

## **Sermon for Lent 1**

### **Mark 1.9-15**

We begin our Sundays in Lent this year with St Mark. On a small canvas with only a few brushstrokes, Mark shows Jesus being baptised in the river Jordan, and then being driven by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by Satan.

In the mind's eye we can see the sharp contrasts. In the background are the rushing waters of the Jordan, life returning to the land at the end of the wet season. It is an icon of Creation, a reminder of the Flood, the stuff of baptism.

There is a crowd of repentant sinners who have come out from the towns and villages, away from business as usual, to be cleansed by John the Baptist in anticipation of Messiah's coming. There is Jesus, Emmanuel, God-with-us, the one person in the crowd who does not need to repent but who chooses to stand with the repentant. He is making his first public appearance -- as indeed he will make his last, on the Cross in faithful solidarity with the People of God in all their sin. There is the voice of God, exuberant with uncontainable delight at the action of his Son and there is the small dove, the gentle touch of the life-giving Spirit.

Mark does not say all this, of course. Unlike Luke and Matthew, Mark is a man of few words. Yet the background of his picture is thick with allusions and references, signalling life and hope.

But the mind's eye moves on, immediately, as Mark himself says, to the foreground of this picture where the Spirit drove Jesus into the wilderness. The gracious little dove has gone, replaced by the driving Spirit, like the wind that Ezekiel heard in his vision of the Valley of Dry Bones, like the rushing wind we shall hear again at Pentecost. It is the wind of the great Judean desert. The crowds have gone; there is no water here. Jesus is on his own, among wind-carved rocks, in the blazing heat of desert days, in the star-filled cold nights.

The wilderness of Judea was not a place where anyone went voluntarily, and certainly never alone. It was a place of danger and destruction, and if one had to go into the trackless sands it was in order to get from A to B as fast as possible, with food and water, in caravans of company. But here is Jesus, alone, with only the wild animals for company, and angels who need neither food nor drink.

Mark does not say all this, either. And yet the foreground of this picture is also rich with allusions. Jesus is in this inhuman place for forty days, says Mark, and the mind's eye sees the Exodus people of God in their forty-year journey across other deserts, through other wildernesses. Jesus is here resisting temptation, resisting Satan. Mark gives us no details of this deliberate encounter.

So this is our context for Lent in the year 2021. The picture surely calls us into a Lent that wants something beyond the quiet, personal pieties of giving up chocolates, or whatever it is that you and I decide to do when we see Ash Wednesday loom up on the calendar.

Mark calls us on a pilgrimage. Of course, we might expect that. The Bible invites us again and again to travel, to explore, to go somewhere. Richard R. Neibuhr provides this elegant description:

“Christians are persons in motion—passing through territories not their own—seeking something we might call completion, or perhaps the word clarity will do as well, a goal to which only the spirit’s compass points the way.”

In the Bible we are given many images of this. In Genesis we are reminded of God taking daily walks in his exquisite garden—what an image that is—our strolling God, taking in the wonder and joy of his creation. There is the story of Enoch and the wonderful phrase, "Enoch walked with God, and he was no more, for God took him." Enoch was going somewhere with God.

Or the story of Abraham who was called to "set out for a place... not knowing where he was going." Or the story of Moses confronted by the sending God who called him to lead the people of Israel of Egypt. And of course that is a journey like no other wandering in the wilderness forty years—but it is the journey to a Promised Land.

Sometimes we seem to forget that the first name given to this group of people later called Christians was People of the Way. Is it any wonder? When Jesus called those standing at the boats by the sea, and at the tax collector’s table, what was it he said? "Follow me..." Those simple words capture the essence of what it means to be a Christian. We are disciples—followers of Jesus of Nazareth.

The Gospel of Mark, especially Mark, pictures those followers again and again as people who do not get it when it comes to the teaching of Jesus. They can’t figure out those parables. They miss the messianic quality of Jesus. They are again and again slow to understand what Jesus is saying. But one thing they did.

They followed. In the midst of confusion, they followed. When they missed the meaning, they followed. When they couldn’t understand why Jesus was so determined to make his way to Jerusalem, they followed. They did not always know the words, but they knew the Way.

There is always a beginning point in any journey. Mark gives it to us. The sign of that beginning point in the life of Jesus and for followers of Jesus is baptism. I confess to you today, that I have no complete answer why this act of being plunged beneath the waters is so important as a symbol of identification with Jesus. It is a simple act of simple obedience—and in the midst of that simplicity something deep and mysterious and unfathomable happens that we never fully grasp or understand but is nonetheless true and continues in us from that moment on. That is the heart of a pilgrim on a journey into life. One writer puts it this way:

"He crowds upon us from Sheol to sea; he jostles our thoughts along the pathways... He hides in the bushes, jumping out in flames to startle us into seeing. He sequesters himself in stables and swaddling so as to take us unawares. He veils himself in flesh, the same flesh that drips into fingers at the end of my arms and sprouts into hair on my head." (Owens, *And the Trees*, 141-42).

So we begin the journey, this pilgrimage, not to a place, but to a person. Not because we understand everything completely but because we are willing to take the next step along the way. And the next step might be trouble. How our Lent journey will remind us of that.

Mark gives us Jesus and the Spirit in sharp contrasts: the waters of life and the dry wastes of the wilderness, the gentle touch of a dove, the driving force of wind.

Of course we will use this penitential season of Lent as we always do. But this is Lent 2021 and if ever there was a year in which to re-think, re-imagine and re-do our Lenten disciplines, this surely is it. To go through Lent with Mark is a radical walk.

Mark encapsulates in these brief paragraphs of our gospel much of Mark's message. He is setting the themes for the journey. He is letting us catch a glimpse of where the story is going and what it means. Mark simply leaves Jesus in the wilderness, just as his Gospel originally left Jesus dead on the Cross. Mark knew, you see, just as Jesus knew, that the wilderness is where we start. So come the words: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near."

The Kingdom of God is at hand. It's here. The realm of God's rule is present. Here and now, it's that path this Lent we are called to follow.