

A sermon for the First Sunday of Lent  
*Preached by The Dean*  
(Mark 1. 9-15)

Affirmation, introspection and proclamation; the three moves of the beginning of Jesus ministry told in such a condensed way at the beginning of Mark's Gospel.

The Spirit does three things with Jesus in today's gospel reading; first it provides the voice and experience of affirmation at his baptism, the loving voice of the Father assures him of his sonship and that the Father is well pleased with him. If we don't have that inner experience for ourselves, we will only ever be half formed in faith. It is the central beginning and returning point of our journey. To know ourselves as loved, delighted in by God; not tolerated, not conditionally accepted with a constant awareness of all of the ways in which we fall short, but simply affirmed in love. Have you ever done it? Simply sat in the inner room of your mind and practised hearing God's voice, spoken quietly and repeatedly, personally to you: 'You, yes you, are my beloved child, with You I am well pleased.' Before we begin all of the protestations and excuses of our own abject unworthiness we have to learn to hear that voice first of all. It is how Jesus' ministry begins. And it is our beginning and returning point as well.

But the consequence of affirmation is swift: the Spirit then drives him into the wilderness. The wilderness for Jesus and his contemporaries was a liminal space on the edge of civilisation, beyond the limits of human habitation. One translation of wilderness experience is 'quarantine'; a place far from other human beings to which one went for a particular purpose, for a particular period of time, perhaps to recover from infectious disease, perhaps after an experience of trauma, perhaps in reparation or preparation for something. But the experience of all who underwent quarantine in the wilderness was similar; it was an experience of liminality; you were on the edge of the possibility of human existence, deprived of food, water, shelter as the hymn puts it:

'Sunbeams scorching all the day;  
chilly dew-drops nightly shed;  
prowling beasts about thy way;  
stones thy pillow, earth thy bed.'

I understand the experience of wild beasts and angels as an essentially interior encounter. In a wilderness experience the only voice you have to hear is your own, and the wild beasts, the untamed part of ourselves come from deep down inside, as does the angelic experience of God within. It's no mistake that the wilderness is the place where Jesus encounters temptation, no mistake that the wilderness is why he finds the inner strength for the beginning of his ministry, because it's at the point at which we are driven back to the essence of who we are that the unvarnished truth of the savagery we are capable of and the good that we often fail to understand within us emerges, and we encounter God in the darkness, in the isolation in the aloneness and howling silence.

For many, if not all of us, there have been moments, perhaps protracted periods of time during the past year when quarantine wilderness has become far too much of a reality for us, the experience of isolation, loneliness, a dry, dull, repetitive lack of meaning or purpose in our lives might have been a point at which the wild beasts within have caused us to lash out at ourselves or others, adopt anaesthetic behaviours...

But also that we may have been surprised by the angelic presence of others and of resilience within, a resilience that we never knew existed. I hesitate to name this wilderness process as necessary because nothing about the pandemic has felt necessary. But wilderness during the course of our lives certainly is. Whenever we necessarily lose people, stages of our lives, the inevitable procession of small deaths that are an inescapable part of human living, we find wilderness within and must encounter the wild beasts while longing for the angels.

And the next thing the spirit does with Jesus is to drive him back to Galilee to begin his ministry. Note here that the activity of the Spirit is one that drives him. We may have a tendency to think of the Spirit in rather more tamed ways than scripture suggests we should. This reference to the Spirit driving Jesus should put us right. The Spirit is not just the consoler, She is also that which pushes us, demands of us, requires that we live out the vocation to which God calls us. For Jesus that vocation is the proclamation of the kingdom with repentance. For repentance we should not understand something that involves breastbeating and self hatred it's simply what the word means in translation; the preparedness to turn round to look in another direction, to start living differently, reorientate our desires.

Am I alone in seeing parallels between this succinct description of the beginning of Jesus ministry and our own journey in the past year? I've already alluded to the experience of wilderness quarantine, I hope they have also been moments of surprising affirmation in relationships built up, in new ways of being human that we may have discovered. So if there are parallels, then the next logical question for us might be: what might proclamation look like for us now? If there is a hesitant beginning to the easing of lockdown and the resumption of patterns of worship, service, Learning, and care, then what that we have learned over the past year might the spirit be driving us to do differently from now on? If the wilderness quarantine experience has required of us new patterns, Then how might those new patterns inform us as we move towards Easter?

To put down a few markers, I might suggest: agility, an outward focus, and a concentration on essentials to start off with.

Agility in how we are prepared to respond to opportunity and need as we find it; we responded quickly enough with the imperative to develop online worship. How might we now respond to the challenges presented to us of a society which wonders increasingly about the relevance of Christianity for today's world? All the evidence suggests but what we do best is to respond to need without anxiety and with a joyful preparedness to serve support and challenge. Ready meals by the hundred prepared by our pilgrims kitchen I've been a graceful example of this. The opportunities to engage with society's ongoing affliction by systemic institutional racism is another example, as is the ongoing challenge of inclusion in every aspect of the church's life.

An outward focus might concentrate our minds on what looks like the common good in our town and county and how might we be part of its realisation? Our young people and the impact on their mental health presented by the lockdown will be one immediate area in which we should seek to be involved, bringing our gifts but also being attentive and humble.

And a concentration on the essentials. What is it that we've most missed in the past year? Human contact? The opportunity to gather? Sacramental moments: bread and wine water and oil, physical touch? To recognise how much we've taken these for granted, to long for their resumption and to savour them as the tokens and gifts they are would be a moment of renewal individually and for the

church. To have a real hunger to listen to each other, learn from each other, and allow ourselves to be renewed by concentrating on the essentials of our faith would be a good beginning. Of course there is a part of me as with everybody else that simply longs for a return to normality, the chance to sit in a pub garden with friends over a pint, the longing to be able to hold a newborn great niece or nephew when they arrive. All of these are good and natural desires, But there has also to be a desire for renewal and a rediscovery of our first love in the faith at work within us.

My prayer is that where ever the spirit drives you during Lent, it will be on a journey which begins with the affirmation that you are a beloved child of God, that as you encounter your wilderness, it is in the company of angels, and that as we are all renewed by the Easter mysteries, we can proclaim in our own Galilee that the kingdom is indeed near, that we can reorientate ourselves in its direction, and as a people renewed in hope and faith, be re-equipped to serve once again.

Amen