

Lent 1: Mark 1:9-15

Jesus' baptism and testing – preparation for the coming reign of God

Today is the first Sunday in lent. Traditionally this is when we reflect upon “temptation”. And so we come to our text in Mark’s gospel, about Jesus being driven into the wilderness by the Holy Spirit after his baptism, only to reappear proclaiming the arrival of the Kingdom of God.

¹ It is easy to pass over *Mark’s* brief account of Jesus’ time in the wilderness as a poor relation to the more elaborate accounts in Matthew² and Luke³.

Matthew and Luke may well reflect Jesus’ experience as he later related it to the twelve when he taught them privately.⁴ But, if we are to hear what God is saying to us through this text, it is perhaps best to put Matthew and Luke out of mind and approach Mark’s account on its own terms.

As I have said in previous weeks, Mark, Peter’s interpreter (as Papias calls him⁵), seeks to theologise about the *meaning* of Jesus even as he faithfully records Peter’s recollections of what Jesus said and did. In the *juxtaposition* of events and sayings, no less than the re-presentation of Peter’s words, therefore, Mark is telling us something. Mark does this against the backdrop of a whole biblical tradition.

So today, I want to give attention to the *relation* of the three blocks of scripture which make up our Gospel reading, as well as their relation to themes from the wider scriptural context.

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⁶ Jesus probably began his public ministry around A.D. 27, when he was about thirty years old. His childhood and youth, about which we know very little, were spent in the village of Nazareth in Galilee. Mark chooses to ignore this period of Jesus’ life and cut to the chase, as it were.

¹ For detail of much what follows, see Fr. Brendan Byrne, *A Costly Freedom ~ A theological reading of Mark’s Gospel*, Liturgical press, Collegeville Minnesota, 2008. pg.33 f.f. Quotes are not shown here.

² Mtt.4:1-11.

³ Lk.4:1-13.

⁴ Lk.10:23.

⁵ See Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, Eerdmans 2006, ch.3 & ch.9.

⁶ See *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, Zondervan software as the background for what follows. Quotes are not shown here.

At the beginning of his gospel, then, Mark's concern is to connect these two stories in short order, in a way that both sets up the central conflict and theme of his narrative and moves us on to understand who Jesus is and the nature of his mission: Jesus the faithful Israelite emerges, in his proclamation of the immanence of God's reign upon the earth, as Jesus Messiah, the Holy One of God, set on a confrontation with, and overcoming of, the powers of evil ranged against God's people and the incoming reign of God.

And so, in his rather bare account, Mark simply tells us that after his baptism, Jesus was in the wilderness for forty days where he is confronted by Satan.

The same Greek word for this confrontation does service for both "tempt" and "test". Here it is probably better to translate that Jesus was "*being tested*", rather than "being tempted". This gives us useful biblical precedents where God tests people called to play a significant role in the drama of humanity's redemption, and gives us a key to discover what Mark is saying to us.

The classic instance of God's testing of Abraham⁷ by (seemingly at least), requiring of him the sacrifice of his only Son Isaac, comes to mind.⁸ The forty days recalls the experience of Moses on Mount Sinai⁹ and the forty-day journey of Elijah, who was also fed by an angel.¹⁰

The forty days also recalls the great deluge, the "baptism" through which the faithful Noah and his family endured.¹¹ Just as from Noah's baptism of testing there emerged a new people of God, we find in Mark's narrative, soon after *his* baptism and testing, Jesus calls his disciples and *re-constitutes* this people of God as he appoints the twelve apostles.¹² As with Noah and his family, this will be the beginning of a new humanity "born again from above" (as John puts it¹³), in the image of Jesus, the one after God's very own heart.¹⁴

But with the scene of Jesus' testing being set in the wilderness, God's dealings with the Children of Israel for forty years in the wilderness following their exodus from Egypt, is undoubtedly being referenced here.¹⁵ The Hebrew

⁷ Heb.11:7.

⁸ Gen.22:1-18.

⁹ Ex.34:28; Deut.9:8,18.

¹⁰ 1Kgs.19:1-8.

¹¹ Gen.7:12.

¹² Mk.3:13-19.

¹³ Jn.3:3.

¹⁴ Jn.1:18.

¹⁵ Deut.8:1-5; 13:3.

people became constituted as a nation, not just through “baptism” as they escaped through the sea, but in the formative testing that followed in the wilderness.

Such testing may or may not include “temptation” (it certainly didn’t in the case of Abraham). But it did involve the placing of people in *extremis*, on the edge, where, in the absence of the usual human resources and support, the strength of their faithfulness to God’s calling can be both assessed and refined.

Since Israel is God’s “son” or “child”,¹⁶ the biblical tradition describes God’s testing of Israel in the wilderness through the image of a father’s disciplinary testing or training of a son.¹⁷

This, then, is the background to Mark’s record of Jesus’ “testing”.

