

the beloved
a sermon preached on the
first sunday in lent
18 February 2018
at
st john's
ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL
by father ken hewlett

the lections: Genesis 9: 8-17; Psalm 25; 1 Peter 3: 18-22; Mark 1: 9-15.

Mark opens his gospel account with such dramatic awareness that we could think for thinking that we are present at the theatre. Imagine it for a moment: the lights have been dimmed. The audience has quietened and is settling down into comfort of their seats. A faint patch of light clings to the twitching curtain. The audience know the story but they do not know how it will be told. An expectant murmur is heard going around the auditorium. Before the curtain rises a man called John steps into the limelight. He is dressed as Elijah, and his script has been written by the prophet Isaiah.

‘Is everybody ready?’ he asks. A nervous twitter spreads along the rows. ‘Then watch and listen!’ With these words the Baptist spins on his heel, the curtain is hoisted to the heavens, and the stage lights burst into life, in an instant the main characters are revealed.

This is Mark’s version of the gospel drama, and he is determined to make an impact: ‘At that time Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee’. Immediately we are introduced to the most significant characters from this dramatic presentation. Jesus and John the Baptist; the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit; Satan, the angels and even some wild animals for good measure—all are there from the start.

But among those who appear from the start it is clear Jesus Christ, the son of God stands unquestionably centre stage. What unfolds is a series of encounters between this main character and those who surround him; and each encounter serves to illuminate him further, even as the lights dim on his surroundings. As John said elsewhere, ‘He must increase, but I must decrease’.

From verse 9, five brief encounters come within the space of five verses looking very much like Acts 1 to 5. They involve: Jesus and John the Baptist; Jesus and the Spirit; Jesus and the Father; Jesus and Satan; and Jesus and the angels – so the drama unfolds.

The first encounter, between Jesus and John the Baptist, is puzzling. Why would the sinless one need a ‘baptism of repentance’? A similar problem recurs in Jesus’ encounter with the Spirit, where he is thrust into the desert to be tested by Satan. Why would the sinless one need testing? Perhaps an answer to both of these questions can be found in the requirement for the humanity of Jesus to undergo, as our representative, all that humanity must undergo as we reach for God-forgiveness and sanctification. Only then could it be truly said of Jesus that he ‘has been tempted in every way, just as we are – yet was without sin’.

No sooner was Jesus lifted from the waters of baptism by hands of John, than he is met by the descending Spirit who comes to rest, dove like, upon him. It is hard not to view this scene in slow motion: the glistening pearls of water streaming majestically from the rising Christ, the pure and gentle Spirit alighting from above, and the very heavens, like a curtain torn in two. Already we are glimpsing the end of the story, when Christ will burst forth from the tomb and the temple curtain will be ripped apart, revealing the holiest place.

But the Spirit is also here to make a beginning, to commission this fledgling Messiah, newly travelled from his home in Nazareth. Some have seen the descent of the Spirit as an act of anointing, making Jesus the ‘anointed one’, the Christ. Luke takes this further, has him brimming ‘full of the Holy Spirit’ as he goes to the desert of Temptation, reflecting a post-Pentecost understanding of ‘anointing’. Either way, the Spirit is active in commissioning Jesus. This is made more striking in the Spirit ‘sending’ – literally ejecting – him into the desert to meet Satan and the wild animals. The gentle, empowering, anointing Spirit is also the Spirit who throws him to the lions. There will be no doubt that God’s Messiah has been thoroughly commissioned for his ministry in the world.

Between these two acts of the Spirit, there comes a voice from heaven. ‘You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased’. What the Father says to the Son, many of us spend a life time waiting to hear, without ever hearing. ‘You are my daughter/son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased’. It is a scene from Hollywood, though not without psychological benefit, if we allow ourselves to hear the Father speaking these words. Still, from Mark’s point of view, these words were not spoken to make Jesus happy; they are there to tell us something: the newly anointed one is Son of God, beloved of the Father, chosen servant.

The final two encounters take place in the desert. Unlike Luke’s account, Mark’s story of the temptation is sparing to the point of being threadbare. It is rescued from banality, however, by the richness of its allusion. The desert in the Hebrew mind is pregnant with meaning. It is a place of conflict with the forces of evil, and at the same time, a place of encounter with God. It is the place where Israel was tested, and the place where Moses met with God. These connections are further cemented by the detail the Jesus was in the desert ‘forty days’, recalling Moses’ forty days on Sinai, Elijah’s forty days in the wilderness and Israel’s forty years being tested in their desert wanderings. Just as Jesus at his baptism may represent the new Adam, so in the wilderness he represents the new Israel, the first fruits of a universal Kingdom. Unlike the old Israel, however, he will not fail the desert test.

We are told almost nothing by Mark of the nature of Jesus’ desert experience. We know the cast, of course, comprised of Satan, some wild animals, and angels. ‘Satan’ is a Hebrew word meaning simply ‘adversary’. So we must reckon that the desert experience was more than a test of mere physical endurance, and Matthew and Luke’s much fuller account of Satan’s strategies bears this out. The presence of angels who ‘attended him’ is intriguing, and recalls Elijah being fed by angels. Since there is no mention in Mark of Jesus fasting, it may be that in his mind the spiritual testing was really what mattered. Likewise, were the wild animals friends or foe? Jesus may have been exposed to fierce, wild animals, but are we to hear an echo of Isaiah 11, glimpsing a future kingdom of peace, where the wolf will live with the lamb?

The placing of this passage in our cycle of readings means that Lent is upon us. It is no accident that this story of Jesus’ baptism, commissioning, and forty days of testing, should have been chosen. In Lent, as in this story, we see the end from the beginning, anticipating the new Adam, the new Israel, the Kingdom of righteousness and peace, the torn veil, and the resurrection. Between now and Easter, we journey through our own period of forty days, submitting ourselves to voluntary testing. As in Mark’s account, it may be that the physical endurance – ‘giving things up’ – is not the issue for us; but rather, our calling is to wrestle with an adversary bigger than our stomachs, such as our use of power, our dependence on status, our determination to be little gods. As we enter upon this period of voluntary testing – or has the Spirit driven us here? – we go in the power of the Spirit, and with the words of the Father ringing in our ears: ‘You are my daughter/son, whom I love. With you I am well pleased.’