

Mark 1.9-15 Lent  
 Jesus' Wilderness Experience

### Mark 1:9-15

#### The Baptism and Temptation of Jesus

<sup>9</sup>At that time Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. <sup>10</sup>As Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. <sup>11</sup>And a voice came from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."

<sup>12</sup>At once the Spirit sent him out into the desert, <sup>13</sup>and he was in the desert forty days, being tempted by Satan. He was with the wild animals, and angels attended him.

#### The Calling of the First Disciples

<sup>14</sup>After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. <sup>15</sup>"The time has come," he said. "The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!"

### Introduction

Lent is meant to be a season of reflection and self-examination. In preparation for Easter, we stand back as it were and see ourselves again as we truly are before God. We see our human frailty; we throw ourselves before Christ's great mercy. The emphasis is penitential, we have the colour purple, we aren't singing the Gloria, and things are different. But that is meant to help signal to us that we need to stop what we are doing and take a little time aside to reflect with some honesty and openness about where we are at in our relationship with God; to see the glory but also our frailty.

In today's Gospel, Jesus is led into the wilderness by the Spirit for an acute time of testing. There will be periods of testing throughout his ministry, right up until the end; always testing to try to get him to disobey. Here it begins in Jesus' desert experience: what will we learn about Jesus through his wilderness experience, what will we learn about ourselves?

To help us get into the passage, we want to look at the characters involved.

vs. 9 John the Baptist is centre stage baptizing people,  
 Jesus comes in stage left from Nazareth in Galilee and is baptized.  
 And the Holy Spirit descends upon him like a dove.  
 Then verse 11 God the Father speaks.

Four characters thus far: we are meant to understand that Jesus is no ordinary preacher. He is Spirit-filled, he is God's son and he is on God's mission. The power of the living God is with him.

Then two new, very contrasting characters come on stage and the scene changes.

First Verse 12 **the Spirit sends him out** into the desert for forty days.

Then Satan comes and tests Jesus. We should note that Mark names the Evil One: he is seen a personal being. Evil is not an amorphous force but is given personality and direction in Satan. Indeed Jesus takes Satan very seriously throughout his ministry. Jesus has just been addressed by God the Father at his baptism and affirmed in his identity and mission, now he is addressed by Satan who seeks to strangle that mission before it begins. But the Spirit is controlling events.

Then two choruses come on the stage: stage left are wild animals; they represent the danger Jesus faces in the wilderness and wafting down from the balcony are angels who attend Jesus. Again indicating the divine resources which are backing Jesus.

And this leads us to two important things:

The **struggle** which leads to **triumph**.

## Struggle

This is a struggle. A titanic struggle between the forces of darkness and the living God. Jesus' mission was not just a political or social one: it is a mission with cosmic dimensions and would involve conflict with the forces of darkness. This is brought into highlight here with this time of testing in the wilderness.

Jesus' baptism was a powerful moment of affirmation, but now the enemy of God and his Son seeks to destroy Jesus.

The struggle that begins here will rage throughout the Gospel, reaching its climax when Jesus takes the cross. Even as Jesus surrenders his life on the cross in chapter 16 the day will turn as if to night, so spiritually powerful that moment.

At Golgotha Jesus will again be alone, abandoned by his friends and seemingly by God. Then instead of wild animals, ferocious men will bay at the crucified One.

In the gospel Jesus goes off to wild places to pray, praying not to be deflected from his true mission. As we read the gospel we sense an ongoing struggle within Jesus testing, trying to divert him from his true mission.

That testing came through the **Pharisees**. In chapter 8.11 "*the Pharisees came and began to question Jesus. To test him they asked him for a sign from heaven*". In Matthew's account of the temptation of Jesus that is exactly what Satan does: *turn these stones into bread*; come on, do a sign, be a miracle worker.

Testing even came through his disciples. In chapter 8 Peter tried to persuade Jesus against going to the cross, Jesus said: *get behind me Satan*. The central temptation for Jesus was to fail to go the cross. To be a miracle worker, to be a political messiah, anything than to go the cross, where he would offer his life as a ransom for many. The test Jesus must undergo is the temptation to disobey.

Jesus came to defeat the powers of darkness by offering his life on the cross so that whoever should come to him in repentance might be freed from the power of sin and death. But securing that was a titanic struggle. The Bible sees the Exodus back in the OT as a massive conflict between the living God and the forces of darkness which sought to destroy God's people. Their salvation then was a mighty struggle. So too in the ministry of Jesus there is this titanic struggle between the living God and the forces of Darkness. Salvation does not come cheap.

But that is why the setting: Jesus goes out to the wilderness. The wilderness. 40 days. That is a place of temptation and sin, but also purification. A place deep in the psyche of Israel. It was in the wilderness that the people of Israel were tested after the Exodus. It was in the wilderness that the people of Israel succumbed to temptation and fell into terrible sin. Yet too it was the place where Israel was purified for forty years before they could enter the Promised Land.

