

Sunday 21st February 2021

1st Sunday of Lent - Mark 1:9-15

Today is the first Sunday of Lent; on Wednesday last we started this season by celebrating with the ashes, a remembrance of the dust of our creation.

Three things struck me about this morning's Gospel reading from Mark. The first was that Jesus leaves home. The second is that he has a wilderness experience and the third thing is that he was led into temptation. How does this apply to our lives and experiences today.

At some point we all leave home, we've all done it. We leave home physically, emotionally and spiritually. We leave behind those places that are familiar, comfortable, and predictable. Sometimes we can't wait to leave, we're ready to go, other times we would rather not leave, and sometimes circumstances push us out of the door. Leaving home is a part of life, and happens at different ages and for different reasons.

For children it may be the first day at school, the first stop over with grandparents, or the first time at Brownie or Scout camp.

For young adults it might be moving out of their parents' home to go to university or to start work.

Some of the significant changes in our lives are also forms of leaving the familiar and embarking on a new beginning, for instance like getting married, moving house or retiring from work.

For each of us it can be a frightening and risky venture. It invites us to change, and opens us to discover new things about ourselves. It challenges our understanding of where we find significance, meaning and security. We are in a place that we have not experienced before, and what the future will hold we don't yet know. It would have been the same for Jesus.

So Mark tells us that Jesus leaves his home in Nazareth and goes to the river Jordan. His ministry was to wait until the Father would send the Holy Spirit to come upon him. This happens at his baptism by his cousin, John the baptiser.

There in the Jordan the baptised Jesus stands at the beginning of a new life.

Mark tells us

“Just as Jesus 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”

Following his baptism the Spirit drove Jesus into the wilderness.

A wilderness is any place that we don't want to be, Jesus found he was alone, surrounded by danger from wild animals, no friends to support or encourage him. Maybe he was wandering thinking "where do I go from here" "what purpose has my life", "what do I do next?" We are told that Satan tempted Jesus, but Mark does not tell us the details.

Jesus experienced the invitation to sin just as we do. He knows what it's like to be tempted, but scripture tells us that "He, though tempted in every way that we are, yet did not give in to Satan".

So how does Jesus wilderness experience mirror our own lives?

Well we also have wilderness experiences, where we feel we are alone, wandering around not knowing what to do or where to turn. We can be surrounded by many dangers and temptations that are as threatening to us as the wild animals that Jesus faced. The current pandemic and fears of the Covid 19 virus feels like such an experience today.

Satan wanted to destroy Jesus mission and to tempt him away from his calling.

In the same way Satan wants to side-track us from accomplishing our calling for God, he will put stumbling blocks in our way to tempt us away from our faith. Many people are being led away from the teachings of the church, believing that what the world offers, things like status, fame, money, and having a good time will give meaning to their lives.

In a recent survey of the public the interviewer asked people "is there a God" some said "I believe in a God, but I don't do religion" could this be a trick of the devil because we know that the church, as the body of God's people, is where we are built up and nourished in our faith, and supported when we are weak and vulnerable.

In our wilderness times we come face to face with the reality of our lives; we tend to externalize temptations and make them about behaviour, which is important, but the results of the sin are its own punishment, both individually and collectively.

The real temptations are from within us, not around us, it's not about breaking rules, or being bad. I do not believe that it's God who tempts us, to see if we will pass or fail, however when we are tempted the Spirit prompts us to acknowledge the need for God's compassion and forgiveness, this becomes part of our salvation.

We all have moments of decision in our lives – moments when we can choose to do what we know in our hearts to be the good action or to speak out against what we believe to be wrong. Equally, we can ignore the call to justice or love, preferring instead to let out

prejudice and selfishness influence our non-action. If we are open to the spirits prompting, God will work through us, impelling us towards the best choice. But always he will leave it up to us to make the final decision – that is his gift and his grace.

The Father's words refer to Jesus in a uniquely literal way but they also apply to each one of us. By grace, gift, and the choice of God, we are his beloved daughters and sons.

If leaving home, getting baptised and going to the wilderness is Jesus way, then it is our way too. We leave behind our old identity; we are identified and claimed by God as his children. We go to the wilderness with the knowledge and confidence that Christ has gone before us. Leaving home is not so much a loss for us, but an opportunity for God. We find that we are not self-sufficient and are reminded that just as the angels ministered to Jesus in the wilderness, so they are with us and we will never be alone.

Tom Wright in his book "God and the pandemic" reminds us that during Jesus ministry he points the way forward, not only that but he gave his followers a prayer, which more or less all Christian traditions use to this day

"The Lord's prayer"

In this prayer we acknowledge Gods kingdom and provision, we ask forgiveness for our trespasses and pray that we are not led into the time of testing, but delivered from evil.

Tom says "In a sense, learning to follow Jesus is simply learning to pray the Lord's Prayer"

We leave home and experience wilderness temptations only to discover that our most authentic identity is as a beloved child of God and our only real home is with God.

Let's hold fast to this truth during this holy season of Lent.

Amen