

First Sunday of Lent

26th February 2012

Genesis 9:8-17, Psalm 25:1-10, 1 Peter 3:18-22, Mark 1:9-15

In the name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.

Just to explain we've made a few changes during Lent, which are part of the tradition and liturgy of the Church, and those who are following the programme of Lent studies will know that week by week we're actually looking at the meaning and the purpose of the liturgy of the church —what is it that we do together Sunday by Sunday, and how does that relate to who we are, and how does that relate to the scriptures and are they all linked together somehow? For Lent, traditionally, all the crosses are covered up, which gives us a period whereby, if you like, there's an absence of Christ —it's like taking the Christ out of Christians. And many people don't notice the difference —funny that! We will notice the difference on Easter when they all come back in again and again that's part of the purpose of the process.

The number of candles in the church is reduced, so that we become more aware at Easter of the coming and the significance of the Light. And the font is also covered because traditionally there would be no baptisms during Lent, because Lent was the period of preparation and the baptisms would all occur on Easter Day; so the font is closed. There are no flowers in the front of the church - again we're given just a hint of that wilderness experience, and come Easter, the place will be filled with flowers again. So all of the changes that are made are there to help us engage the journey of Lent.

Now on top of that layer we've taken the service we've become fairly familiar with and gone back to the green prayer book. And again the differences are fairly subtle, but the service we have today is exactly as per the prayer book. As we go through Lent we will bring into that service some of the changes that we have made as a community here, so that we can experience some of the movement that we have already experienced. So it's just an opportunity to tune in and become a little more aware and even wince at those points that deserve wincing at. Today's Collect comes

out of the prayer book and echoes the prayers, the collective prayers, of the church. I wince at that as an orientation for the people of God and would delightfully question where on earth did they get that from? Who on earth would sit down and write such a prayer, having read the scriptures?

But rather than me whinge about the prayer book, let's look at the scriptures. Why do we have the Gospel reading of Jesus being baptized in the Jordan for the first Sunday of Lent? Whole raft of answers but there are two that are stunningly obvious. One is that this is the beginning of Lent — and also a new beginning for us, each of us and all of us, and baptism is the ritual of beginning - in the Body of Christ, in the eyes of the church, in the acceptance of the promise that our faith holds, baptism is the beginning. It also signifies in the reading today the beginning of the Jesus' ministry; before that he did nothing, after that he did everything. It's a turning point. And it is also the beginning of his gospel; it is the place that Mark chooses in order to tell the story of the good news of Jesus. The second obvious reason for today's gospel reading is that it contains the underlying text that supports the ritual of Lent: *He was in the wilderness forty days*. So as we sit and wait to buy our Easter eggs so Jesus had to wait forty days in the wilderness.

In reflecting on the first of these gospel contexts for where we are today at the start of Lent, it is interesting to consider the other gospels and to see what their *beginning* looks like. And some speculation is always good. I would speculate that Mark, or the writer of Mark's gospel, was not a family man; he had no children. That's not a documented fact, it's just a guess, because Mark chooses to start his gospel with the Baptism of Jesus; Jesus is an adult. Mark doesn't choose to start way back at birth. Rather he wants us to see and appreciate that the integration of God with Man, the integration of Divinity with Humanity, the coming together, is a deliberate event, and a turning point in life.

Luke was more likely a family man with children running around everywhere, evidenced by the fact that Luke chooses to reveal exactly the same truth - the revelation of God in humanity - but using the narrative of birth, for as a family man birth would have been the experience of new beginning, the obvious experience of creating something new. Matthew, another family man similar to Luke, but more conservative —Matthew wore grey suits. Matthew was not quite the risk-taker that the others were, because he wants to hang onto the past, the traditions of his heritage. So right before he tells the story of Jesus' birth, he fills a couple of pages with what we used to call the 'begats'; a genealogy, a family tree. It's almost the same story as Luke's, trying to illuminate for us how Divinity came to reside in Humanity, but he hedges his bets slightly by saying, 'And it's linked to the

past. Don=t let go of anything; this is a new beginning but hang onto all that was begat in the past. John was obviously a better mathematician than all three, because he approaches the telling of the story with a mystical abstraction; he speaks in a language that comes from a more complex, more abstract mind-space than that of the simple story teller. He requires us to actually do some spiritual algebra in order to make sense.

