



First Sunday of Lent Beloved!

A service by Zoom on Sunday 21st February 2021

Welcome

In our service today we think about Jesus' baptism by John the Baptist in the River Jordan and, on this first Sunday of Lent – a period lasting 40 days - the 40 days Jesus spent in the wilderness.

Hymn – God who spoke in the beginning

Our opening hymn has new words by to a familiar tune, that of 'Hark! the herald-angels sing'. It was written for a series of services looking at the beginning of Mark's gospel and its journey from written Word, through the living prophets, to God present in Jesus.

1. God who spoke in the beginning,
By your word all life began!
Still, your words in Law and story,
shape our purpose, show your plan.
Ancient words we all inherit,
words of wisdom, help and merit,
teach us how we ought to be:
humble, gracious, endlessly.
By your written words draw near,
let your love sustain us here.
2. God, who sent us fiery prophets,
fearless, faithful, all for you,
still, their strident call for justice
speaks to challenge all we do.
Living, present, urgent voices
put before us vital choices:
will we work for God today?
will we follow in your way?
Through such prophets, still draw
near;
let your love sustain us here.
3. God who came to us in person,
walking with us here on earth,
still, the way you took in Jesus
shows your wisdom and your worth!
Selfless, sharing, kind and caring,
learning humbly, yet so daring;
for our rescue flailed alive,
spat upon, then crucified.
Living Jesus now draw near,
Let your love sustain us here.
(John Campbell)

Prayer

We draw on images from the story of Noah in Genesis 9, our Old Testament passage for today:



Loving, faithful God, your love is absolute,
your promises irrevocable.

We look up after a shower of rain, marvelling
at the colourful beauty of your rainbow –

a reminder of your promise and faithfulness to
all generations.

Wherever we happen to be – wilderness,
mountain or valley bottom – your Holy Spirit
is with us. We adore you, loving, faithful God.

We thank you, faithful Lord, for your patience,
provision and power; for your tenderness,
trust and triumph; for your security and
strength; for your compassion and wisdom.

We thank you, Lord, that through your grace and mercy, the blessings of faith, and your covenant love, you equip, teach and guide us as we traverse today's world, ever mindful of your steadfast love.

Amen

Introduction

The programme *'Who Do You Think You Are?'* has been a very successful series on the BBC with 17 series now available. Celebrities look back at their family tree and, with the help of genealogists, research and learn about their forebears. The celebrity featured often reflects on their own identity, making connections through characteristics they share with their ancestors. But how might we think of ourselves? How would we describe ourselves or introduce ourselves to a stranger? By our name, our role in the family or perhaps in terms of our faith? Those labels help others to categorise us and understand who we are, but do they describe our true self? I hope we can all recall an occasion when somebody said to us, 'Well done, I'm really proud of you' - a time when we received praise or encouragement from somebody and experienced the wonderful sense of being held in high regard, built up and encouraged.

At the very beginning of Jesus' ministry, two key events happen which help him be sure of who he is. At his baptism, he receives the assurance from God that he is loved and is God's Son. Jesus then moves straight from this beautiful experience to being alone and tempted. Even here, God looks after him. When Jesus leaves the wilderness, he begins his ministry, secure in who he is.

Reading – The Baptism and Temptation of Jesus (Mark 1: 9-15)

⁹ Not long afterward Jesus came from Nazareth in the province of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. ¹⁰ As soon as Jesus came up out of the water, he saw heaven opening and the Spirit coming down on him like a dove. ¹¹ And a voice came from heaven, "You are my own dear Son. I am pleased with you."

¹² At once the Spirit made him go into the desert, ¹³ where he stayed forty days, being tempted by Satan. Wild animals were there also, but angels came and helped him.

¹⁴ After John had been put in prison, Jesus went to Galilee and preached the Good News from God. ¹⁵ "The right time has come," he said, "and the Kingdom of God is near! Turn away from your sins and believe the Good News!"

Good News Bible © 1994, 2004 published by the Bible Societies/HarperCollins Publishers Ltd., UK Good News Bible © American Bible Society 1966, 1971, 1976, 1992. Used with permission.

Comment

Mark introduces the Gospel as an account of the Good News about Jesus Christ, the Son of God and quotes from Malachi and Isaiah – God says, *'I will send my messenger ahead of you to clear the way for you.'* Someone is shouting in the desert *'Get the road ready for the Lord; make a straight path for him to travel.'* The coming of John the Baptist and Jesus are the fulfilment of prophecy and Mark tells his readers the time of waiting since those Old Testament prophecies is over.

Then we meet John the Baptist, calling people to repent and be baptised. He announced he was preparing the way for somebody who would be mightier than himself, somebody who will baptise not with water but with the Holy Spirit. Even though John said he wasn't fit to untie the sandals of the one who was to follow him, Jesus is baptised in the Jordan by John. When he comes up out of the water Mark describes how Jesus saw 'the heavens being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove.'

