

Sermon, Lent 1, Sunday 21 February 2021 - Mark 1 v.9-15

Today is the first Sunday of Lent. In Lent we sometimes think of giving something up to increase our discipline. But I think we should reverse it and think of taking something up. Perhaps reading the Bible more often or praying more often and more deeply.

Jesus' baptism was a moment of decision for him. For thirty years he had remained at Nazareth. He had done his skilled work and done his duties at home. For some time he must have been conscious that the time for him to come out had come. He must have waited for a sign and the emergence of John the Baptist was that sign.

Here was a movement of the people back to God. With that he was determined to identify himself and be baptised to express his solidarity with all of us.. He received the approval of God, the wonderful affirmation which would sustain him in difficult times. "You are my beloved son, in you I take delight".

It was the Spirit who came to him at his baptism and then drove him out for his test in the wilderness. In the wilderness every thing was whittled down to the bare bones, the minimum. You are exposed to the elements and the wild beasts. There is nothing to distract you, nothing around you to focus the mind on. There, you are open to God alone.

I once watched some programmes called "The face". They consisted of six climbing adventures featuring some of the greatest climbers and were absolutely breathtaking. The last one I saw was set in the Cederburg mountains in South Africa. There were two climbers. The first was Jo Simpson who had already had three accidents and was living on borrowed time. The second was Ed February. He was born near the Table mountain and that had started him climbing at an early age. The climb involved breathtaking skills and the climbers had to prepare themselves for incredible risks.

At a crucial point in the climb Ed said, " I'm going the hard route. You won't hear me when I go round the corner. You won't be able to stop me much if I fall. I just wanted you to know." It all involved the most bone wrenching routines and the testing of every nerve and sinew. The temptations of Jesus are likewise a bone wrenching trial of his qualities. He had to make crucial decisions to prepare him for ministry. This involved determined rejections of the simple routes to power.

So in the desert Jesus' fitness for ministry is tested. Our tests to faith are a necessary challenge to our complacency and an important part of our preparation for the future. We in the West, affluent as we are, are a whole generation of rich fools taking our ease. And we need the reminder because we are now aware that the whole environment is a delicately balanced system.

Jesus came into Galilee proclaiming the Gospel."The time has arrived "said Jesus. Every Jew would know what this meant. History as recorded in the Old Testament was all preparation for a consummation which lay in the future. But Jesus juts into this hope because he was proclaiming that the time of preparation was at last over." The kingdom of God is upon you." It would be demonstrated in the teaching and destiny of Jesus and the new experience of the church. For Jesus did not merely mention the kingdom. He proclaimed its imminent arrival. For the appearance of Jesus was the irruption of something new and the urgency of his preaching demanded a singleminded and immediate response.

For us it means turning away from old habits, the things that keep us comfortable and a total commitment of our lives here and now to a new standard and a new master. This is the single-mindedness that Jesus taught and practised. He embraced everyone and everything but took nothing to himself. And when it was time to let go he did so with the same equanimity and freedom.

We need not be afraid. The fact is our happiness is important to God. God's calling in our lives will always be in accord with our deepest identity. Brechner said, "The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet". We need to trust. As we discover our personal calling then we must be acquainted with God's heart for the world and in touch with the best of who we are.. Our calling emerges where these two relates make contact.

The need for ministry is urgent. As we accompany Jesus through the Gospels we are present at one dramatic meeting after another. One person after another experiences a mysterious power in Jesus which from that moment changes the course of their and our lives. Time after time we see the breakthrough of this new life. This was the path that Jesus chose to follow after his time in the wilderness and this was what he set his face resolutely towards. It was a strong harmonising love which infiltrated even the deepest places of blackness and darkness. And this in ways that did not override them or cancel them but gently reconnected them to the whole.

We are challenged this Lent to deepen our commitment as God calls us, avoiding a partial response which clings to other interests. I'm going to end with a few words written by an English nun, "*In stillness nailed to hold all time, all change, all circumstances in love's embrace.*" In our deepest and blackest places God does not take away our pain but gently reconnects it to his purpose of love.

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