

Reflection for the First Sunday of Lent

The Baptism of Jesus

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'

The Temptation of Jesus

And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness for forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.

The Beginning of the Galilean Ministry

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.' (Mark 1:9-15)

One of the characteristics of the gospel writer Mark is that everything happens in a rush. There's no padding out of description. There's very little detail about what's happening. There's no philosophising about what the situations might mean. Mark gives the impression of wanting to get straight to the point. There's no time to waste in Mark's account. What's really important to Mark is that his readers come to recognise the person of Jesus.

So in the gospel of Mark, the forty days that Jesus spent in the wilderness justifies only one short verse, unlike Matthew's gospel with 11 verses and Luke's gospel with 13. As far as Mark is concerned we don't need to know the details of Jesus' temptations. He has just three points - Jesus was tempted, he was with the wild beasts and the angels waited on him. For Mark, Jesus' experience in the desert was a time of challenge with scary moments but with the attentions of the angels sustaining him.

As we mark the season of Lent we tend to focus on the forty days as a time for resisting temptation. We reflect on the time Jesus spent in the wilderness and aim to grow in our relationship with him by giving something up. Well, that's the theory - if we can say no to chocolate and alcohol then we're experiencing something of the nature of Christ. But it seems that for Mark temptation was just a part of Jesus' time in the wilderness. There was more going on, all of which was important in preparing Jesus for ministry.

I wonder whether over the past year we've actually been walking alongside Jesus in the wilderness rather more than we give ourselves credit for. Since the middle of Lent last year we've been challenged over and over again. We haven't known what to believe when we've been given rules in one month that have changed in the next. We've had to make decisions about the right thing to do, bearing in mind the impact of our actions on others. While the virus and its mutations aren't exactly the wild beast that circled around Jesus in the wilderness, they have certainly generated as much fear as marauding lions, possibly more because we can't see or hear a virus. Through it all we've also seen moments of extraordinary generosity, resilience and courage, demonstrations of angelic nature. So I think we might well be growing in our understanding of Jesus in the desert place.

If then we consider ourselves already to be in the wilderness, how might we engage with Lent? For Jesus, the time in the wilderness was a preparation for his ministry. After the forty days he was ready to go to Galilee proclaiming the good news. Perhaps we could view this Lent as a time of preparation for what might come next. We don't yet know when or how we'll emerge from this lockdown but I think we're all aware now that what lies ahead of us is likely to be different – not normal but a new normal. So maybe we could use these forty days to contemplate new possibilities for sharing the love of God. Then when we leave this wilderness we will be prepared to follow the call of Jesus and to proclaim the good news in our own community. Amen

Ann Barlow