

## Sermon

Some birds, after caring for their young in their nest for a period of time, physically push them out to fend for themselves. David Attenborough has been there (well where **hasn't** he been) and filmed it. The little things tumble in the air and instinctively put out their wings and somehow land safely. This appears brutal, but instinct tells the parent bird that the right time has come, the young must get on with their own lives. Any further involvement by the parents would stop their full development.

For Mark, the first gospel to be written, the baptism of Jesus is the first important milestone in his ministry. He does not bother about the birth or early life. He wants to get on with the real story. And we see that Jesus' appearance on the world stage starts with a bang. Baptism, a voice from God himself, and God's spirit coming down on Him.

But rather in the same way as the parent birds, this same spirit of God pushes Jesus, drives Him out, into the desert. It seems very harsh, doesn't it. The brutality of it can be gauged by the fact that the word "to drive out" is the same as is used when Jesus later casts out evil spirits. It is as though the Spirit of God is saying to Jesus, "You are grown up now. It is time - you must leave the nest, and you will be tested before starting on your new calling, your mission."

So Jesus goes alone into the wilderness. I was there a few short weeks ago. It is a place of steep hills with no vegetation, just rocks and bare hard earth. It is a barren, desolate and dangerous place of thirst, hunger, snakes, scorpions and wild animals. To go there alone would have been very scary. But in the context of the Bible and Christian history the wilderness, or desert, is also a place full of meaning. It has both good and bad resonances.

First, the desert was a place where one might go to meet with God. The Exodus journey, on which so much of Jewish national self-understanding came, was not an easy trek, and there was suffering, privation, hunger and thirst. But God had watched over them. And yet that whole Exodus trek from Egypt to the Promised Land, largely through desert terrain, was seen by later generations as a time of great blessing and closeness to God.

On the other hand the desert was believed to be a place where one would encounter forces hostile to God. It was in desert lands on the East shore of the lake that Jesus encountered the man Legion, and threw out his demons into the swine. Elijah went into the desert to lie down and die. Everyone had forsaken the Lord, Jezebel was after him, his ministry had failed. He went out there to die. Instead, he met his real self, not the bit that was feeling depressed. And he was reassured by the small voice that God revealed to him.

In the early centuries of the church, men went out to the desert to battle with their inner natures, and to purify themselves before God. The Essenes in the time of Jesus, and St Anthony of Egypt was one such too. Anthony left his considerable wealth to pursue a life of prayer in the Egyptian desert and while he was certainly close to God, he also battled with the devil, who sometimes appeared in the form of wild beasts. The church found his example to be heroic, and undertaken not just for himself, but as part of the ongoing battle for the kingdom of God.

In Anthony's story, the connection is very clear between the desert, God's presence, the devil and the wild beasts; and the connection to the Gospel story about Jesus is also clear. Jesus also goes into a desert inhabited by wild beasts and there confronts the temptation of the devil in the power of God. Anthony is following in the steps of his master.

Regarding the temptations themselves, Mark tells us tersely that Jesus was "tempted by Satan". So were Adam and Eve in that powerful allegory of the birth of mankind. They failed, and the world was seen as a sinful place because of that failure. Jesus, seen by later Christian teachers and writers as the new Adam, triumphed. And to drive the message home a few verses later Mark records Jesus' first miracle as the casting out of an evil spirit. Satan has been more than resisted: he has been defeated.

For many of us, periods of our lives have the feel of the desert: barren, unpromising ground with little sign of growth, but many dangers. For some, life is a continuous desert; for others, times of bereavement, illness or financial hardship engulf us like a sand dune moving in a storm: suddenly and unexpectedly we find ourselves driven unwillingly into the wilderness or the

wilderness has been driven around us. How, as Christians, do we interpret such experiences? Do we feel that this can't come from God, that it must be our bad luck or bad judgement or even the work of the devil?

One commentator suggests that perhaps we should remember Jesus' experience and ask whether this is in fact God's Spirit who is driving us into such times, testing and refining us. Are we like the little bird, being pushed out of the nest? Is God using these hard times to bring us to greater maturity of spirit and even give us a new calling? Or the other way of looking at it comes in Psalm 84: *Blessed are those whose strength is in you, who have set their hearts on pilgrimage. As they pass through the dry Valley of Weeping they make it a place of springs; the autumn rains also cover it with pools of blessing. They go from strength to strength, till each appears before God in Zion.* Ps 84:5-7

All of us go through the vale of misery in our lives, and it doesn't have to be God giving us difficult tests - it is simply life. But as we go through these experiences we can draw strength from God and we may even find that we are actually blessed in some way in our lives, in our relationships perhaps, simply because of this event.

If we are like the bird there is one difference: once the parent bird has pushed the young out, that's it: their relationship is at an end. Whether or not we see it as the Spirit pushing us out where we would rather not go, there is no question but that God comes with us, and meeting him turns the barrenness to a place of new growth and fills the unpromising land with new hope.

Who going through the vale of misery, use it for a well. Jesus got through his vale of misery, his moments of self doubt, by turning to the scriptures and to prayer. He beat back his doubts, his fears, his temptations to win support by doing amazing miracles, and emerged stronger, more focussed, and clear of the mission he had to undertake. He did indeed, use it for a well.

So this Lent, as we look inside to see the sin that is there, and decide how to deal with it, don't expect to be able to clear all of the inner life of every sin which we regularly commit in one go. Remember the answer to the question: "How do you eat an elephant?" One bite at a time. Tackle a manageable bite of private sin.

And beat it down by prayer, and the scripture. I pray that your desert Lent will indeed result in pools of blessing.