**Mark 1.9-15 The Baptism and Temptation of Christ**

“Can I tempt you?” is a question we often associate with hospitality – the offer of cake or something else delicious which we regard as a treat. In that respect it is usually a positive action, a friendly gesture.

But of course that’s not always the case and certainly for Christians, the words tempt / temptation have negative connotations too – indeed we pray “lead us not into temptation”.

In our Gospel reading on this, the first Sunday of Lent, we hear of Christ’s temptation in the wilderness. In the verses we are looking at, one might say that it is positioned as a temptation sandwich, in that Mark places it directly between the baptism of Jesus and the beginning of his public ministry. And it is told in the characteristic breakneck speed of Mark’s writing – he relates all three of these very significant events in just 7 verses. Whereas Luke takes 17 verses for the same narrative and Matthew is even longer at 22!

In these seven, succinct verses, Mark describes the baptism of Christ, tells us that the Holy Spirit descends on Jesus at his baptism and then drives him out into the wilderness for forty days, where he is tempted by Satan. And that he then starts to evangelise in his home district of Galilee.

And Mark places wild beasts and angels in the desert account too. This helps I think, to see life stripped down to the essentials. No distractions in the desert, just a focus on the fundamentals of good, of evil and of creation / nature.

The desert is an unexpected place. And we too have been driven into an unexpected place over the past year. I wonder if this has felt to you like a desert experience in any way? Perhaps concentrating the mind which can be difficult to achieve in the hustle and bustle of normal, everyday life.

Lent is an appropriate time to review our desert experiences: have we recognised them for what they are? What are our temptations and distractions and how have we dealt with them? Or perhaps we haven’t dealt with them…. And how can our desert experience prepare us for the future?

And we might ask ourselves, in the midst of this danger and threat in the wilderness, what are the promises of God? Well, we have today’s Old Testament reading to help us here - the passage describing God’s covenant with Noah.[[1]](#footnote-1) This covenant states categorically that death and destruction have no part to play in God’s relationship with humanity and all creation. God vows never to destroy all flesh, an affirmation of his faithfulness to all creatures. Or to put it another way, the story of Noah symbolises God’s grace, saving his people through terrible catastrophe.

We may destroy each other, but God will not destroy us.

And the story of Noah also symbolises our baptism: in both we come through water to salvation.

I think it is helpful to give some thought to the positioning of the baptism of Christ and his temptation together. There is no mistaking that the temptation follows hard on the heels of the baptism.

So why is this significant?

In normal times, we have quite a lot of baptisms in our benefice – usually babies or toddlers, but occasionally adults. And they are happy occasions – a time for cake and parties as we celebrate a new beginning, we celebrate being part of God’s family.

And yet of course, there is a darker, more difficult, side to baptism. The candidates, or their parents and godparents, are asked: “do you reject the devil and all rebellion against God”, to which they reply “I reject them”. Now some who make this promise may not realise the significance of what they are saying.

But what they are doing is beginning a duel, a fight with the enemy of all that God wants from us. Some will describe that as the devil, or Satan, some are less comfortable with that terminology. But whatever you choose to call it, in baptism it is important to realise that we are called to live as Jesus teaches us and that throughout our lives we will be faced with temptations to take us away from that path. We are called to surrender to Jesus, to follow his example. His whole life - not just his passion and crucifixion – his whole life was a sacrifice of surrender to the will of the Father. And that is our calling too.

And that can be a tough and sometimes lonely call. Jesus is driven out on his own, into the wilderness, the desert. He is removed from his family, friends, sent out on his own to face these trials. He is alone.

Now I don’t know about you, but that strikes a chord with me – temptation seems to take hold when we allow ourselves to wander from the group / when we are feeling lonely and perhaps more vulnerable to suggestions which have no place in Christian life.

I was talking to someone recently who was questioning the need to come to church. I hesitate to be proscriptive about that – coming to church doesn’t on its own make us good Christians and on occasion it can seem sadly unhelpful if members of a church community aren’t working well together.

But having said that, we do all need feeding, need support and love in our Christian journey and generally our church family will give that. Baptism is just the first step, temptation is a life-long battle, best, it seems to me, undertaken with others.

As we walk through Lent and prepare together for Holy Week, let me end with some words from our Diocesan Lent Course: “let us this Lent clear a space inside us where the voice of Jesus can resound as it once did in Galilee”.. Or to quote Bishop Martin in his recent Ad Clerum: “Do less, pray more and let God renew you.” Amen

1. Genesis 9.8-17 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)