

Sermon Archive 188

Sunday 18 February, 2018

Knox Church, Christchurch

Lesson: Mark 1: 9-15

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



In *Matthew's* long account of the temptation of Jesus, there's an extended description of the nature of the temptations - vulnerability to hunger, the beguiling potency of power, the sparkly attractiveness of glory. And there's a full "talking out loud" of how Jesus deals with each one. But in Mark there's none of that - no temptation content, no "thinking out loud". Mark's Jesus doesn't utter a single word. There's simply a picture of a small person in a big wilderness - with quick, passing reference to four other characters: the Spirit, the tempter, the wild animals, and the angels. None of these has words either - no clues or windows into why they're there, or what they're doing. Their silence makes me curious - makes me want to ask questions of them. And so, a sermon of five imaginative enquiries.

-ooOoo-

An imaginative enquiry of the first character, the Spirit of God. Later on, Spirit of God, in a secretive meeting with a furtive "teacher of Israel", Jesus is going to describe you as being like the wind - no one knowing where you come from or where you're going. You're invisible, unguidable, free. Later on, beyond that meeting, as he gives you to his disciples in the upper room, he's going to do it simply by breathing on them - an act of such gentleness. I want to say that you have no hard edges, no sharp corners. Even in the olden days, when we were trying to describe your huge creativity in bringing forth the earth, we described you as hovering above the waters - a hovering, a "not-quite touching" of the substance you form. And last time we discerned you at work, we wanted to say you were like a dove - a small bird of peace suspended above. Life-giving, space-respecting, gentle.

Yet in *this* scene, you're presented as the One who *drives* Jesus into the wilderness. Not leading. Not guiding. Not drawing or even moving by hope - but *driving*. To be in the desert is not a decision that Jesus has made. It's the result of you compelling him, of insisting for him, of forcing him. When did you

become the driver, the compeller? And what does it mean for us? Does it mean that no matter how much we might want it not to be, no matter how we might resist engaging with the wilderness, it's going to be part of our life anyway? Is this simply the unwelcome truth (compelled upon us) that every human being, one day, or every day, needs to deal with the self - to work out who we are and what we're to do. God knows, as we try to negotiate the possibilities in our lives (to choose wrong or right, to choose easy or hard, to choose the demeaning of self or the better way, to choose despair or hope), it isn't pleasant. It would be easier not to have to deal with it. But here you come, the One driving the beloved into the desert. It's as if we're having to admit (being compelled, driven, forced to admit) . . .

I don't know, Spirit of God; I accept that we don't spring forth as completed, finished products. I know that we're all works in progress. I guess I even know that it's been during the testing times, the times of self-questioning, and even of stumbling then learning, that I've grown the most. I wouldn't have chosen it - but it came anyway. Soul-making, heart-refining - following in the footsteps, maybe, of the One who will carry the cross. Is this "inevitable challenge of the person" the truth of the Spirit who drives the beloved wilderness-ways?

Spirit of God, you are part of this picture.

-ooOoo-

An enquiry with the second characters, the wild animals. We hear, O wild animals, that you are with Jesus. You're described as wild, so I guess you are. And if I were him, that'd make me nervous. Wild is unpredictable; it's dangerous. It reminds me that the wilderness experience is no twee entertainment. It's the very real possibility of dangerous damage. And I guess if the tempted one has a shiny red button on his desk, or a well-oiled gun in the cupboard, or an overly-liberal hand on the morphine pump, or if the tempted one has influence over governance of the hungry, the homeless or the sick, then the dangers are real. The animals have real claws and teeth.

And yet, O wild animals, I'm not entirely sure about what you're doing in this picture. If you are there simply to be a threat, then maybe Mark would have described you as circling Jesus, being "around" Jesus, or "stalking" Jesus. Mark says that you are "with" Jesus. Being *with* Jesus. And I'm wondering whether this is something like the lion being with the lamb, and the leopard being with the goat, and the snake and the little child playing together. If you animals are

being with him, is this a kind of seeping into the picture of the great promises of God's peace? Is it a putting into the grim picture of testing and fearing, a prophetic whisper that all will be well? "Remember, little human being, in the midst of your unchosen difficulty, one day peace **will** come!"

So maybe you animals are there to call me again (a re-echoing of the call to open my eyes, to listen to my world more deeply), to search for signs of God's work having been begun. When dangerous capacities are put aside, when small demonstrations of openness to peace are observed, are we perhaps, there, in the desert, seeing the work of God?

Or maybe, wild animals, you've just entered the picture to take a look. I don't know why you're there. But you are wild, and part of the picture.

-ooOoo-

An enquiry into the third characters, the ministering angels. Your purpose in the picture is clearer than that of the animals. It is stated: you are there to minister. As the vulnerable human being considers all that needs to be considered, you serve him. I wonder what you're like. Are you bright and haloed? Do you have wings and a harp? I only ask, because although that's the hackneyed caricature, **I've** never met anyone with wings. The ones who've ministered to me, in my times of testing, have been much more "flesh and blood". They've had arms to wrap around me in hugging. They've had mouths, from which have come words of caring. They've had eyes that have seen me - **seen** me. They've had ears that have heard me. It's all been very terrestrial, quite made of earth. And I've just **called** them angels.

I suppose that Jesus had those kinds of angels as well, people who stood with him as he grew into who he was. I suppose he had people with him in times that must have been discouraging. There must have been people who gave him comfort, and who stayed awake with him while he prayed. (Ah.) We need the ministering ones, don't we? So we give thanks for those who have ministered to us. We offer ourselves, in the hope that we may become angels to others. Ministering angels, bless you; you are part of the picture.

-ooOoo-

An enquiry into the tempter, in this story going by the name of "Satan". I am tempted to say to you, that I have no question for you at all. Not only

because you have nothing that I want to learn, but also because none of your words are true. You only use words to deceive, confuse or demean. You kill, you damage, you lie. You ruin, you wreck, you frighten. Unfortunately, you are part of the picture; I regret that; and that's about all I have to say.

-ooOoo-

An enquiry of Jesus. Jesus, my brother; I am so sorry that you didn't get more time to enjoy, or to reflect on, what was said at your baptism. Knowing that you are loved is something you should be able to hold for a while, cherish. But for you, there didn't seem to be cherishing time, no pause for thought. Straight after you came up out of your river, you're driven into the desert. Straight from the cool, washing water, to the dust and heat - and **driven**, imposed. It doesn't seem decent or fair.

Better than decent and fair, though, more into the realms of the inspiring, is that you leave this wilderness scene to begin living your gospel. You emerge out the other end, saying "the time is fulfilled, the kingdom of God has come near". You emerge calling upon your sisters and brothers to follow you into the redemptive, strengthened life that now you are ready to live. You have worked through who you are. You know what you must do. Now your heart is claimed - is sifted and sorted. And now, not driven, but called and committed, forth you go to begin the blessing.

This journey, to which now you're committed, is one that we will follow, certainly at a historical distance, and maybe at a slight, preserving distance of heart. Maybe we're not quite so ready as you to be among the animals, to do the desert heat. But we'll do this Lenten walk. As we do, keep us close. Keep in our cherishing, this image of you, emerging from the testing with hope. The kingdom of God is coming near. The Lenten journey begins. We keep a moment of quiet.

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