

Lent - a Time to Grow ...

... a Time of Transformation

A sermon given on the First Sunday of Lent, 18th February 2024, by the Vicar, the Revd Canon Jonathan Baker, in Beverley Minster

Mark 1:9-15

The first Sunday in Lent always presents a gospel reading about the beginning of Jesus's public ministry, beginning with his baptism and then the 40 days being tested in the wilderness. And those 40 days, of course, form the basis for the season of Lent, that period of preparation leading up to Easter. So why is it that Jesus's ministry starts in this way? Well, I think it's in order to do two things: first of all, to establish his identity, who he really is, and to test it and make sure it's real; and secondly, to see how out of that identity comes the possibility of transformation, change.

So, first of all, it was good for Jesus to have a clear sense of who he was at the start of his ministry - that's what his baptism makes clear: on the one hand, when Jesus was baptised, he was identifying with his people and their need for redemption; but on the other hand, he received this very special revelation when as he came up out of the water of the river, he hears this voice from the heavens saying, "*You are my son, the beloved; with you, I am well pleased.*" That must have been a very special moment for Jesus, very personal, very profound and deeply affirming. And that's a truth that we all will recognise, that we get our sense of our own self from our key relationships and perhaps especially from our parents.

A while back, I read a novel by Bernardine Evaristo called 'Girl, Woman, Other' and it's all about the experience of black women in Britain. There's a number of characters from that culture, and in a number of cases, those characters are exploring their identity in a culture that is unfamiliar and somewhat alien. And for many of them, the thing that keeps them grounded and gives them their real sense of who they are in an unfamiliar culture is knowing that they're part of their particular family - so a sense of identity that they've drawn from their parents. And without that, our identity can feel very fragile.

And Jesus in his baptism is affirmed as God's Son, not in any biological sense, but in the sense of drawing from his relationship with God, the foundation for everything that he was to do - this gave him his confidence as to who he was in the face of all sorts of challenges that lay ahead. And I think there's something similar for you and me as we identify with the Lord Jesus Christ by faith, so we too hear that promise, "*You are my son or my daughter, my child; with you I am well pleased.*" And by that act of faith, we find ourselves welcomed into the household and family of God, and strengthened to reach out to others from the security we have received from that unconditional love of God. And as we find ourselves in a culture that is often very secularised, very godless, which leaves no room for God, then it's very helpful for us as we live out our vocation as Christian people to know that we are children of God and that we receive that unconditional love. And in a world full of people hungry for attention, it's powerful stuff to be told that you have God's full attention and that he sees you as his very own.

And Jesus at his baptism sees the Spirit, who in the Old Testament is the spirit of the new age of God's kingdom of peace and justice and mercy. And so it seems that Jesus's identity as

God's Son is to be as the one who brings in the reality of God's kingdom, in the power of the Spirit; who's going to confront and disarm the old order, the old power structures of greed and exploitation and selfishness. And those who are baptised with the Spirit of Jesus share in that work: announcing God's kingdom; trying to live as citizens of that kingdom; rejecting the systems of domination and exclusion and oppression.

So I wonder, do you know that about yourself? Have you got that confidence in your own identity as the children of God? Do you know that you are loved, forgiven, accepted and also called and claimed by the Lord as his own to continue his work in the world? That's who Jesus is revealed to be at the start of his ministry. By following him, we share in that identity as God's children living in the power of God's Holy Spirit.

And then the Spirit drives Jesus into the wilderness, where for 40 days he is tempted by Satan. In other words, this identity as the Son of God is tried out; it's sifted; it's put to the test. And the other gospels give a fuller account of the details of this and make it clear that Satan is testing what it means for Jesus to be called the Son of God. And Satan is trying to make him become like all the other sons of God that were around in the ancient world, because it was a title that was often used by kings and emperors - the Roman Emperor also had 'Son of God' inscribed around the edge of the Roman coinage. And so was Jesus going to be a son of God like that, in that mould, or was he going to be son of God in a different way? And the wilderness is a good place to test what is real. In silence and emptiness, things come to the surface that aren't always easy to confront - we're masters of distracting ourselves from listening to what's really going on inside our hearts. And in our culture, we're very good at avoiding any wilderness experience (most of us have had enough of our own company after 40 minutes, let alone 40 days) and we're very good at filling our lives with unnecessary busyness and keeping ourselves occupied and entertained to stop any questions about who we really are, being tested and made fully grounded.

But Lent is a good time to seek silence and solitude and to allow these questions to surface and to try and be honest with ourselves, to acknowledge our vulnerability and our inner emptiness, and to allow God to grow closer and to assure us that we are truly His sons and daughters as a result.

So Jesus's identity is established at his baptism and then tested in the wilderness. But as he becomes clear about his identity, it also becomes apparent that this is a transforming identity: after 40 days in the wilderness he comes 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.*" And so begins his ministry of healing, forgiveness, exorcism, cleansing and transformation, setting people free from all the powers that crush and oppress them. That ministry arises out of his sense of being the true Son of God. And that transformation begins when Jesus invites us to believe in him and to share in his identity as a child of God. And by receiving that identity, we are set free from all our other competing identities insofar as they might lead us astray. Because all of us are made up of multiple identities: sons; daughters; parents; husbands; friends; our job descriptions; our politics; our religion; our colour; our race; our social background; - these all give us a sense of our identity and who we are. They all shape us and they can become sources of division and prejudice if we attach too much importance to them.

And so, surrendering all these different identities to Jesus, he then returns them to us, doesn't deprive us of them, but he allows us to inhabit them in a different way so that they take their rightful place second to our most important identity as children of God. Which means we see every other human being, every human being, as a child of God as well, accepted and beloved and full of hope. And when we allow that to happen, God will change you and me. He will change the way we see ourselves and the way we see other people. And that's how the world around us begins to change as well.

So may this Lent be for you a time to grow in your sense of being a beloved child of God; may you find space and silence and time in the wilderness to allow that identity to be tested; and to learn to mistrust your own strength and the temptation to turn idols out of our other identities, so that you then grow in dependence on the Lord.

And so may this lent be for you a time of transformation, of living more fully as citizens of God's kingdom, and of praying and working for the coming of that kingdom in our town, in our communities, and in the world around us.

Reading Text

Mark 1:9-15

⁹ *In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptised by John in the Jordan.*
¹⁰ *And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him.* ¹¹ *And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'* ¹² *And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness.* ¹³ *He was in the wilderness for forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.* ¹⁴ *Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God,* ¹⁵ *and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.'*