

Sermon – Baptism and Temptation of Jesus Mark 1:9-15 – First Sunday of Lent

Today is the first Sunday of Lent. There is a conscious shift in the Church Year, calling us to reflect and ponder on our faith – our relationship with God – and in this year of Mark's recording about the temptation of Jesus we are invited to not only think about putting God and our relationship with him above all else, but we are given an opportunity to ponder on the big idea of evil – in the wilderness of anywhere else for that matter...

Let's set the scene for a moment. We recall the first reading's account that is the climax of the story of the creation of the world and the demise of a humanity caught in the grips of the powers of evil that leads – in the end – to the its destruction and renewal of God's relationship with humanity and earth. The covenant with Noah is everlasting and is afforded to all humanity and every creature – the rainbow says it all. The mythological essence of the flood story that runs along numerous flood stories of the day is superseded by the One and Only God blessing Noah and his sons to go out and be fruitful – the new and redeemed creation is beginning.....

Here we can get an idea of how God intends his love and grace to extend to all nations – to all people – but as we know, there is a long way to go until that intent is manifested and rooted on the ground in the physical presence of God on earth – Jesus – whose body and blood becomes the new covenant and the amazing grace-bringer offers the first fruit of creation – which is love – love of God in the person of Jesus.....

By the time we begin to hear about the temptation of Jesus, he has been baptised by John in the Jordan and God has declared him to be his Son – his beloved, known and called by name and in that moment, the Spirit is within Jesus – fulfilling the hopes of prophets like Isaiah who had been prophesying and proclaiming – the 40 days of the red sea of freedom and the forty years in the wilderness to get to the promised land – are now anchored into the forty days Jesus would spend in the wilderness, being tempted by the world – in order that he could show the way to the kingdom...

As Peter explains - the water of baptism symbolises being 'born anew' – not only washing away the sin of the world that we have become unclean by but it is a renewal of mind, body and spirit – 'a living hope for everyone, even those living in the dark – that a light is being shone upon the pathway that leads to the kingdom of God ...

So, remembering that all that Jesus does is out of love for us all who are living in the dark – we witness Jesus intentionally disrupting his life as he enters into the wilderness for 40 days. He is stripped back from everything and is left in the stillness to contemplate and be with his Father.

Perhaps he is showing us that sometimes the disruption of our own lives - weather, illness, job loss – pandemic – while it is awful and tragic and all those things – can also be an opportunity to be disrupted positively, so that we can realign our priorities and make space for things that are truly meaningful and important – and make space for our relationship with God?

What Mark tells us is also reminding us is that Jesus is in there with the wild beasts being tempted by Satan but the angels are waiting on him - they are waiting....

Again, we too can think about whether we have had to wait in the wilderness – enduring our own forty-days experience – what were the adversaries that were sitting on your shoulder, tempting you away from watching and waiting in faith and trust ?

I don't know what wilderness might look like for you, but a general idea might be when we are in a space when God seems remote – our resistance is low and comfort beckons through acting out an earthy desire – to whet the appetite – to puff up the ego – or to become self-satisfied.

And I wonder if that is what we might think of as the atmosphere of 'evil' in the world – that energy that lures us away from the right loving thinking that we innately know and need to live a life of peace and harmony

We are daily confronted with stories of evil things happening – it seems no amount of technology and intelligence can prevent it. Evil is the flaw in our choice-making, our moral compass, the way the good things in the world can be used for bad – it is driven largely by the way we are and our conscience and relationship with God's goodness – we are mis-led.

Here's the cycle - we get so used to living in that askew moral compass that our outlook can become infected with 'evil intent' – our judgements and motivations can become self-seeking or in some cases dishonest in order for personal or wider gain – and as the insecurity sets in caused by living out in a way that doesn't suit us, but one we are unable to change, and becomes embedded - it is then that we – humanity - truly lose our way and get lost in the wilderness of the world - and fall short of being the kind of person our faith calls us to be – the temptation of evil has been succumbed to – the personal Devil – has become the impersonal Evil – no pin-pointing the origins or causes – but over time an evil energy is running alongside the loving energy of God's created order.

And what's more – the two become muddled and mingled until the worldview proclaims God as being the bearer of evil in the world as well as good – a God who is human in the picking and choosing of who is in and who is out – who lives and who dies – who suffers and who doesn't and so in times of trouble and need, people won't turn to God because they hold a punishing judging God in their heart, leaving no room for the comfort and strength of a loving God that many of us know to be the anchor to life – what an uphill battle....

But hope is there. It is in his wilderness Lenten journey that Jesus is waging that battle for us, walking the path for us – and it is at Jerusalem and on the cross that the evil of the world is hung and we are shown a new way to live without having to include evil into the mix – the choice then at that point really is ours...

So what can we do – how can we resist temptation, turn things around – and find sustenance in the wilderness times life will no doubt bring from time to time – and how can we be trusting and sure of a loving, living God who has our back?

Well looking at the first sentence we are shown the way in which Jesus managed to do so – 'Jesus, it says - full of the Holy Spirit – was LED by the spirit in the wilderness....' – he was guided – he wasn't alone after all – the Spirit was Holy and was with him – and in him – THE COMFORTER NOT THE TEMPTER - – right to the end when Jesus – we are told – 'filled with the power of the Spirit,' went to Galilee proclaiming the Good News - And there we have it – being filled with the Holy Spirit that was in Christ Jesus is how we resist evil and do the best we can and follow his ways the best we can as we become rooted once again in the receiving and offering of love in God's name as we follow the way of Jesus with the holy spirit within us to guide and show the way.

Lent calls us to seek out ways of deepening that sense of living in relationship with God, with ourselves and with others. Prayer deepens our relationship with God – fasting deepens the relationship with ourselves – and alms giving deepens our sense of relationship with others – going beyond ourselves, thinking of other's needs and doing so through the heart of a prayerful desire to do God's will – which will always be to love ourselves – to be kinder to ourselves – and to others – and in being more loving to ourselves and to others – we are then, ultimately being more loving to God.

Jesus shows us that the wilderness can become sanctuary – a place in which we can stop running – breath in God - and take stock fearlessly, honestly, willingly, realigning our will to God's will, with the Holy Spirit to hold and guide us.

We journey together...