

Into the wilderness

Mark 1:9-15

1 Peter 3:18-22

Prayer: As we look into your word and begin the journey to the Cross speak to us and be with us this morning. Amen.

Four years ago today the people of Christchurch were thrust into a wilderness of destruction, homelessness, uncertainty and possibly temptation. Four years later much has been achieved to rebuild Christchurch but much more needs to be done. Let us remember the people of Christchurch in our thoughts and prayers this Sunday.

Today we also mark the beginning of the Lenten journey, a journey into the wilderness. What do we mean by wilderness and what did it mean in biblical times?

For us today, wilderness means those parts of the land that are devoid of people but not devoid of life. It is the mountain forests of the South Alps, the scared slopes of Mount Ruapehu, the arid desserts of Australia and Africa, the ice of Antarctica. Places where human beings either do not want to live or cannot live. Over recent centuries the world's wildernesses have shrunk as we have found more and more ways of living in areas we previously shunned. Some science fiction writers envisage an earth that is completely covered by humanity with no forests or deserts.

But there is also a wilderness of the soul and the spirit. Times of reflection and contemplation. Times to recharge and reenergise ourselves. Peter touches on this in his first epistle. How to make sense of suffering is a perennial question. Evidently those to whom Peter wrote were all too familiar with the wilderness experience. This he sets in the context of the suffering of Christ. The death of Christ is something unique and unrepeatable yet also represents a pathway on which we are invited to walk. Peter in verse 18 explains Jesus suffering in a very clear way - *"in order to bring you to God"*.

The verb “bring” has resonance both for Jew and for Greek. In the Old Testament it is those who are to be priests who are “brought to God”; now this embraces all of us. In the Greek world, at the court of a king, there would be an official who was responsible to determine who would be brought before the king; now, through Jesus Christ, we all may enjoy access to God.

The point is that Christ’s death is an event which transcends space and time, universal in its reference – something underlined by the reference to the time of Noah.

The motif of water and the building of the ark bring us to baptism and what it means. The eight people saved by the ark prefigure the many now being saved through their baptism into Christ. Again the ultimate nature of Christ’s death and resurrection are emphasised. Through baptism we are made part of the salvation and renewal wrought by God through these decisive events and now anchored in the exaltation of Christ to the right hand of God.

Returning to Mark and the wilderness. In Jesus time, and in biblical times generally, there was much more wilderness – there were far fewer people – and going into and crossing the wilderness would have been something most people understood. Even travelling between say Galilea and Jerusalem would have involved crossing some wilderness.

The wilderness must have been a very real reality for those living in biblical times. There are hundreds of references to the wilderness in the Bible from Genesis to Revelation. And wilderness experiences are important parts of the Biblical story. Probably the most significant wilderness experience in the Old Testament was the 40 years in the wilderness that the Israelites spent before entering the “promised land”. A time of cleansing and learning, of transformation. As has

been said “it took 40 days to get the Israelites out of Egypt and 40 years to get Egypt out of the Israelites”. And those 40 years were in the wilderness.

The Gospel writers pick up this theme with the 40 days that Jesus spent after his baptism in the wilderness. Matthew and Luke go into much more detail than Mark, particularly about the temptations of Jesus but Mark, as we heard in our readings this morning is much more succinct. As we heard from scripture this morning:

At once the Spirit sent him out into the wilderness,¹³ and he was in the wilderness for forty days, being tempted^[9] by Satan. He was with the wild animals, and angels attended him.

Jesus was with the wild animals, and angels attended him. Mark in this short sentence links Jesus with all of creation and with heaven, Jesus is the bridge between heaven and earth.

What I think we are seeing here is that the wilderness is not a place to be scared off, not a place to fear or avoid but somewhere where we can be recharged, possibly be transformed, and grow.

I know that during my years with The Leprosy Mission there were times when I had to just get away from everything, go into the wilderness. Sometimes the wilderness was Omana Park, sometimes up on South Head of the Kaipora Harbour. But they were important times. Times to reflect, to listen to God and to be quiet, away from telephone and e-mail.

It is interesting to see the differing approaches of each of the Gospel writers in their first chapters. Matthew focuses on Jesus ancestors and the birth of Jesus. Luke emphasises the relationship between the birth of John the Baptist and the birth of Jesus including those two wonderful songs of praise by Mary and Zechariah that have been important parts of the Anglican liturgy down the ages. John gives us that beautiful introduction “In the beginning was the Word...”, no

mention of the birth but the message of John the Baptist, the baptism of Jesus and Jesus choosing his disciples.

Mark is must more succinct and moves much faster. Like John there is no mention of the birth of Jesus, nor his ancestry, but Jesus is immediately put into scriptural and historical context –

The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God, as it is written in Isaiah the prophet: I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way”— “a voice of one calling in the wilderness, ‘Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.

And immediately John the Baptist appears from the desert and before we know it Jesus is baptised and is sent into the wilderness. But Mark does not stop there, John the Baptist is arrested, Jesus chooses four fishermen as his first followers, he heals a man with an evil spirit on the Sabbath, then heals Simon’s mother in law, and a man with leprosy before the chapter ends.

