. And in verse 15 Jesus is preaching that the kingdom of God has come near or is at hand. Heavens opened – the kingdom at hand. The bread of the sandwich is the closeness, the imminence, of the kingdom of God.

But two slices of bread do not make a sandwich. There has to be a filling inside. And so it is here. It is the wilderness experience. The temptation in the wilderness is an essential pre-requisite to the preaching of the closeness of the kingdom of God. Jesus has to face up to temptation so that his message is unhindered, unhampered by those things that could come from within himself to trip him up – pride, self-doubt, a desire for recognition maybe. Jesus has to face them and defeat them.

Earlier I asked us to imagine a scenario where we are being commissioned by God for an important ministry. But, of course, we already are, by Jesus, at the end of Matthew (Matthew 28:19). Go... and make disciples of all nations. We're not very good at it, are we? Even though the 'nation' for us might be our immediate community, our next-door neighbours or even sat around our dining room table.

And maybe, just maybe, this is because we haven't faced up to and addressed the wild animals that we face that stop us from being responsive to Holy Spirit. That interfere with our relationship with God. Things like fear, anxiety, a sense of inadequacy, broken relationships, regrets, even doubting God. This can be individual but also communal, us together.

So, may I suggest that, as part of our Lent devotions, one of the things we give up our is collusion with any wild animals in our lives of which we are aware?

We have an opportunity now, if you are willing, to make as start on addressing the wild animals that we face individually. To pray, individually and privately, about the stumbling stones or wild animals we face in our lives. And to consider not just the wild animals that hinder our relationship with God and our responsiveness to Holy Spirit but also those that hamper our ministry.

To help us I have here a tub of stones. Not the nice wool wrapped ones that we use sometimes for prayer but hard angular stones from a riverbed. They have been smoothed a bit by the passage of time, but they are still hard stones. And this morning they represent the wild animals. And I also have some tubs, labelled things fear, anxiety, distractions, inadequacy and feeling unloved which I will distribute around the church.

And what I would like us to do, if you are willing, is for each of us to take six (or more!) stones and go round the church visiting each of the tubs. Take a moment to consider what fear or anxiety, for example, might be a stumbling stone or wild animal in your life, pray quietly about it, hand it over to God and then leave one of your stones in the tub. And take out one of the slips of paper inside in exchange for the stone.

If you come across a tub labelled something - 'fear' for example – that doesn't apply to you then thank God, maybe pray about a different wild animal, and still put in your stone and take out a paper slip with a relevant bible verse on it. When you have done that, you should be left with slips of paper in five different colours, and one stone. The one stone represents a prayer burden you have for a world situation, another person and so forth that you want to pray this morning. These will form our intercessions. If you have more than one burden about which you would like to pray, please come and take another stone. After we have prayed our prayers we will place our stones in the basket on the communion table as an act of dedication of our prayers to God. And in our prayers let us include thanking God that in Jesus we can have the power and confidence to overcome the wild animals.

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