

River, Desert, and World: the First Sunday of Lent

Readings: 1 Peter 3:18-22; Psalm 25:1-9; Mark 1:9-15

A few years ago I spent some days in the deserts of Judea and the Sinai. Nothing like 40 days; and not nearly as tough as for those Bedouin who lived there with their animals. But still unforgettable.

What was out there in the wilderness? Not just uninterrupted stretches of sand. There are mountains and caves, there's some sparse vegetation, there are wild animals and birds. But it is profoundly bleak; hot, dry, with none of the paraphernalia of civilisation. No distractions at all. The desert is not a place for parties, nor a place for any illusions. You are simply thrown into open space, into your fragile self, into your God.

And here went Jesus. Not, like me, for a few days as a student or a tourist, with jeeps and water bottles in the background. But for 40 days, with nothing. Nor, it seems, did he *choose* to go there. In Mark's austere account, he is 'driven by the Spirit', driven in what seems the inescapable consequence of his baptism and the declaration that he is Son of God.

St Mark lacks the vivid stories of Jesus' journeyings and dialogue with Satan that Matthew and Luke tell. Just two short sentences – those sparse words echoing the radical deprivation Jesus undergoes. There is no human company: 'he was with the wild beasts'. But there in the emptiness Jesus discovers himself, naked before his God.

If over these 40 days of Lent we're vowing to follow Jesus – however less austerely, and at however great a distance – can we face that knowledge of ourselves, including our dark side? Can we shed the fantasies of our possessions and our civilisation? Can I recognise that I am not after all master of the world or even captain of my soul? Recognise instead our utter dependence on earth and air and water, on one another, and on our creator God?

In the early centuries of the Church, some Christian men and women fled the world to practise that utter dependence in those middle-eastern deserts – not for a forty-day quarantine, but for the rest of their lives. Their successors still live in their monasteries: brave, you could call them, or mad, or perhaps both.

That is probably not our calling. But nor was it the calling of Jesus. He was after all not known as an ascetic, like John who baptised him, but as 'a glutton and a drunkard'. The man from the desert who lived as a man of the world. And St Mark's account of his testing in the desert brings that out by its very compression. For today's gospel reading is not a single picture or story but a triptych, a threefold account.

It begins *at the river*, where Jesus is told that he is God's beloved son. The divine Son goes there not as a priest or a teacher, but as one immersed in the crowd of sinful people, and with them immersed in the water of new life.

Then *from the river to the desert*, driven by the Spirit into that radical stripping of mind and body, alone with the beasts and the God of the wilderness.

But then *from the desert to the world*. After those 40 days, 'Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."'

Jesus, deprived and tested in the wilderness, overflows with knowledge of God and with passion for God's kingdom; for a new world purged of the exploitation, the self-seeking, the sin of the old. And that kingdom he will announce and enact in stories and arguments and healings and companionships. And he will invite all and sundry to join him in it.

Our own baptism and our observance of Lent drive us in that same journey from river to desert to world, and so to the kingdom of God. Ahead is Jesus himself; as we heard in the first reading, put to death in the flesh – in our flesh – descending to the realm of the dead, but alive in the spirit and one with the eternal God.

Yes, Lent is a time for repentance. But not a time for being miserable, or for being obsessed with sin. It is above all a time for looking forward: 'Repent, and believe *in the good news*'. God knows, our planet cries out for good news; so together let us pray for that whole world ...

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