

Fr Tom's homily for The First Sunday of Lent 2021

First Reading: Genesis 9:8-15
Second Reading: 1 Peter 3:18-22
Gospel: Mark 1:12-15



It can be very easy for us to become complacent in the yearly liturgical cycle, we do it every year and so we know what to expect. The first Sunday in Lent always has the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness as the gospel. We all know the story, and how Jesus was tempted, and yet we are brought up short today. Mark's gospel doesn't go into the detail of Jesus' temptation that other gospels do. Mark is much punchier; I remember being told that Mark's gospel is the gospel of action. So when I first sat with these scriptures earlier this week, I felt I had been short changed but that was because I have become complacent in what I expect during these weeks of Lent.

My understanding of this scripture passage was renewed when I was rereading Pope Benedict's book 'Jesus of Nazareth'. He explains how Mark shows the parallels between Adam and Jesus. Mark tells us that that the Spirit drove Jesus out into the wilderness – echoes of Adam and Eve being driven out of the Garden of Eden. But the difference is the desert – the opposite image of the garden becomes the place of reconciliation and healing. The wild animals that are with Jesus are no longer a threat, they become man's best friends as once they were in paradise and peace is restored.

But today's gospel doesn't linger in the desert, there is an urgency in Jesus' action after his time in the desert. *After John had been arrested, Jesus went into Galilee. There he proclaimed the Good News from God. 'The time has come' he said 'and the kingdom of God is close at hand. Repent, and believe the Good News.'*

Pope Benedict points out that the translation of *evangelion* as 'Good News' downplays the magnitude of Jesus' message. It is a saving message, but one that changes the world for the better. It is a message that has authority and is not just talk, but reality. The reality is the Kingdom of God which is core to Jesus' preaching. The kingdom of God occurs 122 times in the New Testament and 99 of those are in Matthew, Mark or Luke, with 90 of those being from the words of Jesus.

In talking about the Kingdom of God, Jesus is basically saying that 'God exists' and 'God really is God'. His call to repent is to return to the Lord, by turning around and being in full relationship with the Lord. He is calling us out of the banishment of the wilderness and back into that loving relationship with the Lord.

In the Eucharist prayer that I will use at Mass we hear the beautiful words

*You, therefore, almighty Father,
we bless through Jesus Christ your Son,
who comes in your name.
He himself is the Word that brings salvation,*

*the hand you extend to sinners,
the way by which your peace is offered to us.*

*When we ourselves had turned away from you
on account of our sins,
you brought us back to be reconciled, O Lord,
so that, converted at last to you,
we might love one another
through your Son,
whom for our sake you handed over to death.*

That is the core of Jesus' mission, to save us and reconcile us with our loving father. That is what the Kingdom of God is about. As Pope Benedict says we can only understand the 'Kingdom of God' in the light of the whole of Jesus' preaching. It is something that calls us to action. It is not something that is passive and we are to sit waiting for it like a 140 bus.

How are we this Lent? Are we going deeper into our relationship? Are we deepening our prayer life? Prayer is not a one-sided relationship, it is not just our longing for God, but God's longing for us. Prayer is an awakening to the fact that our fulfilment lies in God. A deep prayer life is one that leads us to be people of action. We are not only called to contemplate God, but to imitate. It is the relationship that makes us alive. We are to be people who are changed. Can we be recognised as someone who is reconciled with God. Do we have the humility to rely on him as Jesus did in the desert or do we see ourselves as self-sufficient?

Are we actively putting ourselves into a relationship with the Lord? – but it is also a relationship that leads us to love others. On this Sunday we can contemplate how we are restored to that relationship from which we separate ourselves from through sin. We deepen our relationship with the Lord, and because of that we are led to turn to him once again.

As we prayed in the psalm

Lord, make me know your ways.

Lord, teach me your paths.

*Make me walk in your truth, and teach me:
for you are God my saviour.*

Let us walk that journey together.

Fr James and Fr Tom wish you a blessed Sunday. Keep safe and well, and never hesitate to pick up the telephone and be in touch. See you in church I hope! Keep in close contact with the website for news of how practical plans are developing.