

Wilderness days

Sermon for the First Sunday of Lent, 18th February 2024

Holy Communion at 8.30am

Reading [Mark 1.9-15](#)

In a murder mystery, it's the little clues that matter. Don't be fooled by the woman with a smoking gun in her hand – she won't be the one whodunnit. Instead, notice the tiny fleck of blood on the immaculate white shirt of the butler who brings in the tea and cake: he's probably your man.

Our reading from Mark's Gospel contains a mystery – and it also gives a clue. We see Jesus in quarantine. The word means 'forty days' and it comes from Jesus spending forty days in the wilderness. He is there to pray and prepare for his mission. And there, Mark tells us, he is tempted.

Temptation is what comes whenever you have a choice of competing possibilities. Often it's trivial stuff – shall I have another biscuit? – sometimes less trivial – shall I fire off this rather sharp email? – and sometimes it is a matter of life and death.

We heard reports last week of the death of Alexei Navalny, courageous opponent of President Putin, in a Russian labour camp. Four years ago, he was in a German hospital, recovering from an earlier attempt to kill him. Was he tempted to stay in the safety of the West? If he was, he resisted it, and back to his homeland he went.

What are Jesus' temptations? Mark doesn't spell them out; but he does give a clue, in what sounds like a throwaway line. Jesus, he says, was in the wilderness 'with the wild beasts'.

Our reading comes very near the beginning of Mark's Gospel, and it echoes a passage from very near the beginning of the first book in the Bible, Genesis, the book of beginnings. There we find another figure surrounded by animals. His name is Adam.

Adam and Eve have a choice to make, as they think about the competing possibilities put to them, by God and by that trickiest of animals, [the talking snake](#). They make a bad choice, and it has consequences. God drives them out of the Garden of Eden into the wilderness.

Now comes Jesus. The Spirit of God drives him out (same word) into the wilderness, not because he has made a wrong choice but so that he can make the right choice, and begin to put things straight. Jesus replays the story of Adam. He too is tempted; he too faces competing possibilities; he too makes his choice; and he chooses well.

What is the point of all this?

You and I are, as the [Narnia books](#) put it, sons of Adam and daughters of Eve. Their story in the Garden of Eden is not a piece of history, but it is our story. It tells the truth, that being tempted is part of being human. The names ‘Adam’, ‘Eve’, mean ‘human’ and ‘life’, and they stand for all of us, for how we have always been, as we face the competing possibilities that come upon us. The questions we face are the same ones that arise in the garden: Is this person right? Should I believe what that person says? Who can I trust?

The human race has the equipment to think and choose, and once you have it you can’t avoid using it, and that means living with the consequences. So, from the moment we are born into this world, we have to live with the effects of all the choices others have made for us and before us.

And then we start adding choices of our own. Sometimes the tempting thing is also the right thing; sometimes it isn’t, but (like Adam and Eve) you can be persuaded that it is.

Temptation creeps up on them in the garden. It slides through the grass and tricks them, and the results are bad. Jesus looks temptation in the face, deals with it, and then starts preaching his good news. And when temptation comes to us, the only question is whether you let it creep up on you, or whether you face it.

In these forty days of Lent we are invited to take our temptations and go into the wilderness. Most of us can't head off to the wide open spaces, though, so Lent invites us to clear space in the mind.

You can do that in a number of ways – have a look at the [Portico](#) newsletter for ideas – but here is one thing to try. Make a journey (if you can) on foot instead of on four wheels or two. It takes longer, it stretches time a little, opens up some space, and in that space things can happen. Thoughts that might otherwise stay buried bubble up to the surface, and that may help me see my temptations more clearly.

I may see that this thing I am thinking of doing is good, and what I need is confidence to do it. Or that it's a bad choice, and what I need is strength to resist it, and a change of heart to want what's good. Or, I may still be genuinely unsure what to do, and what I need is patience to wait, or perhaps courage to take a risk.

Now even the sturdiest atheist would say Amen to all that. But Lent, this holy season, tells us that if we clear this space we can find God there too: God, who can give us a strength that is not our own, and a wisdom beyond our understanding.

In these forty days we can take our temptations and go in heart and mind into the wilderness with Jesus. Spend these days with him, then (like him) you and I may choose well too.