Jesus then hears a voice coming from heaven *'You are my own dear Son. I am pleased with you.'* The impact of that phrase on us is probably much less than how the account would have heard to a Jewish audience in the first century. Mark brings together two quotes from the books of Psalm and Isaiah to bear witness to who Jesus is and what he comes to do. Mark does not choose just any two Old Testament verses. He quotes from key verses in Jewish Scripture which would have had huge impact on those hearing his gospel. In Psalm 2:7, the psalmist writes of God's chosen king who he calls his Son who will judge and rule over all the nations. Then from Isaiah 42:1, at the start of a section describing the Suffering Servant who will come and rescue his people, the Lord says *'here is my servant with whom I am pleased.'* He goes on to say that he will bring justice to every nation and rescue God's people. By bringing the two phrases together, Mark is making his Jewish audience aware of precisely who he believes Jesus to be: the promised Messiah.

It's easy for us to fall into the trap of worshipping the Jesus in our imagination, the Jesus we have thought of as a special friend, a human doing good and preaching about doing the right thing. All of those aspects of Jesus have some validity, but we mustn't fall into the trap of limiting who Jesus was and is. This passage challenges us to put aside those preconceived limitations and see the true Jesus of the gospels. He is the cosmic Jesus who showed the way of service, suffering and sacrifice but who will also be Lord of all the nations.

Immediately after his baptism Jesus is driven by the Spirit into the wilderness. In the Jewish tradition, the desert was a meeting place with God. Mark's account of the temptations doesn't detail the different temptations described in the other gospels. By spending 40 days in the wilderness some commentators suggest Jesus is living out the 40 years in exile before entering the promised land. We read that Jesus was with the wild animals (representing danger) and angels (representing the presence of God) who ministered to him during what must have been a challenging time.

As we start our Lenten journey and reflect on the period of trial and tribulation we have been through with the pandemic, what are the wild beasts we have encountered in recent weeks and months? Loneliness, bereavement, anxiety, anger, sadness? Have we experienced angels attending us in those desert places as we seek to endure and overcome?

In this time of isolation Jesus was alone and apart (as we are during lockdown), empowered by the Spirit from his baptism, preparing him for his mission. I wonder if we can learn from Jesus at the end of his wilderness experience about how the church might emerge from lockdown?

In the knowledge of who he is, and that he is loved by God, Jesus began his ministry going into the Galilee 'proclaiming the gospel of God'. He announced that the time the prophets had foretold was fulfilled and called on the people to repent and believe in the gospel.

I began by referring to the programme 'Who do you think you are?' but how does God see us? We are all unique and God knows each one of us as individually. He knows us better than anyone and even better than we know ourselves.

The King James Bible quotes the voice from heaven as saying - 'you are my beloved Son'. What is truly amazing is that God also loves us all like that! We need to remember we too are

God's beloved and valued sons and daughters. When we are in the wilderness - whatever it means for us and feels like in our lives - angels wait on us. God is with us. As we begin our journey through Lent this year, do think about what it means to be God's much-loved child. We are loved by God. We must therefore acknowledge that and Be Loved. Amen



The Baptism of Christ, Francesco Francia, Bologna (1490)

Prayers for Others

We pray for those exploring faith, for those preparing for baptism,

and for those around the world who are persecuted for their religion:

may they know the good news of the kingdom.

We pray for the world that God loves so much, and for those who have the power to bring peace to the nations:

may they work with truth and integrity.

We pray for our community and those who are in need, for the fragile and the vulnerable, and for those who support and care for them:

may they feel the presence of Jesus walking with them.

We pray for those who are homeless, for those who are unemployed, and for those who will go hungry and thirsty today:

may we, in Christ, draw near to bring comfort and support.

We pray for ourselves,

for strength to commit ourselves to follow in your way, Lord, and the grace to withstand temptation:

may we grow closer to you as we journey through Lent and prepare to meet Jesus at the cross.

Amen.

The Lord's Prayer

Hymn – Lead us, heavenly Father, lead us (Singing the Faith 238)

Our closing hymn reminds us the love of God can provide us with lasting peace.

1. Lead us, heavenly Father, lead us
O'er the world's tempestuous sea;
Guard us, guide us, keep us, feed us,
For we have no help but thee,
Yet possessing every blessing
If our God our Father be.
2. Saviour, breathe forgiveness o'er us;
all our weakness thou dost know,
Thou didst tread this earth before us,
Thou didst feel its keenest woe;
3. Tempted, taunted, yet undaunted,
through the desert thou didst go.
Spirit of our God, descending,
Fill our hearts with heavenly joy,
Love with every passion blending,
Pleasure that can never cloy;
Thus provided, pardoned, guided,
Nothing can our peace destroy.

(James Edmeston 1791-1867)

Blessing

Creator God, you made us in your image to be your people, wherever we go. This coming week, whatever we experience, wherever we find ourselves, help us to know that you love us, and that you are with us – guiding, revealing and sustaining – always. Amen.

Questions to ponder

- What are the "wild beasts" we have encountered in recent weeks and months? For example, loneliness, bereavement, anxiety, anger, sadness?
- Have we encountered angels during this time?
- What was our response? Do these challenges drive us to generous insights and to thinking of exciting possibilities?

Service prepared by Chris Mannall, drawing on material from ©Roots for Churches Ltd. (www.rootsontheweb.com), *Songs to Shake Us Up* (©Kevin Mayhew) and *Singing the Faith CCLI 5560* (all reproduced with permission).