

We start our Lenten series of sermons by focussing on Jesus's baptism and temptation narratives in Mark's gospel. Compared with the more fulsome accounts of the other three gospel writers, Mark gives only the briefest of accounts and offers little detail.

There is nothing about Jesus being the lamb of God, or John the Baptist saying he was unworthy to baptise Jesus and that it should be the other way round with Jesus baptising him. Nor does Mark say anything about Jesus's dialogue with Satan in the wilderness.

However, by just giving the sparsist of detail, I think Mark is deliberately inviting us to focus on the few details that he does offer. The surprises that lie hidden in the small print, as it were.

Let me show you what I mean from the opening verse 9.

V 9: "At that time Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptised by John in the Jordan".

- **Jesus came from Nazareth....** Mark reveals to us that God constantly surprises. Remember the words spoken by Nathaniel in John's gospel "can anything good ever come out of Nazareth?" Well, yes, Mark reminds us - it can.
- **Nazareth in Galilee....** Judea was the leading tribe and centre of Israel's political and religious leadership yet out of the humble origins of a third-rate village in second-class Galilee comes the Messiah. Mark is reminding us that Christianity is not just the preserve of the elite. Indeed, it is the place of the poor, the humble, and the underclasses too.
- **Baptised by John....** John, a Nazarene whose mere presence amongst Judeans would be considered offensive. Mark is reminding us that God chooses unlikely people to fulfil his purposes and challenges us to ask how God might be using ourselves, because whoever we are, and regardless of our status, ability or personality, God can use us.
- **In the Jordan....** A Jewish holy site, powerfully symbolic of spiritual rebirth. Joshua had led Israel across the Jordan from their 40-year desert existence into the promised land. Mark is reminding that this is a continuation of God's **great plan**.

So, it should come as no surprise that at the precise moment Jesus is baptised when, according to Matthew, 'the heaven was opened', Mark describes much more violently that heaven is torn open. The only other place Mark uses the word 'torn' is at the moment Jesus dies on the cross and the temple curtain is torn in two, from top to bottom.

Mark is challenging us to contrast and compare the significance of these two signposts marking the start and end of Jesus's earthly ministry. Two instances when the boundaries of heaven and earth are ruptured.

In the opening verse to his gospel, Mark proclaims Jesus as the Son of God and of course here, a few verses on, God the Father himself proclaims Jesus as his Son. Not really a case of Mark saying, told you so, more a case of listen carefully to what I'm telling you. It's true.

What's more, the Spirit of God is described as descending on Jesus like a dove. To me that evokes a scene of gentleness and serenity, totally overlooking that the Spirit had descended from a heaven torn apart, according to Mark.

A dichotomy for me to chew in, for sure, because this is the same Spirit of God that moved over the face of deep waters as the world was created out of chaos in the Genesis narrative.

Not only does Mark's brevity of detail continue in his account of Jesus's wilderness temptations, but he also ups the tempo. Here, Jesus is sent, not led by the Spirit as Matthew and Luke record. For me that is an important and more forceful difference.

My one and only experience of being sent into the wilderness was part of the outward-bound training module of my PE teaching course was when I was 18, fresh out of school and totally wet behind the ears as far as fending for myself was concerned.

The brief was simple. I was given a map with two points marked on it. I was accompanied by the instructor to point A somewhere in the middle of the [Brecon Beacons](#), where I would be left to find my own way to point B where he would meet me the following day.

I remember watching the instructor turning around and within 5 minutes not only was he out of sight but there was literally not another sign of life to be had. No road, no building, no telegraph poles. [Nothing](#).

He had **led** me to point A, but now I was being **sent** to point B - and remember, this was in the days when mobile phones, sat nav and the like were only found in science fiction novels.

Unlike Jesus, I was alone. I can say this confidently because, despite his brevity, Mark offers one detail missing from the other accounts. Jesus [was with wild animals and angels attended him](#). Mind you, I don't know how I would have coped if I had encountered wild animals, with or without the presence of [angels](#).

But for Jesus, it was different. He had the comfort of scripture to draw on and no doubt he recalled that Isaiah had prophesised that in God's coming kingdom all creatures would live harmoniously, as we heard in our first reading.

Mark certainly doesn't say that explicitly or even implicitly, but I can't help but think that he included the detail that Jesus was with wild animals as another signpost of God's kingdom being near.

And Mark would surely have been inviting us to understand that angels are a natural part of God's kingdom. Together, the wild animals, angels and Jesus provide a brief glimpse of the ultimate harmony intended by God in his creation.

I hope I have shown that a lack of detail in Mark's account should not prevent us from seeking out more, because what I have said today is merely an introduction to the good news that Jesus starts to proclaim on his return from the wilderness.

But more of that next week.

Amen

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