As we come into the place of Lent, we might re‡ect on how we would begin our gospel; how would we seek to convey the good news that is revealed to us through our knowing of God; how would we seek to convey the change in life that we find in following Christ? What story might we use? And the gospel writers, because they all use different starting points, give us permission to vary the story and to explore each and every setting, to illustrate and illuminate and to discover ourselves in relation to God.

We begin Lent with Mark=s illustration of God becoming evident in humanity: And *the Spirit descended like a dove*. The crew of Apollo 11 might have announced it differently - "the eagle has landed'. Mark is saying, 'the world has changed, in this moment.÷Matthew, Luke and John certainly announced it differently and so it is important for us to not to get hung up on the event. It is not the event that is important, but what is being revealed through that event. If we only appreciate the event itself as important then we=ll end up investing the value of the story in the person of Jesus, and then when we follow the story and come to the Divine voice saying , "*You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased*", we=ll think God was speaking about and to Jesus. But Mark is using the story, not as a recoding of an event, but rather to help us to hear it and see it for ourselves, and to bring us into an enlightenment whereby we hear those same words spoken to us and spoken to the whole of humanity. This is the divine word echoing in your heart and in the heart of humanity.

So Mark places us today, in the river Jordan, just as Matthew and Luke a couple of months ago placed us in the manger. Mark wants us to see ourselves standing in the River Jordan. The waters we stand in are the chaos of un-creation, the same waters from the book of Genesis, and the same waters parted by Moses. The waters we stand in were familiar to Noah, and today=s Old Testament reading and the second reading from 1 Peter make this link explicit. The waters of the River Jordan are not in a land far away and not in a time past; the waters of un-creation, the chaos of life, are in the present, in the here and now. At the beginning of our Lent, at the start of our journey toward Easter and resurrection, we stand in the very waters that waited for the breath of God to bring creation out of them. We stand in the very waters in which the voice from heaven was heard. And, it is only in our coming "up out of the water' that we will encounter the Spirit

descending on us. There's a movement required to draw ourselves up out of that water.

There is then a full stop in the text, and that full stop seems to be where most Christians finish the story – I've been baptised in the water, I've received the Holy Spirit, I'm in. But the full stop is followed by "*And*"; the story does continue. Baptism is not it! And the spirit descending is not it either! The story continues: ***And** a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness*. If you received the full stop at your baptism, then the voice that follows will have gone unheard. Likewise, if you thought this story was about Jesus, then you will not have heard that voice speaking to you. Mark is telling us and everyone, YOU are a child of the Divine, YOU are beloved, and with YOU God is well pleased.

Once you have heard this, there is still the danger of another full stop in the text, but it too is followed by "*and*". I have heard that I am beloved, I've heard that the Divine is well pleased in my creation, *and*.....The spirit - the entering into humanity of God's very being is not the Hollywood ending, for as the story continues we find that *the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness*. That spirit drives us in the wilderness. For us today, we have an opportunity to enter the wilderness of Lent.

We will all have experienced many wildernesses in life - the wilderness of abuse, rejection, grief, depression, addiction, loneliness. There is an almost endless list of wilderness experiences; many of us have spent more than forty days lost in some of those wilderness places. However, today we are called, or rather driven, into the wilderness of Lent. Don't stay where you are in your own wilderness. You are being driven: take with you, "*You are my Beloved; with you I am well pleased*". Pick it up and step out of your wilderness and into the wilderness of Lent - that is the place we are directed or driven to by the Spirit that descended like a dove. It is the place wherein we can experience or know and acknowledge our temptations. Don't give things up - there's so much more to discovering and acknowledging our temptations. But we must stay with the text – ignore the Collect. The text does not mention sin; that's the church trying to dump something more onto us. And nor is there mention of sin in Luke's version of the same story.

