

Sermon – 1st Lent St James Online, 21 Feb 2021

Mark 1:9-15

In the company of beasts and angels



Our Bible reading today begins our first Sunday in Lent. You'll remember from when we've looked at Mark's Gospel before, many scholars feel

this is St Peter's Gospel, with Mark recording his narrative as scribe. The prose proceeds at eyewitness pace, there is no nativity and just nine verses in we see Jesus being baptised and beginning his ministry. Both this and next Sunday's readings come from Mark, and they are in the lectionary because they set the tone for our penitential season of Lent. It is a time of reflection, a time of pairing back the excess and taking time to focus in on God. So the vivid images portrayed by our text are of wilderness and desert places:

- The Heavens torn apart (v10)
- The Spirit immediately drove Jesus out into the wilderness (v13)
- Jesus alone with the wild beasts, with the angels attending him (v13)

When he returns from his wilderness experience, Jesus proclaims '*The time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God is near; Repent and believe in the good news*' (v15). What has this

passage to say to us during our 'Lockdown Lent', when like Jesus, as a community of faith we are seeking God's leading for the journey ahead?

One evening last week I took our own wild beast, Diggory the Dog, for his evening walk on the Strawberry Line, our local disused Victorian railway now converted to a cycle track and walking path. As we went along at dusk, light and darkness mingled together and the last shafts of sunlight were punctuated only by trees and birdsong. It was a liminal time, both visually and also in the sense that I had left one place, but not yet reached where I needed to be. I want to suggest that as a church community we are also in a liminal season, a time betwixt and between, where we've left what was familiar to us and perhaps yearn to return to, but have not yet reached the 'new normal' where we are headed. There are similarities with Jesus' experience. He went gone from the highs of baptism and heaven being torn apart with a shout of great affirmation, to the lows of a being led to a very solitary place where there were few creature comforts, and little consolation in terms of human companionship. His physical company was the beasts that lived in the desert (v13). There are three observations from Jesus experience that can help us.

First, we know that although this time was uncomfortable and testing, he employed himself to good purposes: in prayer and reflection. He made it a time to listen and hear what God was saying to him. He took stock of the past and where he now needed to be headed. We might be house bound, or we might

feel our patience at working from home or home schooling is nearing its limit, but Lent is a season where we can pray and learn and importantly, encourage each other using prayer and scriptures. Let me encourage you to do just that by joining in with our Lent studies on the Lord's prayer. Please also continue to encourage each other with that telephone call or email or card that you could send, to offer someone some cheer and comfort.

Secondly, the angels who appear to Jesus are reminders that even though physical company may be in short supply, the God of heaven himself is with us to comfort, guide and help us. Jesus once described the Holy Spirit as '*the comforter*' (John 14) who is sent to comfort, sustain and direct us. We can confidently trust to His leading, that He has the best for us. And a liminal season is after all, temporary; our future remains safe and secure in God's hands.

Thirdly and finally, we see Jesus emerge from a desert place focused on the vision and mission God had given him. The lockdowns and COVID have caused people to ponder their mortality, and the direction their lives are headed. This will have been a period of secular reflection, albeit somewhat forced, and people will come out the other side with questions, wondering if there is more to this world. Jesus remains the only Saviour. Who will reach out to them and help them hear the good news, if not you and I?

Many of the Old Testament Psalms were written by King David from liminal and desert places. His words echo and accord with our experience, and encourage us today:

*The Lord is my light and my salvation –
whom shall I fear?*

*The Lord is the stronghold of my life –
of whom shall I be afraid?*

⁵*For in the day of trouble*

*he will keep me safe in his dwelling;
he will hide me in the shelter of his sacred tent
and set me high upon a rock.*

⁷*Hear my voice when I call, Lord;
be merciful to me and answer me.*

⁸*My heart says of you, 'Seek his face!'
Your face, Lord, I will seek.*

*Do not reject me or forsake me,
God my Saviour.*

¹³*I remain confident of this:
I will see the goodness of the Lord
in the land of the living.*

¹⁴*Wait for the Lord;
be strong and take heart
and wait for the Lord. (Psalm 27)*

At the end of our walk on the strawberry Line, it seemed rather appropriate that as my dog and I returned from our journey, I noticed the first daffodil shoots starting to blossom, pushing themselves up and promising that Easter is on the way. Amen.