

Mark 1, 9-15 Baptism of Jesus, temptation, start of ministry.

Father, open our hearts and our minds to you word, your truth and your love. Amen.

One of the fun things about preparing and writing sermons is that very often you're looking at a piece of scripture which you think you know already. And then suddenly you see something, or understand something that you haven't really taken on board before. And that's really exciting. Ok, it might not be everybody's idea of exciting, but believe me, it can give you a real buzz.

If something has touched my heart and my mind in a new way, I want to share it. And so often with preaching, I find that I'm preaching to myself, just as much as to you. And so it was with this week's Gospel reading. You may remember that St Mark's Gospel is the shortest and it moves along at speed. Over and over Mark uses the little phrase 'and immediately' this that or the other happened. So just in the few verses we've heard this morning, we have the baptism of Jesus, the forty days of being tempted in the wilderness, and the start of his public ministry. That's a lot!

But I'm going to pick out just one simple but important point. How did I not notice it during all these years? What struck me powerfully this time was reading about Jesus' baptism. This is the first time Jesus appears in Mark's Gospel, and we are told that as Jesus comes up out of the waters of baptism, the heavens open and the Spirit of God is seen descending on Jesus in the form of a dove, and a voice comes from heaven saying: "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased." I always have to smile at that last phrase, because it sounds as though God is a Keighley lad: This is my beloved Son, in whom I am *well* pleased.

Words that are so familiar to us. God's affirmation of Jesus. But do you know, the thought that came to me was – and I don't mean this irreverently at all – the thought was: "But Jesus hasn't done anything yet!" Think about that. Here is Jesus, fresh on the scene. We know

nothing about him apart from Mark's opening words of the Gospel: "The beginning of the Good News of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." Now here we have Jesus' first appearance in the flesh. We haven't heard him preach or teach or seen him do anything yet. And yet God declares that he is well pleased with him.

That is surely a very powerful message, and not just for Jesus. It's saying that God loves Jesus and delights in him, right from the word go. Jesus doesn't have to *prove* himself. He doesn't have to *strive* to win God's love and approval. He is precious and beloved in God's sight just as he is. Praise the Lord!

And the exciting thing is, my friends, that this is true for us too. We don't have to try and *win* or earn God's love, God's grace and God's approval – we could never do that anyway. They are there for us, always, as a free gift. Think of a newborn baby: does that little child have to do or say anything to make his parents love him or delight in her? No. Similarly we are all loved, you and I equally, because we are God's children, God's sons and daughters. It isn't only Jesus. Jesus comes to show us the way, He comes to change the way we think about God. He comes to reassure us that God is Father to us, and that He loves us, *before* we do or say anything at all. That is a thought to ponder on.

And then Mark tells us that 'immediately the Spirit drove him out into the wilderness.' Jesus still hasn't *done* anything. But assured of God's love for him, he now goes off to find out what comes next. What does it mean to be loved by God? What might God be calling him to? He isn't expected just to sit back and bask in the knowledge that God thinks he's pretty special. The realisation that God, the holy one, the almighty creator, actually *loves him*, makes him realise that this relationship will make demands on him too. That he has to respond, in love, to that love of the Father. He has to work out what that means for the rest of his life.

Forty days at a stretch is a long time to give to that task. Most us only manage a few minutes each day if we're doing well.

There comes a point where we realise that we can only *give out* what we have already *received* from God; and we learn that we receive from God in those times of quiet and stillness where we open ourselves to God's Spirit and let him work in us. We tend not to appreciate the value of time spent alone, just being in God's presence and listening. But that's what Jesus did, and for forty whole days!

Over this last year we have all learned a lot about what it means to live in isolation, and many of us have found it pretty hard; but most of us have been able to communicate with other people by phone or online, with the occasional chat if we've met someone while walking on our daily exercise. But imagine forty days and forty nights with *no-one* else around at all, no phone, no internet, nothing. You might think it would drive you mad, but you might also find that you could focus on God in a new way. That's just what Jesus did. As we begin Lent, now would be a good time to try and let ourselves make the most of the restrictions imposed on us to try and draw close to God by simply sitting with him and listening. Maybe we might find, like Jesus did, that angels minister to us.

So firstly Jesus is baptised and affirmed: God tells him who he is, that he is loved as a precious son. Then he goes into the wilderness to learn what God wants of him. This is his training period, if you like; here is where he learns what it *means* to be God's Son, to be beloved of the Father. Then comes the time for action: now he is ready to start his ministry. Mark tells us that he leaves the wilderness and heads for Galilee, where he proclaims the good news of God, telling people that the kingdom of God has come near: God has now broken into this world with his love and his power, and is calling people to repent and believe and enjoy new life in relationship with God *as their Father*. Not as some distant, fearful figure in the heavens, but as a close and loving Father who yearns for them to respond to his love, trying always to live a life that pleases him.

And I think this is God's pattern for *us* too: we come to the Father in baptism, in confirmation, in a commitment we make – we are called,

each and every one of us. Then we need to spend time getting to know this God and what he wants for us and for all humankind; then we have to get out there and get on with the job. This will not make God love us any *more*, but we shall be showing our love for him, we shall be responding to his gift of love with our own gift of ourselves.

As Jesus' disciples, his students, we are meant to follow him, to listen to him, to walk daily with him and, yes, become like him. God's plan for us is that we should become like Jesus, who was himself like the Father. Jesus is the perfect human being as God intended humans to be. And he is the perfect human being because he is filled in every part with the Holy Spirit of God the Father, so that the very being of God himself is seen in this human being. And my friends, Jesus is not supposed to be just a one-off: as St Paul says in Romans 8:29, he is the first-born, the eldest of many brothers (and sisters!). The Christian life is not really about whether you go to heaven or hell, but whether you love God and want to be like him.

Now unlike the rest of us, Jesus could truthfully say 'I and the Father are one' and 'he who has seen me has seen the Father', and he could say that because he had *fully surrendered* his whole being to God his Father. He had allowed every part of himself to be open to God, so that the Holy Spirit filled every part of him. Think of your body: you are made up of millions of tiny cells which are being remade and renewed constantly. They are fed by the blood which flows through all our veins and into each and every cell. We know that if the blood supply to any part of our body is cut off, that part dies. Similarly, God wants to fill every fibre of our being with his Holy Spirit, cleansing, healing, shaping us, making us more and more like Jesus. We know we have a long way to go, but we can be assured that we are a work in progress and God will never give up on us. He is waiting for us, for you and for me, to turn to him in full and glad surrender, and be transformed by the complete renewing of our minds, until we finally become like Jesus. Changed from glory into glory, till in heaven we take our place, as the hymn says. So come to him this Lent, let his Holy Spirit fill you and work in you and make you like Jesus. Amen.