In the wilderness of Lent, we begin our journey of discovery, identifying the temptations that catch our attention - what are those things that take us away from the realization that the Divine Spirit has descended upon us? What takes us away from that knowing? It is not a journey into becoming a resister of temptation. It's not a journey of coming out the end after spending forty days in some divine 'Sorry Day', making a few new year's

resolutions and walking out the other end unchanged and still unknowing. That=s the Sunday School version of this story, that=s the version the writer of the Collect still lives with. But it is not what the text is about. The text is much more than that: we=re to go into the wilderness of Lent and discover who we are, in light of hearing the divine voice and knowing that there is no god up there, for the Divine has descended like a dove. It is a journey toward discovering that alongside that part of us that is distracted by temptation is another 'spirit÷that remains beloved.

In the wilderness of Lent we can find ourselves empowered like Noah, to build an ark that will hold the whole of creation. In the wilderness of Lent we will walk with both the wild beasts and the angels together, becoming aware that the Spirit descended upon us, each and all of us. Noah saw the unseen, he saw the rain before it arrived, and it was by his movement that that he was also able to see the "*the sign of the covenant*', the rainbow. He sees the unseen and then moves with what he sees. He creates in order to hold humanity in life, and that whole process makes evident the Divine for the whole of humanity.

The Divine, invisible, became visible. Likewise, when Jesus comes through the wilderness of Lent, he sees that *time is fulfilled:* past, present and future are one. The time is fulfilled; the world is whole. He sees the *kingdom of God has come near*, the heavens are torn apart for no longer is there anything to cloud his vision of the Divine, and that is what he then seeks to share - "*repent, and believe in the good news."* To repent in its original context (*Metanoia*) is to change one=s mind or thinking, to perceive differently. It=s a rethinking, redirecting, re-seeing. Lent asks and promises much. It asks us to turn from the temptation to see ourselves as the subject and object of life, and turn toward life lived through the eyes of the Spirit that descended like the dove. That=s the wilderness that we enter today.

At this point a re‡ection from Richard Rohr came through and I thought I might as well chuck mine away and do his instead; but still being only the beginning of the wilderness I haven=t found that part of me that doesn=t think my voice is worthwhile! So you=ve got both mine and Richard Rohr=s. This is so appropriate and says something similar. He=s called it 'YOUR IMAGE OF GOD CREATES YOU÷
'How can we look at the Biblical text in a manner that will convert us or change us? I am going to define the Bible in a new way for some of you. The Bible is an honest conversation with humanity about where power really is. All spiritual texts, including the Bible, are books whose primary focus lies outside of themselves, in the Holy Mystery. The Bible is to illuminate your human experience through struggling with it. It is not a substitute for human

experience. It is an invitation into the struggle itself" you are supposed to be bothered by some of the texts. Human beings come to consciousness by struggle, and most especially struggle with God and sacred texts. We largely remain unconscious if we avoid all con‡icts, dilemmas, paradoxes, inconsistencies, or contradictions.
'The Bible is a book fllled with con‡icts and paradoxes and historical inaccuracies. It is fllled with contradictions and it is precisely in learning to struggle with these seeming paradoxes that we grow up" not by avoiding them with a glib one-sentence answer that a 16-year-old can memorize. If I had settled for the mostly one-line answers to everything from my Fr. McGuire=s Baltimore Catechism, my spiritual journey would have been over in the third grade. And for many people, otherwise educated in other flelds, that is exactly what happened. We created people with quick answers instead of humble searchers for God and truth, which never just falls into your lap, but is only given as a gift to those who really want it and desire it.÷ From A Teaching on Wondrous Encounters (webcast) (CD/DVD/MP3.

We move into the wilderness of Lent and one of the reasons that we have groups is that it is a place of struggling and the easiest way to struggle is to struggle with someone alongside you. It=s a place of wrestling —now you can beat yourself up or you can wrestle with someone else. So as we journey through Lent let=s be gentle with each other but let=s also encourage each other to push further into testing the truth that is who we are.

The Lord be with you.
Peter Humphris