

Lent 1
1/3 2009

Mark the Evangelist

Genesis 9:8-17

Ps 25

1 Peter 3:18-22

Mark 1:9-15

Driven into the Wilderness

Everything Mark tells us in the first few verses of his good news makes the point that in Jesus a new act of God takes place in the world to open a pathway to life. In today's reading this involves Jesus in an encounter with the wilderness.

The Wilderness was and is a place of ambivalence and it has attracted many levels of meaning. On one hand it was a place of testing, because it symbolised the world "over against God", a place where the residue of chaos remained, where unclean spirits and wild beasts lived. For Israel the Wilderness was a place of testing where the people of old rebelled against God and were disciplined. On the other hand, because of their experiences, Israel and the prophets found the Wilderness to be a highly fertile place because it was where their love for God was renewed. Out of the struggle and testing of their journey there, grace became a concrete reality - unexpected sustenance came to people and prophets alike.

Mark is clear, after his Baptism, the Spirit drove Jesus into the Wilderness. This journey was not self-chosen. Jesus did not go there for a spiritual retreat, for self-improvement or to test his strength. The Spirit drove him there. It is the same word that is used to describe Jesus' expulsion of demons from sick and possessed people. Jesus' journey was made in the power of God. He was there 40 days: a metaphor that identifies him with Israel's 40 year journey from slavery to freedom long before.

He was tested by Satan: compared with the other Gospels, Mark's account is telegraphic. We are not told what enticements this involved. We hear only that Jesus was put to the test. In Mark this is like code for a cosmic struggle. Here the force for life and the force against life, wrestle for supremacy in the man Jesus. In this place he is alone with no other resource but God. The point is that in this struggle Jesus remained faithful to God. He did not sin but lived out the reality of his being named at his Baptism as the Beloved Son. That is why, when Jesus emerged from his perilous journey into the Wilderness, he began to preach: *the time is fulfilled, the Kingdom of God has come near*. The victory of grace was about to spread in the world.

The Wilderness can be understood literally and symbolically, internally and externally. In the early church men and women retired to the desert to there live in solitude with the help of God alone to confront their own nature and that of the world. It was not long before people realised there is also a wilderness of the heart and that many who never leave their ordinary place in life make such a journey, relying only on grace.

The desert mothers and fathers, and the saints, made this journey after their Baptism, not as a course of study to reach it. In the same way Jesus is driven to the place of testing after he is Baptised and named by the Spirit. This means the sign and seal of faith does not guarantee an easy path in life. The toughest part of the journey may follow the time of faith or revelation. This is possibly because the forces of darkness are felt and seen most acutely when the light begins to shine. This is one reason why Lent is maintained as a season for special reflection on discipleship: a time for review and for remembering our calling.

On the first Sunday of Lent, the image of the Wilderness stands before us to reintroduce question: to whom do we belong? Who has given us our life? What does that mean for how we live? Lent is often thought of as time of giving things up, but we are not talking about wine or chocolate. Lent is a time when we think seriously about what it means to be Christian. It is a time when we pause to reflect on what to keep at the centre and what can be dispensed with.

As you know, before he became the first black leader of a renewed South Africa, Nelson Mandela spent 26 years in Prison where he suffered many persecutions. During his prison years Mandela maintained a disciplined life and stayed focussed on the vision. As the time of his freedom approached Mandela knew he had a choice about whether or not he would take revenge on his persecutors. As he approached the prison gates for the last time he knew that he had to forgive every one of his persecutors, or he would stay joined to them for the rest of his life. As Margaret Atwood has said: "revenge is a heavy chain that weighs us down. Acts of revenge recoil on the heads of their inventors, and there is only one thing strong enough to cut the chain. It is not justice. It is forgiveness." [Massey Lecture #4]. In Mandela's choice can be seen the impulse that led to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and the effort to heal a nation.

Why tell a story like that on a day when people more commonly think of avoiding peccadilloes? Because in Lent we called to think deeply about what it means to be converted, to go through the waters of Baptism into Christ, and how that affects the choices we make in the world.

This weekend President Obama has announced an end to US involvement in war with Iraq. He is giving up war for Lent! We can only speculate on what the world would be like now if, following September 11, the Christian leaders of Britain and America (and Australia) had chosen to love their enemies. If they had chosen to love the God of life rather than death; if they had chosen to enact forgiveness instead of revenge; and we can only dream of what it would look like if the nations did this, not just for Lent, but for good.
