

1 Peter 3:18-end and Mark 1:9-15

18th February, just before Lent, Tidenham 2024

This short sharp record of the start of Jesus' ministry is typical of Mark's style – snappy, concise and a bit 'this is it – take it or leave it, rather confrontational'. And some like me, are not happy with the brevity and want to fill in the gaps. Bit like the old story of ancient mapmakers. They drew up the land that they knew but then of the unknown beyond they wrote: 'Here be dragons!' Understandably there would have been those that would draw back 'ooh too scary, not going to go there' which of course could be sensible. But some ever curious want to go and search further – to know more.

I remember learning to drive and I could not get this clutch control thing. So, I said 'but why do I have to lift my foot slowly....?' The instructor had, long since given up saying 'but you don't need to know that!' And so, we had a lesson on the workings of clutch plates.... New language of course – but now I get it

I thank God for those with the gift of biblical scholarship – there *is* so much more to discover, and in fact we can find more reading the rest of Scripture – Lent is a great time to do that

We can see what Mark wants to emphasize. That is, he wants to underline what Jesus *does* rather than what he says. Entirely in keeping with the culture of his audience. The Jewish religious desire to know God is through His *actions* rather than pondering about his 'being' as the Greeks were wont to do. We can look elsewhere in the other gospels for example to expand the story.

What does Jesus do? He submits to the practice of baptism. He is not a sinner though, so why do this? Well, partly as we see in the account, it is to announce his identity as the son of God: 'You are my Son, the beloved, with you I am well pleased.' Also, Jesus is identifying with *us*. He actively demonstrates the call to humans to undertake this ritual. Not to wash off the dirt and dust, as Peter puts it in our first reading, but to obediently receive an internal cleansing of conscience before God. Jesus is fully God and fully human.

Next, Jesus submits to a rather gruelling preparation for his ministry. The Holy Spirit *drives* him out into the wilderness. A forceful intentional unavoidable period of temptation to overcome. He is to face all those temptations common to us all. Once again identifying with *us*.

It's interesting isn't it that if we make a grand gesture of identity with God, we often seem to face a barrage of difficulties in a kind of backlash. The enemies of God really react. I remember that was the case as I was baptised as an adult – oddly I felt drawn to the ungodly ways of previous times after making this public affirmation of my faith in Christ. It was a dark and difficult time, but the presence of God sustains us.

But also, this withdrawal is a time of preparation, of training if you like for facing antagonism and opposition. Jesus would have been only too well aware of how his actions and words would stir up hostility amongst the ruling elite, the religious leaders and the ordinary people beholden to them. 'Who did he think he was – better than us? Bringing in a new Kingdom – what?!, Making out he was God by forgiving sins – that's blasphemy!

We can all identify to some extent, as others discover we are Christians – 'who do you think you are, how can you say Jesus is Lord? Surely you don't believe in God...'. Of course, we could, quietly hide our light under a convenient lid and stay silent and inactive. But that is simply not the way of Christ. Thanks be to God for the gift of the Holy Spirit to encourage and strengthen. And indeed, still shine through even in our shyness.

Preparation can be hard work – I'm mindful of the time I spent in Afghanistan, a truly dark place but a great one to learn more about yourself in wilderness isolation from your support system! But I learned a lot about another culture as well, it was tough but really helpful, especially as that culture increasingly comes here.

It is also useful to learn who the biblical writers are addressing, what their understanding of practices are, to know about their language -what do the words mean in their culture etc. Likewise, it is helpful to know your own audience when God calls you to work in a particular place which *may* be right where you are. E.g Matthew wrote his gospel record primarily to the Jews – you can tell by the language he uses – Luke primarily to the Greeks, he uses different bits of Jesus story that would particularly resonate with a non-Jewish community. It is the same for us. Some are called to their own community – who knows this community of Tidenham, Tuthill etc, better than Nicki? Nicki who knows the families, the culture, the language – who better to share the good news of Jesus Christ with love and understanding than Nicki! Who better than Peter to minister to the diaspora, the scattered Jews beyond Palestine, ... people like him, that he had grown up with. But sometimes we are called to

learn a new language somewhere new. I fear I'm getting a bit old for new language – but hey, I'll have a go if necessary. Tudor speaks of people being either 'somewheres' or 'anywheres' – I think both of us have been 'anywheres' and it may be time for me to be a 'somewhere'!

So, identity, preparation and finally proclamation – active ministry. Actually, getting out there and telling the good news. Again, in Mark's record, the words are few but succinct. Following John the Baptists message, Jesus also proclaims the good news of God, by saying: 'the time is fulfilled, and the Kingdom of God has come near, repent, and believe in the good news.'

It is pretty simple but it is not easy, - following Jesus and sharing in His suffering for the glory of God is challenging. In our first reading we have a letter from Peter who has *seen* the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ (and we know how confident he was to begin with) who writes to the struggling diaspora in other parts of the Mediterranean world: "Christ also suffered, for sins ONCE for ALL. "The job, the *action* of God is done – we need only to make it known to all. Which part of the 'all' are we to direct our energies? What would the good news look like for them? Do we know how best to express that good news for them?

We start the Lenten season this week, - remembering the wilderness time for Jesus. Remembering his identity, one with the Father and the Holy Spirit, and his identifying with us – he understands and he gives us a, pattern to follow. He obediently undergoes the tough training, resisting the easy way of the world of power hungriness and greed, which solves nothing. And with courage and conviction, he tells it like it is: repent and believe. The Kingdom of God is at hand. Let us go into this season of reflection, draw near to God, listen and gain courage. And let us go and with words and actions go out and share the good news of Jesus Christ, Lord and God to all those we have been prepared to encounter.

May the Lord bless our reflections. Amen