

Jesus the beloved Son is tempted

Mark 1.9-15

21.2.2021

Genesis 9.8-17

How are you getting on with our daily Lent reflections? The theme this year is story: 'God's story, our story'. The central idea is that we all live by and through stories – our own, other people's, real, fictional – and that as Christians we live by the story of Jesus. We started with the story of the resurrection, a plot twist that leaves 'Line of Duty' in the shade, as Mary Magdalene bursts in on the frightened disciples and proclaims breathlessly, 'I have seen the Lord!' We continued with the call of the disciples, stories which we have read and thought about recently on Sunday mornings, and Jesus' repeated invitation to 'come and see'.

And that's the point. The gospel is not primarily a set of doctrinal propositions, it's an invitation to join a story, the story of God's engagement with the world through Jesus. And the climax of the story of Jesus is the extraordinary notion that the man who had died was alive again - and that he can be our companion in our daily lives.

Over the last few Sundays we've been following the story of that man Jesus in his early ministry in Galilee as he taught, healed and was hailed as one who spoke with authority. Today we mark the start of Lent by tracking back to his baptism and temptation in the wilderness. In typical Mark fashion we get the executive summary only and are left to peruse Matthew and Luke for details about what Jesus went through in the desert. Nevertheless Mark gives us the essentials of both baptism and temptation stories: Jesus saw the heavens torn open and God's spirit descending on him to affirm his special status and mission, and was *immediately* (that word again) driven into the wilderness to be tempted by Satan and ministered to by angels.

What's your image of Satan? A grinning red face, horns, tail and a goatee beard? Or a little devil on your shoulder: 'Come on, do it', or 'say it' or 'you don't need to bother with that person'...? We don't buy that medieval picture any more but we should take seriously the reality behind it.

At a baptism service I ask parents and godparents, 'Do you reject the devil and all rebellion against God?' In the book of Revelation we read about the battle in heaven as Satan and his followers rebel against God and are defeated. They

represent all that is evil and corrupt, what the Book of Common Prayer calls 'the vain pomp and glory of this world'.

Jesus is being tempted to rebel against God and that is what evil tempts us to do as well. There are dark forces within us and in the world around us – greed, cruelty, injustice, selfishness, cowardice. We can throw out the horns, the tail and the goatee but we neglect the reality of the power of darkness at our peril.

If we are honest with ourselves, we try our best to avoid the wilderness. It is where we are forced to see ourselves as we are, without filter or finery. It is there we wander and wait to encounter the holy. Like Jesus, we are sometimes driven against our will, by the Holy Spirit, to the wild places we would rather not go. But the wilderness is where we as individuals and as community must go, because out of the wild comes new life.

During this Lenten season of fasting and focus, of praying and preparing, we are tempted to simply go through the motions. We are tempted to skirt the wilderness, to turn away from encountering the wild places in our lives and in our world. We are tempted to turn away from the mirror of the Tempter. But if we are to follow Jesus, if we are to be renewed for new possibilities and prepared to hope once more, we must face the wild.

Throughout the history of God, we see our spiritual ancestors spending their time wrestling with the barren places. From the call of Abraham and Sarah to the wandering of the people of Israel for forty years, the wilderness has become a place of refining and self-discovery.

But our forbearers never faced the desert alone. As we heard in our first reading, Noah's desert was a flood but for forty days, God watched over Noah and at the end he made a covenant with him. For forty years, God journeyed with Israel. For forty days, God stood with Jesus. And for our time, God will stand with us.

God has work for us to do and that work begins, like it did with Jesus, when we are driven to the wild places of discovery.

We go to the wilderness to discover anew the joy of being beloved, as Jesus was beloved.

We go because that is where we encounter God.

We go to listen for the voice of God calling us again, connecting to our story.

We go to see Christ more clearly in the world around us and to join in his story.

God's work begins with a pesky Holy Spirit sometimes dragging, driving, and drawing us out into the wilderness. Jesus has been there. The angels are there. His footsteps can still be found.

The wilderness is calling. "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news." And when we believe we are to share this greatest of stories with others.

So next time someone asks you why you go to church, don't get tied up in theology. Don't talk about sin or the Trinity or use churchy language about repentance and salvation. Just talk about God's love and the amazing good news of Jesus who came to search for the lost and invited them to join him, the Jesus whose good news transforms lives.

And invite them to 'come and see'.