

Sermon for 18th February 2024 – Year B – Lent I

Preached at St John's Baillieston

Genesis 9:8-17; Mark 1:9-15

Sermon

The gospel reading for the first Sunday of Lent wastes no time in reminding us why Lent is 40 days long – it is of course the amount of time that Jesus spends in the wilderness being tempted by the devil. Although, if you've ever counted the number of days between Ash Wednesday and Easter Sunday, you might feel a bit confused, because that's a full 46 days and not 40 at all! The reason for the disparity is that Sundays themselves, being a weekly day of celebration, are never counted as part of Lent. So, I always like to remind everyone that as we go on this sombre 6-week journey with Jesus to the Cross, the sabbath day is still a day of rest when you're allowed to indulge in whatever it is that you've chosen to give up!

When I was a novice nun, monastic discipline in Lent was very strict – stricter than usual – with additional days of communal fasting where very little food was provided until suppertime. Sundays on the other hand, continued to offer the opportunity for two breakfasts, a fine Sunday dinner, afternoon tea and supper! There's nothing quite like days of fasting to make you really appreciate the feast that follows!

And so it is with the story of Jesus's journey to the Cross, and then to Resurrection at Easter. The more determined we are to accompany Jesus in his continual desire to obey God by loving and including and forgiving those he is supposed to condemn, the more we will experience the joy of Easter, when the long struggle as if through endless dark days of rain suddenly breaks open into the joy of the sun shining forth and sending rainbows arcing across the heavens.

But we're getting a little ahead of ourselves. Even if our Old Testament reading is full of rainbows celebrating the success of Noah's ark and the end of the flood, and St Peter's letter is already proclaiming that Jesus is now at the right hand of God, we mustn't leap forward to Easter too soon. "The meaning," as poet-priest R.S. Thomas famously put it, "is in the waiting."

The journey for Jesus, of course, is a lot longer than a mere 40 days. For him it's three years from the beginning of his ministry to its ending on the Cross.

It all begins with a textbook rite of passage, in which Jesus is singled out by the voice from heaven at his baptism, declared to be God's beloved Son, and then sent out into a sort of liminal space beyond the boundaries of society where choices are made and new identities are forged, before returning in a new role.

Many stories there are in history where a young person – and Jesus was only 30 years old remember – is sent out into a strange wild place to find their true identity, before returning to their community to lead them in a new way. The difference with Jesus is that his identity as God's child, and the ministry of healing and inclusion and compassion he takes up, are not just for Jesus, but for all of us. Just as the wilderness was a place of transformation for Jesus, so everything Jesus does afterwards is designed to offer us that same transformation.

We see that over and over again in the gospel stories, Jesus reaches out to those who are stuck in oppressed or oppressive lives, and offers them another identity and another way of being human. His firm trust in God and in his identity as God's child allows him to break all kinds of social taboos, touching lepers and anguished women, healing on the Sabbath, eating with tax collectors. Come and follow me, he says. The kingdom of God, the community of God's family, is right here; all you have to do is step through the door, realise that you, too, are a beloved child of God, and you will be transformed. Many who hear Jesus change their names, and their jobs. They've become different people from the inside out.

Some people of course do not want to make the leap. The scribes and the pharisees and King Herod and Pontius Pilate very much like the identities they have, and have no desire to struggle in the wilderness for something new. They slam the door shut in horror at the privileges and power they might lose.

Even the disciples themselves are often too hard-hearted to really grasp what Jesus is offering them until much, much later. They fix their eyes on human greatness and won't let go until they see Jesus die, and their old identities, hopes, and dreams finally crash and burn. For them, the death of Jesus on the Cross is their terrifying, unavoidable wilderness, and it is only with the coming of Resurrection they finally realise who they truly are, unconditionally loved children of God.

And now, this understanding of our true human identity is passed down to us as well. Just as God provided the wilderness for Jesus to realise who he is, and Jesus went to the Cross so that the disciples might realise who they are, the disciples also then gave us the gospels and the letters, so that we too might come to know that we are God's sons and daughters.

Too often, in my view, Christian faith has become limited to praising Jesus for the things he did, and then hoping that we get enough brownie points in life to get into heaven. Ideas like 'Original Sin' have even led many Christians to believe that God sees us as fundamentally wicked and that only Jesus taking our punishment on the Cross can sneak us past the pearly gates. But I really don't believe this is what Jesus and his disciples were trying to teach us. I think what they are offering is an opportunity to realise that we too are God's children, loved unconditionally, forgiven before we can even ask. It's this realisation of our true identity that transforms us, gives us worth and dignity as human beings, enables us to see that same dignity in everyone else, and leads us to make our own lives a place of love where others can encounter the God who is the eternal source of our being.

Everything in the Christian story from creation to resurrection is an opportunity to discover that we are God's family. We are beloved. This is, and always has been our identity, and it changes everything.