

Sermon for the First Sunday in Lent, 21st February 2021

Reading: Mark, Chapter 1:9-15.

Jesus is baptised, and immediately goes into the wilderness

I love the version of Jesus' baptism and time in the wilderness as Mark tells it.

Matthew and Luke are story-tellers. They go into the detail. They tell us how Jesus ate nothing and was famished and how the devil came and tempted him - they give us the whole dialogue between Jesus and Satan - and how at the end, the angels came and ministered to him. Matthew and Luke weave the tale and draw us in - we can imagine Jesus there, and enter into the drama.

Mark's drama is of an entirely different order. The start of his gospel rattles along at a cracking pace. He draws us in by the sheer energy of his story. The words of the first three chapters tumble over themselves in their haste to let us know what is happening as Jesus bursts upon the stage from Galilee: and just as... immediately ... as soon as... at once... let us go on... Mark leaps from one action to the next with barely a pause for breath - you can count as many as 35 different actions in these opening chapters - and Mark doesn't stop to draw breath until chapter four, where finally Jesus pauses, sits down beside the lake of Galilee, and begins to teach. Phew!

You could almost be forgiven by passing over the baptism and 40 days in the wilderness, and missing them altogether - they only take up six verses. But Mark puts these events right here, in chapter one: they are the foundation of all that is to follow, because Mark makes the point of telling us that The Voice - God's voice - resounds out, telling us firmly that this is God's Son, and all that follows thereafter echoes this voice - this truth - this fantastic statement. Listen up, people, this is the story of God's Son.

All three gospels link Jesus' baptism with Jesus' time in the wilderness. It's like last week's gospel: remember Bishop David's sermon on the Transfiguration? After the hype and the glory of dazzling brightness, and the voice from heaven, Jesus comes down off the mountain and gets stuck into the nitty gritty of real life. In that narrative, the nitty gritty is the healing of a young boy of his seizures. In this narrative, the nitty gritty is the attempt to seize Jesus' own soul and cut his ministry off before it has even begun. These things tend to go together, in God's wise economy. The glory God's voice, reassuring us that Jesus is the One who is sent, and all will be well, hand in hand with trouble, strife, and testing. As God knows, as Jesus knows, and as you and I know, these things do not cancel each other out. You can't have one without the other.

Mark's version demonstrates this truth in a different way to Matthew and Luke. Remember I said that the other two Gospellers tell us a story in great detail? Both seem to imply that Satan waits and bides his time and chooses his moment. Jesus fasts, alone, for 40 days. And then, almost as if Jesus is worn out and hallucinating from famine, only then does Satan show up, and dangle before Jesus the possibility of rescue from his fasting. And only after Jesus has stood the test does Matthew relate that the angels came - almost as a soothing reward.



Here's a profound version of the story painted by James Tissot. Jesus has taken refuge in a cave. He is wrestling with his own mortality and human weakness and death. And Satan comes, not as a false angel, but as a false beggar - one who shares Jesus' craving for bread. Yes, this is what we want, isn't it? And I have it and will share it with you. This is false bread - and were Jesus to take it, a false resurrection would accompany it. Jesus must wait, bide his time, and the true

resurrection will be his.

It can be tempting to view life like that. God promises that all will be well. And then hard times fall on us. And you and I have to stand the test - have to prove that we have enough faith - have to stand strong. And only after we have proved we are good enough will God reward us. It's a tough road of faith to follow. And the question, hovering just outside the periphery of our vision, is that if we don't stand the test, what then? Will the angels will be withheld, along with God's blessing? This may sound familiar to you, as a Christian worldview.

But Mark, you will be pleased to hear, will have none of it! In his version - fast-paced as it is - the elements of the 40 days don't happen in sequence: first this, then this, then, if all goes well, this. Mark's language is different; his Greek grammar as he tells this story is different. Mark is clear: the 40 days, the isolation, the fasting, the tempting, the soothing all take place at the same time. The arrival of the angels is not dependant on Jesus withstanding the test.



Here is a unique vision of Jesus being ministered to by the angels. Most traditional artists show Satan as a dark angel on one side and God's angels in white on the other - like a tug of war. James Tissot imagines it almost as a dream. Jesus is surrounded by angels each shining a light as if they are a star, and their touch heals and soothes.

My friends, this is of the utmost importance for you and I, and for our journey through the wildernesses and wastelands and isolation of this (Covid) age. We are in the Year of Mark, and Mark has been gifted to us as our guide on this first Sunday in Lent. Mark would have us know that in the midst of our hardships and distresses and utter exhaustion, God does not sit back and wait to see how well we fare, before sending us help. We need God's help - God's angels - precisely because we are weary and alone and fear that we cannot last the distance.

There are two sides to the coin. Baptism and Wilderness. Glory and the nitty-gritty. Suffering and comfort. Testing and reassurance.

Traditionally, Lent is a time for us to fast and pray alongside Jesus. We might give up meat or chocolate or some everyday luxury, and pray for the strength to last the distance. I have never been any good at that. The theory is that, for a time, we pay more attention to our internal life than to our external life. Easter Day then dawns with external relief and rejoicing, as well as spiritual relief and rejoicing, and the angels rejoice with us. The two are sequential, they follow with the turning of the seasons.

This year, I invite you to view Lent through Mark's eyes. For Jesus, the fasting and the temptation and the comfort of the angels happened simultaneously. He gave up companionship and a secure food supply, and he took on reliance on God and the companionship of the angels. These two - giving-up and taking-on, are two sides to the coin.

It's become a new Christian tradition that we intentionally take on something for Lent, rather than fasting. Never mind giving up chocolate or meat: take on an act of kindness each day, or sharing of our comparative wealth with those who are in need. I think Mark would approve of that. But I also think he would take us one step further. When I choose to give something up, what have I, unintentionally maybe, taken on? What internal gift or opportunity is mine, because I have given something up? What spiritual gift has been given to me? Reliance on God? Discernment of what is true and what is false? Awareness of God's goodness?

My friends, may this Lent be a time of richness and renewal, as you discover afresh the goodness and faithfulness of God, our companion and our help, when we need it most.

Jacky Sewell