

Christ's Baptism and Temptation

Mark 1:9-15.

Jane Ward-Hall, 21 February 2021

On this first Sunday in Lent our reading from Mark's gospel says a huge amount in just 3 short paragraphs. It's so down to earth, so full of movement. It ranges from Jesus travelling from Nazareth, meeting his cousin John, being baptised in the Jordan, hearing those wonderful words, the Father God spoke, "You are my son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased", then immediately being driven by the Holy Spirit into the wilderness for 40 days, to fast and be tempted; then John, being imprisoned and Jesus starting His public ministry, declaring His foundational message "The time has come, the Kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news". At first sight does everything that happens in this passage sound like good news? Well, the affirmation of God's love but I'm not so sure about the rest.

Here we are in lockdown and good news can be hard to find when we are bombarded by shockingly sad stories every day. Perhaps gospel good news means something different from what we tend to think of as good news in our culture. There is so much loss around. We have to accept that suffering is an unavoidable part of human life. But what we want to know is, what is God doing about it?

In all my struggles I believe that God cares and is always at work in His creation. His ways are loving and He always works for our good even though we can't see it.

I've often thought things must have been easy for Jesus. He was divine as well as human, surely everything just fell into place for Him. But did it? Why was He driven into the wilderness to be tested as soon as it had been confirmed that He was God's son? There are probably many answers but I believe He went through those 40 difficult days for us. Everything Jesus went through was for love of us. In every possible way Jesus has gone before us. Experiencing all the pain and struggles of human life so He can stand with us, comfort us and help us. This is where we start getting a sense of what gospel good news might be about.

It says in First Corinthians "Jesus became for us wisdom from God, that is our righteousness, holiness and redemption." Could Jesus' time in the wilderness have something to do with our redemption?

God specialises in making good what has gone wrong. Through Jesus God sets things right for us. I think essentially this is what redemption means.

It seems to me that an aspect of God's redemption of us is making good the mistakes of the past. Jesus experiences everything that life can throw at Him, all the challenges, but somehow when we see how Jesus coped with a situation it opens the door for a different outcome for us. Jesus stands firm in the face of Satan's temptations in the wilderness; what might this make good for us?

I find myself thinking of the first temptation we read about in the bible. Adam and Eve disobeying God by eating fruit. It sounds such a simple mistake but it represents a decision that's had disastrous consequences throughout human history. Satan asked them the question "Did God really say?" A frequent question Satan uses! It caused them, and us, to doubt God's goodness, it suggests that God was withholding good things from them and couldn't be trusted. If you can't trust that God is good what do you do? You take control yourself, look out for No1, and put your trust elsewhere. That's what Adam and Eve did. That's what we do.

Jesus' experience in the wilderness tested him. Jesus chose God's way not Satan's way. Jesus stood firm trusting in the goodness of His Father. The outcome was different to that in the garden of Eden,

Jesus overturned the consequences of original sin for us. This is really good news for us. It means we don't have to be limited by past sin, other people's or our own. Jesus makes a new way for us.

But this doesn't mean that we don't sin or won't ever be tempted to doubt God's goodness and be in need of forgiveness. Jesus offers us freedom. Our freedom means we always have a choice to follow God's way or not. Every day we are faced with decisions, many seemingly inconsequential, but it's worth thinking which choice is more loving?

It's worth reminding ourselves that when we acknowledge God as our Heavenly Father we can trust that He is always working for our good in everything that happens, even the things we wouldn't chose, things that we call bad.

The evangelist J John used to speak of a car as a metaphor for life and say where would Jesus be in your car? It's an interesting question! When I first heard this, years ago, I was driving and Jesus demoted to the back seat. Nowadays I like to think I let Jesus drive the car but I have to admit, it's a dual control car like those that driving instructors have, I'm in the front too with my foot hovering over the break!

How about you? Where is Jesus in your car of life this lent?

As we ponder this, what action God might be inviting us to take?

How is Jesus, our redeemer, wanting us to draw closer to Him? Lent can be an opportunity for self denial or to try something new, maybe a different way of praying.

Wilderness experiences, and we could see lockdown as one, involve a lot of silence. Offering God our silence, our difficult thoughts or feelings, maybe taking the risk to open up to a friend, we may receive unexpected blessing, as we repent and believe the good news. Our Heavenly Father does indeed work every detail of our lives of love into something good. (cf Rom 8:28 msg).