

Lent I

St Luke's Tutshill 18/2/24

Mark 1: 9-15 – Jesus – led by the Holy Spirit

Prayer

Some time ago I heard a German professor say that if Mark's Gospel were submitted as a piece of work for marking it would certainly fail. Mark mentions many points without developing them adequately. He brings in lots of different characters without introducing them properly. His structure is unclear, and worst of all – he has no conclusion. Just as well then it isn't a piece of academic work. It was written nearly two thousand years ago; it's not a modern biography. If we wanted to think about Mark's Gospel in modern terms, perhaps it would be more like a series of cartoons. Take the passage we have just heard. In six verses he tells us about one of the major events in Jesus' life, his baptism, a highly significant time at the start of Jesus' ministry, the temptations in the desert, and still has words to spare to summarise Jesus' message. All that in 118 words – check if you like, I counted what Mark wrote in Greek! I think Mark is like a good cartoonist using just a few strokes for a very vivid picture. And like a good cartoon he sets us thinking about many things that are implied rather than made explicit.

The first cartoon is Jesus being baptised in the Jordan by John. But Mark isn't interested so much in the baptism itself but more on the vision of the heavens opening, the Spirit descending like a dove and the voice of the Father, *You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased*. Notice something? The Spirit comes down and the Father speaks of the Son – Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Right here at Jesus' baptism we have roots of what we now call Trinity – one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Question – if John was baptising people as a sign of their repentance, why was Jesus baptised if we say he was sinless, the perfect man? It's a fair question. Any answer has to be along the lines that Jesus was identifying himself with sinful humanity – voluntarily putting himself with us who certainly are sinners. In that sense Jesus' baptism was a foretaste of what he would do much more comprehensively at the cross where he gave himself for us, where he died as the sinless one for us. At his baptism Jesus identified himself as one for us; so that we can identify with him and find in him forgiveness and a new life. We are drawn, as it were, into the cartoon, so we can wonder and proclaim - this is my God, we believe in the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We can stand on the banks of the Jordan in our minds anyway, with thousands, millions of others, worshipping this God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Our second cartoon moves on with almost breathless speed – *the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness*. We have to turn to Matthew or Luke for any details about the temptations, while Mark includes a different little detail – Jesus was with the wild beasts and the angels. Bit tricky this – was it literal or are the wild beasts and angels symbols of the internal struggle going on between Jesus and the evil one tempting him? We can read it either way. What we do have is Jesus about to launch into public ministry, but first he has to be alone – alone that is with his Father and the devil and the struggle within about his own identity and his work and his future and his calling. We are mistaken if we think it wasn't a real struggle because he was Son of God protected from real temptation. No it was real enough – the New Testament teaches us that Jesus was tempted in every way as we are – yet without sin. It was real for Jesus, real like in the Garden of Gethsemane where Jesus sweated blood as he prayed that he would not have to go through with the cross. Jesus knew temptation and testing all right.

When are you most tempted and tested? I don't know about you but for me, I find temptations and testing arising more from within when I'm alone, and that can be much harder to deal with than say, biscuits in the cupboard – which I can shut, or time on social media that I can switch off. The most dangerous wild beasts are not lurking out there but lurking within. If we want to grow as Christians we'll probably find that the Holy Spirit pushes us to be alone with God, perhaps for a few moments at the start or the end of the day. If that's the case then you may well find it involves struggle as well as joy. It amazes me that when I am working or reading or even watching sport on the tele I can concentrate on that, but as soon as I turn to pray, my mind starts buzzing with all kinds of unwanted things and distractions and irrelevancies. Nasty things well up from inside. The truth is that if we want to follow Jesus, we can't avoid the wilderness. Do think about coming along to our Tuesday Lent groups because we'll be exploring this over the next few weeks.

There's a third cartoon, which is really a summary picture of Jesus' teaching ministry – *The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe in the good news.* Jesus had an announcement to make. The Jewish people at that time were waiting – longing and praying for God to intervene. They wanted God to help them throw out the Roman overlords and restore them politically. But God had grander ideas. Rather than think of God's kingdom as a place – like we think of the United Kingdom, a territory with borders – it's better to think of God's reign, his rule, his protection. Jesus was telling people that they could come under God's rule, his protection, his salvation, his healing. To do so they needed to repent – change their life and believe the good news. So Jesus travelled around, healing people, delivering them from evil spirits, telling people that God accepted them freely. He had a message of freedom – from guilt and pain and everything that oppresses and holds down and holds back from being what God intends us to be. Believe and you will see this. Trust Jesus and know for yourself. No one else can do it for you; you have to enter God's kingdom, his rule, for yourself. This is good news; you can reach out to God; you are welcome; Jesus has come close to us.

Do we live in a world that is crying out for good news? Conflicts, tensions, where folk seem unsure about a sense of direction and moral values. The old certainties have been shaken and are crumbling, but what is replacing them? Jesus addressed the issues of his day when people around him wanted to overthrow the Romans and restore Jerusalem. He didn't give people what they wanted; but he got people to look up and see what God was doing. Jesus was absolutely not the kind of populist leader who provided people with scapegoats – blame these people. He didn't promise simple solutions; didn't offer unrealistic expectations. Jesus wouldn't make a modern politician any more than Mark would make an acceptable academic essay! Rant over – sort of, but how do we address the real questions of our society and our community without being bound by these questions. How do we bring in new angles, the God-dimension if you like? How do we talk about Jesus without being all-churchy? How do we present Jesus as good news in language that people can relate to, the Jesus who gives us freedom from guilt and a new purpose? It's surely more than – come to church and meet some nice people! This Lent will we risk meeting the real Jesus who turns us upside down and inside out...

Nearly time for me to end. Do tell me if I am reading too much into this passage, but I like to see in these three little cartoons a picture of what it means to be a growing Christian. From Jesus' baptism I see a people who know Jesus and know that he is the one who died for us, who acknowledge Jesus along with the Father and the Spirit, one God. This is worship – worship together. And then there's Jesus driven into the wilderness; and here we are with him, sharing if you like in his suffering, knowing that we are alone before God, yet tempted and tested and struggling, battles within. Here is the quiet time alone with God – not cosy but wrestling, him and us. And then there's Jesus out in the

world, proclaiming good news. Where we will go shortly – out there; where we will be all week. Worshipping with others, taking time to be alone with God and speaking freely about him in a language that people can relate to. Now that sounds to me like a church, a Christian people who are going somewhere.

Prayer

Absolution

May the Father forgive us
by the death of his Son
and strengthen us
to live in the power of the Spirit
all our days. Amen

Blessing

May the God of hope fill you
with all joy and peace in believing
through the power of the Holy Spirit,
and the blessing...