

Message for Sunday, 18th February, 2018 - First Sunday in Lent

(Genesis 9:8-17, Ps 25:1-10, 1 Peter 3:18-22, Mark 1:9-15)

The Gospel reading today is a relatively small portion of scripture which covers quite a lot of territory and we hear Mark touch upon Jesus' baptism, his temptation in the wilderness and the beginning of Jesus' public ministry.

In Mark's modest way, we hear in a few short verses 'how Jesus came from obscurity, was baptised by John, spent time alone with God in the wilderness, and when John is arrested and his ministry over, Jesus emerges to begin his own ministry' (1).

Theologian William Loader writes that the beginning verses concerning Jesus baptism (1:9-11), are 'very like the transfiguration story. They are symbolic narrative, much like a movie clip which gives us a taste of the whole film. Here is a meeting point of heaven and earth, a deliberate ripping aside of the barrier on the part of God. Jesus is the point of intersection... the coming one has arrived and the camera shows the Spirit descending on him. Baptising in the Spirit can begin.' He goes on to make the point that 'Jesus, seemingly one of us, is the promised one, the messiah and it is with him that God's covenant will be fulfilled. There is no bypassing humanity.'

Immediately following his baptism, according to Mark's Gospel, Jesus spent time in the wilderness and these two events are linked. The Spirit who descended upon Jesus is the one who drives him into the wilderness where Jesus is tested by Satan.

In Hebrew, the word "Satan" originally meant 'obstacle' and, by the time the New Testament was written, it meant 'adversary' (3). To the Jewish people of the time Satan came to mean 'an evil power that stands opposed to God' (5). Jesus' time in the wilderness can be seen as both preparation for his public ministry and a struggle with evil from which he emerges victorious. We are told that Jesus spent 40 days in the wilderness and this is a connection to the Jewish nation which was important to the readers of Mark's gospel.

The reading we heard this morning from Genesis speaks of the covenant that God made with the Jewish people. We know that in the Noah's Ark story, it rained for 40 days and 40 nights. We also know the Exodus story when Israel passed through the waters of the sea and set out for the wilderness, and here they stayed for forty years.

As well as the numerical symbolism which is at play here, Mark provides an overriding sense of the desert as a place of danger and awe. We can understand the 'beasts' in the wilderness as allies of Satan, whose role was to terrify Jesus, or they can stand as a symbol of the harmony with nature that Jesus' salvation will ultimately bring (3). The text can be understood either way and perhaps this is what was intended - the wilderness or desert is a primitive place of wild forces, but it can also be a place of hope and new beginnings.

Jesus' struggle with Satan is obvious but there are also the ideas of simplicity and trust that are suggested. Jesus is ministered to by the angels. Mark's Gospel says nothing about fasting; rather it is more about being at one with nature, of trust that God's angels will protect and provide. This deliberate step into radical simplicity is a model for spiritual discipline and certainly a timely focus for Lent.

In his writing "In the Heart of the Desert" John Chryssavagis tells us 'the way of the desert teaches us how to pray: how to stand before God, how to speak to God and above all how to keep silent before God. It reminds us that God is born in barrenness, where there is an absence of pride, of masks, of illusions and of false images.'

Paradoxically, God fulfils in emptiness. God appears when we are not too filled with other attachments and distractions, when we are not too full of ourselves."

Mark's writing about Jesus time in the wilderness is short (much shorter than the gospels of Matthew and Luke) and with that brevity we might feel a sense of anticipation about what is coming next. It's probably fair to say that the reader is intended to respond with a sense of fear or dread when Mark tells us that Jesus "was with the wild beasts,". Indeed, alone in the wilderness with wild beasts would be for most of us a fearful thing.

Now moments and periods of fear are part of the human condition. We have real things to fear, and we are also afraid of other things that we know will do us no real harm - but scare us anyway.

