

St Marc Grenoble  
First Sunday of Lent  
21st February 2021  
1 Peter 3: 18 - 21  
Psalm 25: 1 - 9  
Mark 1: 9 - 15  
**'Beloved'**

## **PRAY**

I love the start of the New Testament, in Tom Wright's translation - 'The New Testament for Everyone' - it begins: 'This is where the good news starts - the Good News of Jesus the Messiah, God's son.'

Then, for the start of today's passage: *'This is how it happened ...*  
Around that time, Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee, and was baptised by John in the river Jordan ...'

I wonder if you have any idea what Mark may have been talking about, when he said 'This is how it happened ...'

John the baptiser had told his followers that someone a lot stronger than him was coming, 'I've plunged you in the water; he's going to plunge you in the Holy Spirit' ... And, Mark says: 'This is how it happened! ...'

I don't know about you, but there have been a number of occasions in my life when I have been startlingly aware of God's presence around me (I'm sure some of you will have had similar experiences) - it is an amazing feeling: awesome, scary and exciting, all at once.

The first such occasion I can remember was at my baptism! (Don't worry, I don't have a freaky memory of when I was a baby; I wasn't baptised until I was 12 - the day before my confirmation). I can remember a few things about that day; for example, it was the first of the few occasions I can remember my parents coming to church. (The others were at my ordinations - both as Deacon, and then as Priest; also to some of my licensing services.

Above all, I was very aware of God's presence, and I felt I was doing exactly what He wanted me to do at the time.

Sadly, for many of us, that very real awareness and feeling of God's

imminent closeness doesn't happen very often. (I wonder why that is?)

But, it seems, that is exactly how it was when John the Baptist baptised Jesus... And, we're told, as he was coming up out of the water Jesus saw the heavens open and the Holy Spirit coming down upon him, like a dove: and Jesus, and John, heard a voice - God's voice, say:

**'You are my son, my beloved, with you I am well pleased'.**

That must have been amazingly affirming for Jesus (I always glowed if my father ever said anything like that; sadly I only remember it in later life) - and it was, almost certainly, very reassuring for J the B too. There could now be no doubt in his mind that here, indeed, was the Messiah!

Tom Wright, in his commentary, explains it something like this: Jesus insisted John should baptise him, like everyone else, because He needed to demonstrate the way in which we would all receive God the Father's affirmation - or 'seal of approval'.

At His baptism, Jesus received clear affirmation from His Father that He is, indeed, the Messiah; and it is through His redemption of us (rather than through anything we've done) that the Father is pleased to affirm us as His beloved children, and this is a poignant reminder at our baptism.

So, we're told, as Jesus was coming up out of the water, He saw the heavens open, and the Spirit coming down like a dove onto Him - I don't think it was like just a little door opening in the sky ... more like a mighty curtain being raised - to reveal God's almighty and powerful presence - overlooking the stage of our everyday lives!!

Such moments of stark clarity are rare: just like when you put a coin in those powerful seaside binoculars, and what was previously a blur, suddenly comes crisply into focus, and you can see clearly for miles! Some people call them 'lightbulb moments', because it is like having a light switched on in a dark place.

So much of our faith, our Christian - Christlike - faith, is about living our daily lives knowing that God's presence with us is the true focus, behind the blurred vision of our day to day existence.

Only very occasionally do we enjoy the privilege of having the curtain rolled back to reveal, or confirm, His awesome presence with us.

But that presence will totally transform our life, even our very existence.

And, it was that kind of revelation, which seems to have been happening to Jesus as He came up out of the Jordan, and He heard the Father's voice affirming Him as the long awaited Messiah.

But, then, there was a most surprising paradox ... Mark tells us 'All at once, the Spirit sent Jesus out into the wilderness' Tom Wright, in his translation, actually says ' the Spirit *pushed* him out into the desert.

We're informed 'He was there for forty days, being tested by satan.'

Anyone who has given up chocolate, or biscuits, or wine for Lent, will already be realising ... 40 days is a very long time!

Why did it happen?? ... The answer is something of a challenge; I doubt whether anyone can actually supply a complete, comprehensive answer.

But, it seems that it may have been intended as a time of preparation, or equipping, for Jesus' earthly ministry; building up His resources and developing His own dependence on the Holy Spirit.

I'm also fairly sure that there's something in there about Jesus teaching us, by setting an example - demonstrating the way, to strengthen and refresh ourselves. Possibly also sanctifying the kinds of wilderness experiences that we all have, and often struggle with, in our lives.

Most Christians I know seem to experience them at one time, or another; and, often struggle with pangs of guilt because of them. But, don't worry - because we know Jesus has been there before us - and has triumphed over those temptations ahead of us.

Mark also tells us that Jesus had two sets of companions during His ordeal: wild animals and angels, who ministered to Him.

Only after this time of trial (and after John the B's arrest), we're told Jesus returned, proclaiming: 'The kingdom of God has come near. Repent (i.e. turn your life around) and believe the Good News!'

So, in conclusion, what does this wonderful story have to say to us?

It's a clear lesson to us that even Jesus - or perhaps, especially Jesus, had to experience the kind of wilderness times that all of us will, inevitably, have to face.

We are on a journey of faith - and we should not expect it to be an easy one; Jesus shows us where to find the resources he used, and we need, to empower and equip us for that journey.

We must give thanks for a renewed awareness of the Holy Spirit's presence with us, as we journey towards the goal He has given us; and to be aware that the Kingdom of Heaven is, indeed, near.

**So, Let's Pray ... Amen**

**Something to reflect on after the service:**

**REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS??** 3 Questions to 'chew on' as you reflect:

- What jumped out of today's Gospel reading for you??
- Talk about occasions when God has felt especially close to you??
- Why do you think Jesus was pushed out into the wilderness??