

BIBLE READINGS: Genesis 9:8-17 Mark 9:9-15

SERMON

It's a strange time, Lent. For the next several weeks, along with giving up whatever it is we're giving up, we'll be taking up something too. Taking up our cross anew, and walking with Jesus to Jerusalem. Lent is a journeying time.

Some of us, when we travel, like to get to a place as quickly as possible - the destination's the thing. I wonder if sometimes we do this a bit with Lent? For me it is... 'Okay, no chocolates for the next five weeks and then - resurrection, Easter eggs, Yippee!' It's so easy to fall into this pattern for Advent, the other time of waiting in our liturgical calendar. We get so caught up in the expectations - the promise of what lies ahead, that sometimes, we forget about the 'now' and the preparation required to get to the promise of 'then'.

Just as Noah had to spend time preparing for the flood by building a boat, Jesus spent time in the Wilderness, preparing for his public ministry. And we, in our turn, now spend time in lent, preparing for the joyous news of Easter.

It's a strange time, Lent, because we have a paradox. We move inexorably towards the final destination: Jerusalem and Holy Week. And yet, the journey is also the destination.

Let's have a look at the Gospel reading..

Jesus is baptised by John in the Jordan and the heavens are 'torn apart'. There's an echo here from the first Sunday of Advent, of the prophet Isaiah crying out to God - 'Oh that you would tear open the heavens and come down .'. And there's a foreshadowing of the curtain in the Temple being torn in two at Jesus' death. Past, present and future blend together if only for a moment.

The gentle Spirit-dove descending on Jesus becomes the driving Spirit, sending Jesus to the Wilderness.

The voice from heaven exclaiming 'You are my beloved son. I'm pleased with you.', is replaced by the voice of Satan, ever trying to tempt.

And, after the Wilderness, a changing of the guard. John is arrested. Jesus picks up the prophetic torch and begins his public ministry.

The gospel of Mark startles us with its speed. You feel that Jesus is sent into the wilderness still wet from the waters of baptism. And that the time in the wilderness passes in the blink of an eye. Everything in Mark's gospel is in a bit of a hurry. Mark's favourite word seems to be "immediately"! Yet even in his hurried pace Mark tells us that God saw to it that Jesus took time first to get his act together.

Jesus is sent into the Wilderness. And so often, we jump to thoughts of temptation, testing and suffering. But wait. Go back. Before he's driven out - and it's the same word in the Greek that's used later when referring to driving out demons - before he's driven out, look what has just happened..

Before the Wilderness - the water and the affirmation from heaven - 'I love you. You are loved. I'm so proud of you.' The words that refresh in the dry dust and heat of the desert. The words that give strength in the testing time.

Mark's writing is brief, but in its simplicity, I think it invites us to go deeper into our imaginations and find our own desert and see what lurks there. The journey we begin this Lent, may include reflecting on those broken, scarred and raw places of Wilderness that we've experienced over this last year - places of sorrow, sickness and despair. The journey may mean sifting through issues of who we are, and what really matters - exploring our hunger, yearning and inner most longing. It may be about taking time to grieve over lost love, missed opportunities, those things left undone, the things done that we wish we hadn't.. It's a time where, if we allow ourselves to become still, and face our aching nakedness, we may perhaps find comfort for our souls. But wait. Go back. Before the Wilderness . remember - you are loved, loved by the One who set the rainbow in the sky as a sign to Noah, and for all of us.

It's a strange time, Lent. It gets a bit of a negative press. 'Mustn't do this!', 'Can't do that!' 'No joy allowed!' 'Abstinence makes the heart grow fonder.' Yet.... I like Lent. To me, it's the time when we can give ourselves permission to withdraw from the relentless pace of our day to day lives and where God says - 'Stop. Take stock. Be refreshed.' It's our time to become explorers - journeying into the wilderness of the desert, of the ocean of the heart. It's our time to take time, knowing that God is with us as companion and compass, and that we are held in God's love.

It's the first Sunday in the season we call Lent. Let's take up our cross, and walk with Jesus awhile in the wilderness. And, as Jesus was strengthened by words of love before the Wilderness, so too may we find strength in that same love, find courage for our souls, and hold in our hearts the hope of the promise of the rainbow. Amen