'Fear is a powerful and primitive human emotion. It alerts us to the presence of danger and was critical in keeping our ancestors alive. These days psychologists tell us that 'Fear can actually be divided into two stages, biochemical and emotional. The biochemical response is universal, while the emotional response is highly individualized. When we confront a perceived danger, our bodies respond in certain ways. Physical reactions to fear include sweating, increased heart rate and high adrenaline levels. This physical response is the body preparing itself to either enter combat or run away. This biochemical reaction is likely an evolutionary development and is an automatic response, crucial to survival.'

'The emotional response to fear is highly personalized. Some people thrive on fear-inducing thrill situations. Others have a negative reaction to the feeling of fear, avoiding it at all costs. (4)

But, we will all experience times when we are afraid of something. During our lives there are many negative things that can come our way and, to stay with our gospel reading for today, these times can lead us into our own wilderness – alone with our beasts. What might our 'beasts' be? – things such as illness, death of a loved one, addiction, unemployment, disability, breakdown of relationships, an overwhelming sense of loneliness or lack of self-worth. Are they good or are they bad? (3)

These things can diminish us and turn us in on ourselves.....and so we would in all likelihood say they are bad. At times though, if we are open to the spirit of God, grace can work through these experiences, opening us up more fully to the love of God (and others), and in that light, we are able to understand that good can come from them.

Lent is a time when we can, perhaps with greater intent, make room for the Spirit; entering into our wildernesses to meet our own 'beasts'. This is something that can take some courage. There is only one thing we can be certain of, we are not alone. Jesus has paved the way for us and we can come to know God's presence more fully. How will our beasts be tamed? There is no easy answer to this but being prepared to trust is a great place to start.

In a contemporary reading of today's Psalm 25, Nan Merrill puts the psalmist's lament in these words –

*To You O Love I lift up my soul
O Heart within my heart
In you I place my trust,
Let me not feel unworthy;
Let not fear rule over me.*

In God's grace it is possible. Sometimes we just need to stand aside and allow God in.

Thomas Merton, in *Seasons of Celebration*, wrote that the purpose of Lent, above all 'is a preparation to rejoice in God's love. And this preparation consists in receiving the gift of God's mercy – a gift which we receive insofar as we open our hearts to it, casting out what cannot remain in the same room with mercy. One of the things we must cast out first of all is fear. Fear narrows the little entrance of our heart. It shrinks our capacity to love. It freezes up our power to give of ourselves.'

In Jesus' time in the wilderness Mark tells us that he was "tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him." Jesus faced his temptations and his fears, and God was looking out for him. It doesn't say he wasn't afraid. We simply don't know. But we do know that he had received the Holy Spirit in his baptism and he was not alone.

If we understand that "angel" means "messenger," then when we are fearful and uncertain, we each have the option of looking for the grace of God – of experiencing the presence of God – the peace, stillness, strength, hope, courage and love of God.

This Lenten season is a perfect time for us to remember– both our own desert experiences and those of others, whether those times are recent or long past. We have the opportunity to reflect on our fears and our future, our vulnerabilities and our spiritual longings.

From time to time we probably all think that it would be wonderful if we were never afraid. But we also know that facing our fears helps us grow into people who have lived, been challenged and strengthened precisely because of a wilderness experience.

John Newton was a man who knew something about fear and the grace of God. Newton was a slave trader who, in a terrible storm, prayed to God to be saved. Newton survived the storm and this changed his life. He devoted his life to God, to supporting the abolition of the slave trade and is well known as the man who wrote the hymn 'Amazing Grace'. Newton is quoted as writing: *How sweet the name of Jesus sounds, In a believer's ear! It soothes his sorrows, heals his wounds, And drives away his fear.*

To go forward, to grow in spirit, to journey more completely with God, we all need to find our desert places and this is not just something for Lent – though Lent gives us an opportunity to begin. Sometimes the struggle and the fear of the struggle can be overwhelming but in God's grace, Newton's words will echo in our hearts and minds.

Let us pray -

When we find ourselves in the midst of the wild beasts of our fears, may we also discover that the angels are our companions. May we each be assured that God journeys alongside us. May the messages from God give us strength to not only face our fears but allow us to grow in grace, truth and love. May we be empowered to live as Jesus has taught us, loving others as God loves us. Amen

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