But, as the ad says, there is more. Mark makes it abundantly clear that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God. And John is likened to the voice in Isaiah 40 calling from the wilderness “make straight paths”. Although one has to wonder how straight those paths were as the first three of Jesus’s healings, as recorded by Mark, raise issues under the Jewish law – working (healing) on the Sabbath, Jesus, a man, entering a woman’s bedroom, and touching someone with leprosy. One thing you can never accuse Mark of is portraying Jesus as meek and mild. In fact none of the gospel writers portray Jesus this way!

But let’s get back to the wilderness and John’s baptism of Jesus. By this time John would have baptised possibly many thousands in the Jorden, all who wanted to repent of their sins. But Jesus was the Son of God so did he have to repent of his sins? Matthew tells us that John initially resisted Jesus request for baptism but when Jesus

makes it clear that “we must do all that God wants us to do” John agrees. As Jesus comes out of the water *“he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove.”*¹¹ *And a voice came from heaven: “You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.”* We can only assume that John and all those who witnessed Jesus baptism also saw the Spirit descent like a dove and hear the words of God – You are my son with whom I am well pleased.

The Jordan River basically separates the relatively fertile land to the west – what is now the West Bank and Israel, from the relatively arid wilderness of what is now the Kingdom of Jordan. Probably most of those coming for baptism by John would have been coming from the western bank of the Jordan and the towns and villages around Jerusalem. And they would have returned there after receiving John’s baptism. But not Jesus, the Spirit that came down on him at the time of his baptism now makes him go into the wilderness – to probably go east.

And Mark tells us that Jesus is then tempted and tested by Satan for 40 days. The whole concept of Satan and how it has been used by some Christian teachers as a metaphor for a being that is somehow the “equal and opposite of God” really worries me. William Barclay in his commentary on this passage really helps put Satan into perspective.

Barclay says *“The development of the concept of Satan is very interesting. The word Satan in Hebrew simply means ADVERSARY, and in the Old Testament it is used of ordinary human adversaries and opponents time and time again.”* Barclay then quotes a number of examples including the Philistines who fear David may be their Satan – adversary.

According to Barclay the word then takes a further development to mean “one who pleads a case against a person” as we see in Job – Satan is the one who accuses Job.

But what about the Devil – a synonym for Satan. Again Barclay explains that Devil comes from the Greek *diabolus* which means *Slanderer*.

This is not the end of the slide from adversary to picture we can get from the New Testament – where Satan can be seen as the “power against God”. Barclay explains that during the exile the Jews began to learn a bit about Persian thought.

He writes “ *Persian thought is based on the conception that this universe there are two powers, a power of darkness and a power of light, Ormuzd and Ahriman, a power of good and a power of evil; the whole universe is a battle-ground between them and man must choose his aide in that cosmic conflict*”.

Much of this Persian thought comes through in the New Testament writers when they say that Satan being responsible for human disease; it is Satan that seduces Judas to betray Jesus. Satan is the power that is against God and it can only be broken by the work of Christ.

I must admit as I look around the world today this dichotomy between good and evil seems to be very prevalent. Radical Islam, the Tea Party in the US, the neoliberal agenda that enriches the rich and rejects the poor. But how does all this equate with Jesus call to love our neighbour as ourselves?

Yes there is an ongoing battle between good and evil, and Jesus faced that battle in the wilderness immediately after being told by God that “*You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased*”. But “*He was with the wild animals, and angels attended him.*”

Barclay quotes this verse as *“the beasts where His companions”* but I was unable to find out which translation he was using. However the Message translation is *“Wild animals were his companions, and angels took care of him.”*

Why is this important? As I read Barclay’s comments I was reminded of one of the scriptures we read during the midnight service at Christmas Isaiah 11

A green Shoot will sprout from Jesse’s stump, from his roots a budding Branch.

The life-giving Spirit of GOD will hover over him, the Spirit that brings wisdom and understanding.

The Spirit that gives direction and builds strength, the Spirit that instils knowledge and Fear-of-GOD.

Fear-of-GOD WILL be all his joy and delight.

He won’t judge by appearances, won’t decide on the basis of hearsay.

He’ll judge the needy by what is right, render decisions on earth’s poor with justice.

His words will bring everyone to awed attention.

A mere breath from his lips will topple the wicked.

Each morning he’ll pull on sturdy work clothes and boots, and build righteousness and faithfulness in the land.

The wolf will romp with the lamb, the leopard sleep with the kid. Calf and lion will eat from the same trough, and a little child will tend them.

Cow and bear will graze the same pasture, their calves and cubs grow up together, and the lion eat straw like the ox.

The nursing child will crawl over rattlesnake dens, the toddler stick his hand down the hole of a serpent. Neither animal nor human will hurt or kill on my holy mountain.

The whole earth will be brimming with knowing God-Alive, a living knowledge of God ocean-deep, ocean-wide.

From the Message.

No dichotomy here, no good versus evil but a picture of peace, love, tolerance and justice. This is the promise from the visit to the wilderness, this is the promise that Jesus brings to a troubled world. The promise that brings us to God. Amen.