

## SERMON 18 FEBRUARY LENT 1

Here we are. Lent has begun. Maybe it doesn't seem to matter too much. Maybe you are over the giving up of chocolate, or coffee or whatever. I must admit, I am not much into that myself this year, though I do think the focus of Lent Event, whose material we have here for you pick up and consider carefully – I do think that focus is very important. There has always been the suggestion that we might think about not just giving up our coffee but about collecting the money we would have paid for it as part of our Lenten discipline. Lent is meant to focus us on how we are called to live, to share, to work for justice and peace as part of God's Kingdom. All that is good and important.

I have found myself approaching Lent differently this year. It has always seemed to emphasize denial and struggle, which is certainly there, because this is the time that prepares us for all that Easter means. This year, I have wanted to see this time more as a special gift, an opportunity to create space; to use its focus as an invitation for reflection on what I value and what I could re-evaluate.

This change is partly because the gospel account of Jesus in the wilderness and his being tempted comes to us this year from Mark, and Mark's account is very different. In Mark's usual style, it is sparse. Indeed, it doesn't say anything about Jesus' particular temptations: no turning stones into bread, no throwing himself off a high place, no worshipping the devil. Just wild beasts and angels. Only two sentences. I know we heard firstly, about Jesus' baptism, as we did a few weeks ago, and it is obviously significant that immediately after he is baptised and affirmed as God's son as the Holy Spirit descends on him, that same Holy Spirit drives Jesus, drives him into the wilderness.

He had to go. We don't often choose to go into the wilderness places certainly not on our own in the physical reality of such a place. But then, it is often when we feel most alone that we find ourselves in what we can call a wilderness. We may all have found ourselves in such a barren and testing place at some times in our lives. We may fear that such a place is never far away and dread that if we wander off-track we may end up that darkness. But we do not choose it. Anyone who has suffered

from depression or anxiety, knows all about this, and many of us will have felt its shadow if not its full-on blackness. Jesus was driven there by the Holy Spirit. There is no suggesting that this was some sort of cruel act of God's. God isn't like that, but there was some necessity.

I think this brief account in Mark shows us something deeply human, in a way that we may struggle to associate with Jesus. It is depicted by the artist who painted the picture on the back of your service sheet. I suspect that many people will not like this. It is not how we imagine Jesus. It is too full of loneliness, too full of grief, weariness, hunger. We want our Jesus to be strong, eyes full of compassion, reaching out a healing hand. Or peacefully alone in prayer. Or standing tall before those who tried to trick him. Somehow, although we talk about Jesus sharing our humanity, we don't really think he did because he was so full of Godliness. So, he was never just like us. This is the dilemma for Christians, holding on to Jesus' humanity and his divinity.

Here, at this point in his story – we are still in chapter 1 of Mark's gospel, Jesus has only just stepped out from the obscurity of his beginning, into the desert to join John the Baptist's call to repentance, to share in the baptism he offered, and now, to sit here in the wilderness, alone. He knew that God's touch, God's blessing was on him, but what was that to mean? It was enormous. So here he is, in the wilderness, asking himself that question. Isn't that what happens in the desert places of our lives? Haven't we all known this time of questioning ourselves? Who am I? Am I good enough? What do other people imagine I am – and if people think I am ok, they really don't know what I am like? These, and many other such questions beset us in our dark moments. This is temptation. These are the wild beasts that circle around to pounce on us in our weaker moments. We can be terrified of them, terrified that we will be exposed. Sometimes we almost punish ourselves with this kind of thinking which only makes matters worse.

When things are like this, our tendency is to believe that we are then far from God, that this very human stuff is wrong, bad. It's not positive but it doesn't separate us from God or make our faith any less because we are questioning so much. Now I am not saying that what Jesus was experiencing in his wilderness time was the

same as what happens for us, but he was exposed, vulnerable, questioning, wrestling with the wild beasts of identity. He was alone. He does know this struggle.

We may still wonder why it had to be like this. Could Jesus not just have gone on from his baptism, affirmed as he was by God and empowered by the Holy Spirit? He could just have walked on confident that God was with him. If it had been like that, his humanness would have been super-ceded by his unique relationship with God. His story with us would have been different because he would have been different. Driven into the wilderness place he wrestled with his own demons. He went through that time surrounded by all that was wild, sustained by angels, we are told, which certainly would have brought awareness that he was loved by God. He had to claim that loving relationship for himself, just as we do. He had to allow his very being to be forged in the fire of what happened to him there and to hold true through its testing. Only in such a way could he have been prepared to face all that lay ahead of him and to be so rooted in the integrity of his being and his calling that he could remain steadfast in life, in faith and in purpose. He could accept all that God called him to be and know that nothing could break his bond with God.

Not all our battles within ourselves are fought and won, dispensed with once and for all. We know how we are all plagued with things that may seem to have gone, but then may quietly slide in alongside us again and hit us where it hurts. We know that Jesus had to wrestle again with Satan, with the powers of evil and fear that would stalk him and would come so very close at Gethsemane. We know he had to keep anchoring himself in God as he escaped the ever-pressing demands and went to lonely places to pray. In all of this we can recognise our own needs. The wilderness places, it turns out, are an essential part of our humanness and struggles. We recognise our weakness and know, through hard experience, that we are not alone because, God, in Christ, is not overwhelmed by what our struggle reveals, but is in there beside us. We are then led to another very important realisation. We see that so much of our self-doubt and questioning stems from our feelings of guilt or shame about past failings. Again, we may wrestle with these wild beasts and think we have been able to let them go, and often we have, but, as with all the rest of our struggles, they may jump out at us unexpectedly. Jesus tells us a different story, only made real through his own struggles. It is carried in the core of his being where,

in his hard-won integrity he could pray at the end “Father, forgive them, for they don’t know what they are doing.” God’s forgiveness far outweighs our failures. His struggle tells us that we are embraced in that forgiveness also.

Much of what we have been reflecting on has, inevitably, focussed on the personal, on our own battles which we fight unseen to others. But there is another very important dimension to this which is essential to discipleship. That is that we come to recognise, in humility, that this is a common struggle that should draw us into awareness of one another and of our communities, indeed of people everywhere. None of us has the ability to work our own salvation. We are not the source of our own healing, even though today’s society would have us believe that if we but the right self-help book, we will master our problems and all will be well. Our Lenten reflecting draws us back to the understanding of how dependent we are on God’s grace and of how that is offered to us. This is what calls us together. This is where the source of real hope for the world lies, as our response then comes from our growing trust in God, in Christ and in the Holy Spirit.

So much happened in the wilderness, so much that has an impact on our living. Here Jesus’ humanity was carried through on the depths of his own battles. So, you may look at that picture and think how strange it is, or you may look at it and see the hope for each and every person who knows what it is like to deal with loneliness and fear, along with the loss of so much that normally brings life. This is a picture of love.

Our Lenten journey has begun. Yet I would reframe that because it is actually the journey that Jesus makes which we are invited, called, to follow. So we look to him even more closely at this time, and we look to ourselves and to the world around us. This is a gift of a time. Today’s reading has already shown us how much our lives are held within the strength of love that Jesus carries within himself. As we focus on that, and on who we are, may we find the freedom to let go of our fears in the knowledge that our very humanity is known, understood and blessed. May we have our eyes and hearts opened to see how that is true for people everywhere. May this season of Lent draw us close together, for Christ’s sake. Amen.