

Mark 1:9-15

9 At that time Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan.

10 Just as Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove.

11 And a voice came from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."

12 At once the Spirit sent him out into the wilderness,

13 and he was in the wilderness forty days, being tempted by Satan. He was with the wild animals, and angels attended him.

14 After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God.

15 "The time has come," he said. "The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!"

Jesus in the desert *Mark 1:9-15*

We've looked at the baptism of Jesus recently but this week I'm going to concentrate on the immediate aftermath of it. Jesus baptised by John was the first public demonstration of who Jesus was, and it's certainly seen as a powerful revelation of what God was about to do, with the Holy Spirit descending on Jesus with all of God's blessing and equipping Him to carry out his mission. But the striking statement here is in verse 12

At once the Spirit sent him out into the wilderness

Two things you immediately notice, after all the glory of the baptism, is that:

Firstly. Jesus goes *straight* into the wilderness

and secondly. It's the Spirit who sends Him.

I'm going to take this as a picture of how our lives as followers of Christ will probably pan out when we've said yes to him publicly and made a commitment to give our lives to Him. The desert, the wilderness, although it's actually a physical place where Jesus goes to be alone, is also an image of his struggle with the reality of what it means to do God's will. At this point he's lived a fairly normal life for 30 years, but now things will change dramatically, because for Jesus the way was never going to be easy. Anyone who thinks christianity is an escape from reality or a crutch to lean on will also be disappointed.

This may explain why many people prefer not to take it seriously. It's not until the step is taken, or even much later, that we realise what the implications really are. Williamson in his commentary puts it this way:

Commissioning means conflict and struggle.

The first experience of Jesus after his baptism was spiritual struggle. And it has to be said that we invariably learn more from our struggles than we do when we're in our comfort zone. If you're playing for the Spurs second team, and do well, you won't be put into the 3rd team, but promoted to the first! So Jesus is in the desert, although when it says 40 days in the wilderness it doesn't necessarily mean that long. It's a symbolic Hebrew phrase meaning 'a considerable time'. Moses was with God on the mountain for 'forty days' as well. The Israelites were 40 years in the desert. John the Baptist also came out of the desert to begin his ministry. So these are the parallels that Mark is drawing with Jewish history. This week marks the start of 40 days of Lent. The issue for Jesus was not so much *physical* survival as spiritual because he was aware of what he was able to do, but also knew that his gifts could be misused. Mark here is very sketchy about the detail, whereas Matthew tells us that Jesus could have turned the stones to bread. He could have tried to get God to prove he was the Messiah by throwing himself off the temple and getting angels to catch him. He could have had political power if he chose that path rather than the one of a suffering servant.

And he did have the choice. If He had simply been unable to sin, it wouldn't have been a real choice. So he's tempted by Satan to make the wrong choices.

In Hebrew Satan means 'adversary'. We don't have to believe that Satan was an actual visible person to know the reality of temptation and of the awareness of what are correct moral choices. We all have a conscience.

Jesus was fully human and so had an active conscience. Jesus once referred to Peter as Satan because he was presenting Jesus with an easier option, and Satan is the one who presents us with easier and more immediately enjoyable possibilities. He's the adversary of all that is true and good, and he will call evil 'good' and good 'evil'. It's a sign of our spiritual blindness that we can see this happening without challenge in our present day politics. Accomplished liars rise to power without challenge. Governments flout the law and get away with it. The word devil comes from the Greek *diabolos*, which means slanderer. He's not supernaturally gifted as he is sometimes portrayed - he's a slanderer and a liar.

The line [*Jesus*] *was with the wild animals, and angels attended him* is also symbolically significant. Wild animals, whether they were dangerous or not, signify that Jesus' road ahead was a difficult one, but that God, through the presence of angels, would reassure Him that the difficult path was the right path.

The problem is that our instinct for comfort is a very powerful temptation and we always tend to go for the easier option. We want a nice life when God is probably calling us to a sacrificial life. Imagine a world where *everyone* lives sacrificially for others.

So where is the good news? How does this relate to us in a time when everyone wants life to get easier and not harder? Mark is as usual short and to the point on this, and immediately after the temptation, without hesitation, (v 14) John is banged up in prison and Jesus is on the road preaching the good news. So we have baptism – which is commissioning and commitment. Temptation – which is conflict and struggle, immediately followed by a clear understanding of God's call to preach the good news.

Before we have time to take a breath, there is *hope*. The message is that the kingdom of God is near, there's a rescue from the mess we've made. As we can see 2000 years on, we've massively increased our knowledge but not our wisdom. The hope for the world in 2021 is just the same, but release from lockdown, without the kingdom and its promise of salvation, is just the start of many other challenges, not least unemployment and the threat of further financial meltdown. Just as John and Jesus said, one by one, all people need to turn back and face the God who made them.

There is no other hope. I have no other suggestion than this.

Of course that's only the start, but from a personal perspective, before I gave my life to God, my main fear was that there was nothing after death.

After an encounter with Christ, that fear was replaced, surprisingly not by looking forward to life after death, but by a celebration of life now in this very moment, because when Jesus speaks of eternal life, he means life with a new quality to it, which is untouched by death, because death becomes just a staging post rather than an end.

Jesus [said], "Everyone who drinks ... water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life."

The invitation today to anyone listening is to drink the spiritual water Jesus offers, the only thing which can quench our spiritual thirst, and give us life which has a different quality of being eternal. If we want that eternal life we only have to ask. Amen