

Lent 1 – Parish Service – 26th February 2010 - DT

Theme: “Testing Times”

Reading: “At once, the Spirit sent Jesus out into the wilderness or desert, and he was in the desert forty days being tempted by Satan. He was with the wild animals and the angels ministered to him.” Mark1:12-13

Introduction

I'm basically a city boy, raised in Adelaide. However, I have spent quite a bit of time in the bush, particularly when I was part of Frontier Services. Even then, most of my bush time was spent in motels/hotels or people's homes or on stations. Hence I didn't really camp out all that often. Sorry to dispel any myths about my tough life in Frontier Services! However, there were occasions when we camped, threw the swag on the ground and slept under the stars. One occasion I remember well. I was with our indigenous Patrol Minister, Barry Condon from Meekatharra. We camped on the edge of the Western Desert by a lovely waterhole which provided some yabbies for an entrée before we cooked our steaks over the coals of the fire. We were literally in the middle of nowhere, in the centre of Western Australia. Around the waterhole was ironstone country and at night you could hear the kangaroos both running and fighting, the sounds coming clearly through the ironstone and the stillness of the night. You could hear the dingoes and a variety of other noises from the wild animals that I couldn't identify, but they had come down to drink at the billabong during the night. Sleep didn't come easily to the city boy but I had to wake Barry up at 8am with a billy cuppa – he slept soundly!

As I re-read the Marcan passage for today I thought of Jesus in the wilderness – there for forty days, which traditionally signifies a long time in Scriptural terms. This terminology comes from way back in Noah's time where we read in Genesis 8:6 “After forty days Noah opened the window he had made in the ark and sent out a raven and it kept flying back and forth until the water had dried up from the earth.” This imagery of forty days reflects a long period of time. For Jesus, going straight into the wilderness after the joy and affirmation of his baptism must have been incredibly difficult. Not purely the physical danger of the wild animals such as lions and bears which were present in that region then, but also he was tempted by Satan.

Middle

Let's take a few moments to think about these verses from Mark1 as we journey into Lent. The most striking characteristic of the Marcan temptation account is its brevity. In comparison with Matthew or Luke, Mark appears to have preserved no more than a fragment of the tradition. The evangelist seizes upon the fact that the Lord, who was announced and baptized in the wilderness, continues there for forty days. Last Sunday we had the Transfiguration experience from Mark 9 which was the transition point between the seasons of Epiphany and Lent but also that experience of the Transfiguration links back to the symbolic time in the wilderness here by Jesus with reference to Moses' forty days on Mt Sinai as well as the time of Elijah's wandering in the wilderness as he came to Mt Horeb. For the early Christians they would link this time to the great prophets of the past and see Jesus in that line. Also the time of wrestling with both the spiritual and physical demands of being in the desert was seen as a time of preparation for the ministry to come. We are given in Mark no idea of the temptations made upon Jesus except that he was tempted by Satan. We can only surmise from the other Gospels that these involved food, power and authority.

The words 'and the angels attended him' tell us very little except that somehow he was kept and comforted by angels. The only other parallel to this is found in 1 Kings 19:5-7 where an angel supplies nourishment to Elijah in the barren wilderness. Somehow Jesus is kept spiritually strong, safe from both the wild animals and Satan in his time in the wilderness and doesn't die of starvation. For me, these few words 'and the angels attended him' are behind his strength as he comes forth from the desert and begins his ministry.

Reflections for today

As we begin Lent and try to bring some aspects out of this passage for us today three questions stand out.

1. What is our modern wilderness?
2. What are the temptations for us today?
3. Do we have angels attending us today?

Theologically and reflectively we could spend hours on these questions. However, you'll be pleased to know that I don't plan to do that – just a few minutes.

1. What is our modern wilderness?

Is it a place or is it a spiritual void? A place in the heart and the mind where we find discontentment, inner turmoil and uncertainty in a constantly changing and challenging world?

Certainly I believe that Jesus was in turmoil, trying to work through what his baptism and ministry was all about when in a sense 'the Spirit drove him out into the desert'. It was in this place and during a long and unspecified time given to us as 'forty days' that Jesus battled with his future and what it may 'look like'. The wilderness for us may look like; a battle with illness, sorting out or not sorting out relationships, grieving, looking for life's direction, coping with work, redundancy, retirement, fighting loneliness, seeking friendship or meaning to our life to mention but a few things. You, no doubt, can think of other aspects of what may constitute our modern wilderness and some of the wild beasts that abound.

2. What are the temptations before us today?

Certainly there are many temptations that we can think of in our affluent, indulgent society.

- it is easy to forgo God – forget God or at least lessen God.
- we seek the approval of others rather than living our life for God.
- we seek financial security and material riches and put God on the 'back-burner' so to speak
- we can easily put self before others and forget the servant role of Christ to which we are called
- we can become so self absorbed that we fail to see the needs of others both locally and further afield.

You can probably add to this list as well

3. Do we have angels attending us today?

Let me say from the outset, I'm not big 'on angels'. Yet both in the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament there are many instances of angels being described. Today, I mostly feel that 'attending or ministering angels' come in the form of faithful Christians doing the servant role of Christ in caring for those struggling in whatever their wilderness may be. They are there for us when we are down, when life has the better of us and they simply appear, walk with us, nourish and support us. So in that sense I believe we do have God's angels attending us today. Maybe, that when we are strong spiritually we can be 'angels attending others' and hopefully when we need it there will be others there who will 'attend us'. For me that is a wonderful thought.

Lent

As we come into Lent don't be afraid of the wilderness within our own lives. Confront the challenges and the temptations knowing that Jesus has been there before us and has come through that time. Also know that there are 'angels there to attend us' as we journey with Christ towards the cross of Easter. **Amen.**