Jesus has just seen the Spirit descend upon him and has received assurance of his relational status as God’s Son. Now in the wilderness, he relives the experience of Israel being tested as God’s Son and disciplined for his mission that lies ahead. That mission will also prove a great testing, a testing which will involve an aggressive conflict with the powers opposed to God and the reassertion of God’s rule in the world.

At this early stage of Mark’s gospel, though, the testing of Jesus in the wilderness anticipates and prepares him for the supreme test that, as “the beloved Son”, he will undergo in his Passion – beginning with his anguish as he prays in Gethsemane and concluding with his cry of anguish on the cross.

Perhaps the best comment, both on the present test and the one that lies ahead, comes from the writer to the Hebrews:

In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered; and having been made

¹⁶ Ex.4:22; Deut.14:1; Hos.11:1.

¹⁷ Deut.8:5; 32:10.

perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him.¹⁸

This is not the place to go into issues around whether God's purposes evil for good.¹⁹ I am simply noting that the notion of disciplinary testing, is one way in which biblical thought interprets the experience of suffering visited upon those who are otherwise devoted to God's cause.

It is not a view with which contemporary spirituality or theology is comfortable. Certainly, contemporary society which seeks comfort from the cradle to the grave as the highest good, finds this inconceivable. Yet, what such thinking is trying to express is the sense that God's good providence is present and at work even in situations where, in our experience, it seems most utterly absent.²⁰

This is no easy claim to make. All of us experience wilderness times where we find ourselves with "wild beasts": we lose loved ones or are betrayed; we struggle with illness, loneliness, bewilderment and suffer disappointments; we endure injuries to both body and soul; bad things befall our children or those we love.

Wild beasts can also live within – such was the experience of the demoniacs we find Jesus throughout Mark's gospel. In difficult times we are surprised to learn things about ourselves we would rather not. My old Vicar used to say, that when you knock the cup it spills whatever is inside. Elsewhere in Mark's "good news", Jesus is recorded as saying "It is what comes out of a person that defiles."²¹

At times we find ourselves locked into such battles with ourselves or the situations we find ourselves in, seemingly without any hope of deliverance.

Yet this wilderness time is also when we may be "waited upon by angels";²² where we can especially find God's presence mediated to us in an intense, albeit an unexpected, way.

For Jesus, as he either sought to escape the clamour of those who were after him, or simply to meet with God in the midst of turmoil, the wilderness

¹⁸ Heb.5:7-9.

¹⁹ See Jacob's making sense of his treatment at the hands of his brothers. Gen.45:5-8a.

²⁰ See also, most notably the story of Job.

²¹ Mk.7:20.

²² Mk.1:13.

became not just a place of testing but a place of *sustenance* and *grace*. So it can be for us.

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In the middle of this last week, a group of us met here in this church to make our lenten vows at an Ash Wednesday service. It was good to commit to a period of self-examination and penitence, and to focus upon Jesus' faithfulness to his calling.

Yet the beginning of lent is always difficult. With the cross signed upon us we are marked with the symbol not just of our destiny as those redeemed by Christ's death, but the rough road upon which we travel through it.

This year, in particular, Mark's Gospel gives us no soft edges in which to take shelter, but rather seems to me, to be full of challenge. Today's reading of baptism, testing and proclamation of the coming reign of God, sets the tone as well as the agenda.

Some take home points:

Firstly: If we are to follow Jesus, we are to follow him into his baptism and through his testing. There is no escaping this.

Secondly: To be sustained in this, we need to claim our status as daughters and sons of God: we need to go deep within the life of God in order to receive the anointing of his Spirit and experience the sustaining presence of God with us and within. To do this, we need to be open to hearing God's word to us, no matter how difficult.

Thirdly: When we submerge ourselves in God, we need have no fear, no matter what evil or "wild beast" we encounter. This testing is an extension of, and the meaning of, *our* baptism, just as it was the extension and meaning of *Jesus'* baptism. Entering into such a baptism involves embracing our vulnerability as human beings; it involves, in humility, abandoning our rights before God and accepting that wilderness experience as part of our calling, part of our equipping for our mission of proclaiming the presence of God among us and within us.

Fourthly: We are baptised to be sent into a difficult task that requires discipline. We should expect a life of grief and conflict if we are about God's

business of confronting the powers of the evil one. This too is part of our baptism of testing.

Lastly: In all this we should expect a blessing, we should expect an anointing, we should expect God to meet with us and lavish his sustaining, life-giving grace upon us. Throughout these early chapters of Mark's "good news", the Spirit is everywhere evident: anointing, propelling, driving, strengthening, sustaining. We should expect and seek no less from God today.