

Sermon for Riddells Creek and Mount Macedon

1st of March, 2009

Genesis 9:8-17

Mark 1:9-15

Last week, on the last Sunday before Ash Wednesday, we celebrated the Feast of the Transfiguration and listened to a story from the absolute middle of the gospel of Mark; the moment when the inner circle of disciples, Peter, James and John, see who Jesus really is. This morning, the first Sunday of Lent, we find ourselves back at the beginning, before Jesus has called any disciples, when his identity is known only to himself, to God, and to us, Mark's readers. There's a reason for this jumping around. We're at the beginning of Lent, only a few days into the forty that we will spend accompanying Jesus on his journey to the cross. It's appropriate to begin Lent at the beginning, at the start of Jesus' ministry, especially since everything that happens in this story at the beginning of the gospel prepares us for what will happen at the end.

The reading begins with Jesus' baptism in the Jordan by John. Something quite strange is going on. Why would Jesus be baptised? In the passage immediately before today's reading, we're told that John the Baptist appears in the wilderness proclaiming a baptism of *repentance for the forgiveness of sins*. The people from Jerusalem and all Judea come to John and are baptised by him in the river Jordan, *confessing their sins*. Now Jesus comes from Galilee to John at the Jordan, expressly in order to be baptised by him. But Jesus had no need of repentance. Sin is most basically a turning away from God, and Jesus, Emmanuel, God-with-us, lived his life in full relationship with God. John's Gospel perhaps describes it best in his language of the Father and the Son being One. Jesus did not sin, and had no need to repent. So, why, since John is baptising for repentance those who confess their sins, does Jesus seek baptism? Why, after he has been baptised, does a voice from heaven say that God is well pleased with Jesus?

It's all about the Incarnation, God's amazing, unique intervention in history that we celebrate every Christmas. In the Incarnation, God became human, in the most wonderful act of solidarity with humanity, and in his baptism, Jesus, God-with-us, begins his ministry by acting out that solidarity. Jesus' baptism is symbolic of everything that's going to happen. It's an example of the obedience, humility and sacrifice that will shape the course of Jesus' life, ministry and death. John says of Jesus that: "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals." And yet Jesus, like all the others who come from Jerusalem and the whole Judean countryside, comes to enter the water and be baptised by John. At the time being baptised by someone else was a highly unusual procedure. Ritual baths and immersions were common enough, but to allow someone *else* to immerse you added a whole new level of submission and obedience. It was so unusual that John was known as 'the baptiser' because he did it. By being baptised by John in the Jordan, Jesus demonstrates for the first time his obedience to God; the obedience that will continue till his death on the cross.

In response to Jesus' baptism, the heavens are torn and the barriers between God and humanity are withdrawn. This is an end-time image; it comes from a plea in Isaiah: "O, that you would tear open the heavens and come down!"¹ This is exactly what has happened; in Jesus, God has entered into the world in a new way, and this new communion between heaven and earth will never end. At the very end of the gospel, at the end of Jesus' life, there will be another tearing; the curtain of the temple will be torn in two from top to bottom.² In Jesus, every barrier that separates God from humanity has been torn apart.

¹ Isaiah 63:19.

² Mark 15:38.

The Spirit descends upon Jesus and the voice from heaven says “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased”. In the Hebrew Scriptures the term “beloved son” was used of Abraham’s son Isaac, and Abraham is asked to sacrifice his beloved son as a sign of his loyalty to God.³ There is here a subtle hint of Jesus’ destiny; Abraham’s beloved son was saved, God’s own beloved son will not be.

Immediately after Jesus’ baptism, the Spirit drives him out into the wilderness. This whole story is full of Old Testament imagery. The baptism story is of course one of water. The creation story tells of a world covered in water and darkness, before the Spirit swept over the face of the waters and creation began. Water is a gift to people wandering in the desert, but it’s also chaotic, frightening. Today’s reading from Genesis reminds us of that, as it describes the covenant made between God and Noah after the flood had destroyed most of the earth. Entering water in baptism is a symbolic death. At the very beginning of his ministry Jesus dies symbolically as he’ baptised by John. At the end of his ministry Jesus will die again, but that death won’t be symbolic.

And now, after the baptismal story of water we have a story of wilderness, the place in which the people of Israel wandered for forty years after the liberation from Egypt. Jesus is sent there by the Spirit, to be tested by Satan, in the presence of wild beasts. Mark’s story differs from the stories of the temptation in the wilderness of Matthew and Luke. In those gospels, Jesus fasts for forty days and nights and at the end Satan offers him three temptations. In Mark’s story there is no mention of fasting or of specific temptations; instead Satan *tests* Jesus for forty days.

Jesus obeys God, is baptised, is claimed as God’s beloved son and told that God is well pleased with him – and the very next thing that happens is that God sends him to be tested in the wilderness, the place full of forces hostile to God, including wild and dangerous animals. Commissioning means conflict; sonship means struggle. Jesus has been baptised in solidarity with humanity; now he’s tested in further solidarity with us. He experiences danger and isolation. But he also experiences the presence of the love of God. It’s the Spirit who drives Jesus out to the wilderness, and while he’s there he is not only with Satan and wild beasts, but with angels who wait on him. He is bereft of human comfort and exposed to demonic power, but Jesus is also attended by divine care.

Jesus was baptised in solidarity with us. When we’re baptised we know that we follow in his footsteps, and that God’s words of recognition and love addressed to Jesus as he emerges from the water are also addressed to us when we emerge from the waters of baptism. We too are God’s beloved children. And so we too can expect to follow in Jesus’ footsteps by spending time in the wilderness, being tested as Jesus was tested. We know that there will be times in our lives when we are alone and isolated, surrounded by wild beasts. Jesus’ experience reminds us that even in those times of testing we are accompanied by the love of God. Angels wait upon us, even when we can’t see them.

The forty days of Lent that we have just entered replay these forty days that Jesus spends in the wilderness. They are a time when we give up some small bit of human comfort by giving up luxuries on which we normally rely. For forty days, as we accompany Jesus to the cross, we identify with him in his testing. We are able to spend Lent living in solidarity with Jesus, because in Jesus we have seen God enter human life in solidarity with us. Lent is a time of preparation and repentance; Jesus came preaching: “The time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God has come near: repent and believe the good news”. As we approach God’s ultimate act of love in the crucifixion and ultimate victory in the resurrection we prepare ourselves by repenting, changing our hearts, and by believing, living out our faith. We’re able to do that because in Jesus the barriers that separated God from humanity have been destroyed. The kingdom of God has come near, and we are invited to be part of it. Thanks be to God. Amen.

³ Genesis 22:2.