

In the first few Sundays of Year B, the Year of Mark, we have successively had readings from Mark chapter one, as it describes a typical day in the life of Jesus.

The first two Sundays of Lent, in each of the three years, always have a reading of the Temptation of our Lord and of the Transfiguration. This year's Lent 1 reading of the **Temptation of Our Lord**, in Mk 1:12-15, repeats Mk 1:14-15, which we heard several weeks ago, and gives us also Mark's very brief account of the Temptation. Interestingly, whereas Matthew and Luke say that Jesus 'was led' into the wilderness, Mark is more forceful:

'the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness.'

This same verb, 'to drive out' is used often of driving out demons e.g. Mk 1:34, 39. Those of you who have visited the Holy Land will know what a desolate place this is. Denis McBride, a Redemptorist priest who has written a number of useful books and who currently streams the Sunday Mass each week then makes the homily available online, says this Judean wilderness, running down the Rift Valley to the Dead Sea, is 'an inhospitable, forbidding landscape – from a distance it resembles the highlands and the cratered surface of Mars.' Mark does not give any detail of the Temptation but does say it was for 40 days. Forty is a common period of time in the Old Testament – Moses fasted in the wilderness of Sinai for 40 days (Deut 9:18) and Elijah near Mount Horeb (1 Kings 19:8) whilst Israel was 40 years on the way to the Promised Land. (Lent is 40 days, provided you exclude Sundays which are never fast days!) Only Mark refers to wild beasts. In the Old Testament they are associated with evil powers but here angels 'waited on' Jesus, just as they also cared for Elijah (1 Kings 19:1-8). Fr Denis McBride has an interesting suggestion that if Mark was writing from Rome around the time when Nero persecuted Christians and Vespasian led legions in a war against the Jews, then maybe there is also a fear of being thrown to wild beasts in the arena, as Jesus faces trial in the wilderness, Satan's traditional arena.

Before we look at the account of the Transfiguration I would like to go back to the **Baptism of Our Lord** (Mk 1:9-11). Once again, shown in some translations as 'just as', there is that little Greek word that signifies immediately i.e. as soon as Jesus came up out of the water, he saw the heavens not just opened, as in Matt and Luke, but 'torn apart'. This was a significant event! But it was only seen by Jesus himself. The Spirit descended 'like a dove'. Commentators say the dove symbolism is obscure but the key element is the descent of the Spirit. The voice is from heaven, saying, 'You are my Son, the Beloved.' Thus, at the start of Mark we have the good news of Jesus Christ, who is 'the Son of God' (Mk 1:1) A few verses later Jesus hears this same title at his baptism.

Moving to Lent 2, we have Mk 9:2-10, the **Transfiguration**. We have moved from the beginning to the middle of the gospel. The first part, to Mk 8:26, focussed on Jesus' ministry of healing and preaching in Galilee. From Mk 8:27 we read three predictions of the suffering of Jesus, his entry and opposition to him in Jerusalem, his death and resurrection. To understand Peter, we need to go back a few verses. In Mk 8:29-30 Peter says, 'You are the Messiah' and, as with those who were healed, and the demons, Jesus urges them not to tell anyone. He goes on to foretell his suffering, death and resurrection. His rebuke to Peter makes clear that the disciples did not understand that Jesus was not coming as a conqueror but as a suffering Messiah. Six days later, Jesus took Peter, James and John (who were in the first group of disciples

Jesus chose, in Mk 1:16-20) to a mountain. The location is not clear but it is often thought to be Mount Tabor. I remember quite clearly, years ago, going up there, mainly because the Franciscan, who took us up, wearing open sandals, had a bandage on his big toe!! It was not a huge mountain, just a short taxi ride up. Apparently, the word 'transfigured' came into English from the Latin word used to translate the original Greek which meant 'transformed' i.e. Jesus was changed in 'form': he looked different and his clothes were so dazzlingly white that the best bleacher on earth could not make them so white. Matthew and Luke refer to Jesus' face, but Mark does not. The whole idea, however is that these dazzlingly white clothes give an indication of his glory.

Elijah and Moses are usually seen as representing the prophets and the Law. They point to Jesus fulfilling Old Testament promises. Peter and the disciples didn't know what to say. The idea of three dwellings or tents probably links to the Feast of Tabernacles when they camped out in tents at the autumn harvest festival. The disciples were terrified, or full of awe, just as the women were in Mk16:8 when they saw the empty tomb and heard the proclamation that Jesus had risen.

The cloud in the Old Testament was always a sign of the divine presence e.g. Ex 40:34-8; here it is indicating that the speaker is God. Once more, we read, 'This is my Son, the Beloved' but this time the disciple hear it, as well as Jesus. Yet again, Jesus orders them not to tell anyone.

Jesus is identified as Son of God in the first verse of Mark, at the beginning of his Galilean ministry (at his baptism) and here at the start of his journey to Jerusalem and death. There is one more reference, at the end of the gospel, in Mk 15:39. 'Truly this man was God's Son'. The speaker was a centurion, i.e. a Gentile. The disciples kept failing to understand; a non believer recognised Jesus for who he was.

Mark, from start to finish, proclaims the wonderful news that Jesus is the Son of God. We next read from Mark on Palm Sunday, when the Passion is read.

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Quotations are from NRSV, as used in Bible Society Mark's Gospel