



Mark 1.9-13
18th February 2018

Sometimes there is.... a moment

Gracious God – may your Living Word come to us afresh this morning – so touch, we pray our minds and hearts with your grace and truth – through Christ our Lord and in the power of your Spirit. Amen

Sometimes there is a moment.

Actually Shakespeare put it rather better when he said: *There is a tide in the affairs of men...*

A moment when the conditions are right and we can set sail and chart a new course in our lives.

Well I think St Mark is describing such a moment in chapter one of his gospel. It's the start of something. Verse 9: *It was at this time that Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee...*

At this time...

In a way, biographically speaking, Jesus comes from those hidden years spent at home. We don't know much about his growing up and his years of formation. We presume his was a typical Jewish boyhood – centred on home and synagogue. We use a bit of detective work and mix it with an ounce or two of imagination and come up with the idea that Joseph might have died early on and Jesus, as the firstborn, took on that village carpentry business. His skill providing the income the family would have needed.

I remember, once, calling in to see a church member on her 100th birthday and she patted my hands. She said: *ah, nice hands, the sort that don't do any work!* Wasn't she astute!

Maybe Jesus had workmanlike hands. Perhaps from 12 years old he'd had been using his tools at the carpenter's bench. He had cuts and bruises – gnarled hands, rough hands.

But that time was now coming to an end. Just as he would call Peter and Andrew away from their fishing nets, so he himself had left his carpenter's tools behind as he stood on the brink of a new chapter.

Theologians sometimes call such times a Kairos Moment. That point when a God given opportunity is matched by a God prompted response. That coming together of a need and a solution.

I like the account George Carey gives of the day he was offered the job of Archbishop. He was met by Eileen Carey at Bath's railway station – in his hand was the Prime Minister's letter of invitation. What was he to do? Together they went into a local pub and talked it through. And there and then, in the pub George and Eileen Carey prayed together – and surrounded by ordinary folk having a lunchtime drink, George Carey decided to accept the invitation – that great challenge - to become Pastor to the Nation.

Jesus seems to detect that this was a moment in his life, to leave Nazareth and start a new journey.

We were in Southampton over Christmas visiting my brother and as we went down a hill and up the other side on the outskirts of the city one of our sons shouted from the back seat – *is this the dip Dad?*

Now I was amazed they remembered this stretch of the road from previous visits, but yes, it was 'the' dip. It was the dip in the road I was driving one day on my way to work at The Midland Bank where I have a memory of making a decision to apply for ordination training. Of course, lots of thinking had led up to that moment, but in my, probably now embellished memory, I went down the dip an employee of the bank and came up the other side a potential ministerial candidate.

So if ever you are on the Hamble side of Southampton driving along the A27 just before you get to the Tesco roundabout, that's my special dip in the road – one of 'the moments' in my life.

You'll have your own dips! You'll have your own moments. Times when God has been tapping you on the shoulder, prompting you forward, urging you to take the next step.

This was such a time for Jesus, as he comes up from Nazareth.

The second 'moment' in today's reading is the baptism of Jesus in the Jordan by John.

Other gospel writers start the story of Jesus at Bethlehem in a manger but Mark begins it in a river with a baptism.

It feels like a turning point in the Jesus' narrative marking a transition from private citizen to public preacher.

Now William Barclay – the Scottish Bible Teacher – puts a spoke in the works when he says: To any thinking person the baptism of Jesus presents a problem.

Well yes, in a way I suppose it does on one level if we view John's baptism as being one of repentance.

Yet part of the meaning of repentance is to turn around, it's about facing a new direction with dedication and that, in many ways, is what the baptism of Jesus seems to be about. A moment of consecration.

We have a new covering for the baptistry here at AFC and in some ways this new feature actually emphasises the baptistry alongside the font better than its former prospects covering. Whether baptising a baby or a believer, both forms speak of us dedicating ourselves and those we love to God and God reassuring us of his enduring and sustaining love.

And that is what happened at Christ's baptism. Mark describes it in a poetic way – it's as if at this moment Jesus is blessed by God the Father as he hears the words: You are my beloved.

Maybe as Mark sets out to retell the story of Jesus he wants to make the point that in all that will happen next, all the controversy, all the drama, all the violence – this is the story of God's beloved. The story of Jesus is the story of God at work in our world, challenging our ideals and inspiring our hopes and dreams.

Just as God went through the Red Sea with his people in the story of the Exodus, leading them to the Promised Land, so he is there with Jesus in the waters of baptism and in all that follows leading up to the cross and resurrection.

At that time Jesus came from Nazareth, and he was baptised by John.

Now what of the third 'moment' in today's New Testament reading: *At once the Spirit drove him out into the wilderness, and there he remained for forty days tempted by Satan.*

In bible speak 40 days, or 40 years simply means a long time. The Israelites were wondering in the desert for 40 years, for a long time before entering the Promised Land and here Jesus spends an extended time of trial on that high plateau running like a spine down the country called The Wilderness.

Of course, today is the first Sunday of Lent – that ancient 40 day fast that prepares us for Easter.

And Lent seems serious, it has something of The Wilderness about it. Wild

beasts, ministering angels, struggle, facing up to temptation and looking inside ourselves to find reserves of trust and dedication to God.

It's good to start new things and come up from Nazareth. It's good to be baptised. Yet this third 'moment' in Mark 1 is where the rubber really hits the road.

The Wilderness is where Jesus' had to answer serious questions about his motivation, it's where he had to place real trust in the strength promised by God the Father, it's where he had to examine his heart and positively set it on God's agenda.

And Lent seems real for us too. It's a time for us to name that which is tough in our lives, the bereavements that have gone deep, the struggles that persist, the family anxieties that come our way. And perhaps too Lent is a good time to also acknowledge that our faith is often full of questions.

We all go through the wilderness – maybe it's even true that on our best days there is always a moment or two of wilderness about us.

So, in a story that is barely told in Mark, but one placed immediately after baptism, Jesus confronts his demons in his wilderness and makes those positive choices to take God's path, respond to God's call, trust in God's provision.

Lent is about so much more than giving up chocolate – it's our call to ground faith in the reality of life and find there the presence of God which makes pilgrimage possible.

One of the joys of serving as a minister is talking to folk who have been walking this journey of faith for decades – who are no longer novices! I was once having such a conversation with Miss Streeter in one of my former churches. Irene was blind and near the end of her life. She had a smile that would light up any room. She asked me to guess the names of her guardian angels. Well I failed! She said they were called; Goodness and Mercy – because according to Psalm 23 they followed her every day of her life. Wasn't that lovely – a statement of trust having walked this way of faith for decades.

In the Wilderness Jesus isn't alone, the presence of God is signified by those angels. In life we are not alone. Every moment of every day God the Holy Spirit is alongside us, enabling us to live those moments in Wilderness or Promised Land supported and sustained by that deep presence of love that makes life and hope possible.

So in such 'moments' this Lent may God's peace and strength be yours, in the name of The Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.