Jesus' temptation in the wilderness for forty days is showing us something very important. For we are wondering: how will Jesus respond to the testing of Satan. Will he like Israel did? In this cosmic battle how will he fare?

In our Lenten journey we are reminded of this struggle, this testing in our lives. How will we fare in the face of temptation and testing? Periods of testing come in all our lives, whether in Lent or not and those are often times which prove our faith.

When we fast and pray we are in a sense standing with Jesus. When we fail, we are reminded again of our frailty. We are reminded that on our own we have not successfully overcome sin.

As we struggle with the temptations which fasting throws up at us, even in such small ways, yet we are seeing something of what Jesus struggled with. For although he is God and is the Son of God, yet he surrendered his authority and power and submitted to the limitations of our human being. He had the Holy Spirit; he had his relationship with God. But as a man, he faced it alone. I encourage all of us to fast and pray in some way, to implement a Lenten discipline. But whatever it is you do, do it as a way of standing with Jesus in his testing.

What I decided to do was to fast from using the Internet in the mornings. Usually I hurry the kids out of the house to get the school bus at 7.23, and then I would sit down and scan the news: BBC, the telegraph. CNN, then CBC. So I am fasting from that and spending the time praying instead. What has helped me is I sit down with my coffee and play some Taize music. It's really a small thing, but whatever it is you do, choose something and implement it today, that will be your Lenten struggle. In which you stand with Christ in his testing.

**From Testing to Triumph:**

## Triumph

For all the struggle of Lent and of Jesus' ministry, there is triumph. Jesus will come through his desert experience strengthened and focused on his mission more than ever. Unlike Israel he will not succumb to sin but will obey.

For at Jesus' baptism the Spirit descended upon him. It was the Spirit who guided him into the desert and so who supported him there. As if to underline the support that was there for Jesus the text tells us the angels ministered to him. Yes he was out in the desert, yes there were wild animals there, but there were angels also.

And so the seeds of Christ's final triumph are in the desert. In the Exodus God's people has been purified as they passed through the desert to the Promised Land. Later they would know God's promise that the future blessing of the Spirit would be given in the desert:

**Isaiah 32.15 “until the Spirit is poured upon us from on high and the desert becomes a fertile field” For I will pour water on the thirsty land and streams on the dry ground; I will pour out my Spirit on your offspring”**

The desert experience contains within it the promised Holy Spirit whom God would send once and for all upon his people. That promise begins to be fulfilled in Jesus who is the first human being upon whom God would impart his Spirit permanently. God gives the Spirit to Jesus and Jesus after his ascension into heaven pours out the Spirit upon his people.

Right here at the point of Jesus' testing we see what a spirit-filled life looks like on the road. We see one person, one man living in the power of the Spirit, being guided by the Spirit. One man, resisting evil, obeying God in the power of the Spirit.

There is another way for human beings to live.

Sin does not have to have the victory.

Jesus is the first of a new race of human beings. Not a race defined by national characteristics but a spirit-filled race of men and women who obey God and live for him. A race of Spirit-filled, Spirit-controlled people who live not driven by their own devices and desires by led by the Holy Spirit. A race of obedient people who love God.

Adam failed through disobedience, with the result that sin entered the world. Jesus would triumph through obedience with the result that righteousness would re-enter the world.

**That is why Paul says in Romans 5 consequently, just as the result of one trespass was condemnation for all, so also the result of one act of righteousness was justification that brings life for all.**

What we are seeing vividly demonstrated is the new, Spirit-controlled humanity that God was making possible through Jesus who led the first Spirit-

controlled life. Under the guidance of the Spirit, Jesus obeyed and fulfilled his destiny to be the Holy One of Israel.

And all who come to him become a new creation, a spirit-filled people. That is us, brothers and sisters. That is why Lent is so important. Because it is in seeing our frailty, we are reminded that on our own we have been quite unable to overcome the problem of sin in our lives. But in seeing our frailty, we turn again, to the One who in the power of the Spirit overcame sin. Christ Jesus, our Lord.

When we see again our frailty, that we know even more the power of his Holy Spirit at work in us. In it is in acknowledging our frailty that the Holy Spirit can work in us and through us that we might fulfill our destiny to be this renewed, Spirit-filled race that God has purposed for the world.

You know one of the great benefits of the disciplines of lent, is to bring our relationship with God into focus. I want to encourage each one of us to take this season and make that investment in your relationship with God. As I said I have resolved to fast from surfing the news on the net in the mornings and to spend the time in prayer. That sounds very exalted, but I just play some Taize cds and drink my coffee (I refuse to give up coffee for Lent). For 15 minutes. But what a wonderful difference it makes. And when you open yourself up to God like that, the Spirit doesn't fly away when you go to work. He goes with you through your day.

To conclude:

Take some time in the wilderness this Lent. Ask the Holy Spirit to drive you into the desert. For it is in the testing of our Lent that we know the triumph that is Easter and the glory of being the Spirit-controlled men and women God has called us to be.