

**Sermon**

Sunday 6 December 2020

Lesson

St Mark 1: 1 – 8

The Gospel lesson for today is the opening verses of Mark. We hear the story of John the baptiser in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. The opening verses of the earliest Gospel begins with three key words: wilderness, baptism and forgiveness. If the first chapter of Mark's Gospel is an introduction to Jesus, we learn the ministry of Jesus is centred on wilderness, baptism and forgiveness.

Wilderness? Stories of wilderness, of desert experiences, are common across religious traditions. In the time of the Upanishads the Vedic poets retired deep into forests to meditate. The Buddha left home and became an ascetic until he found enlightenment under the Bodhi tree. John the Baptist invited followers into the desert. Jesus began His ministry with six solitary weeks in the wilderness. After his conversion, St Paul spent three years hidden away in the deserts of Arabia. In the myth of the Exodus, the Hebrew people journeyed

forty years through the desert, through the wilderness. In the Exile, the Israelites spent forty years in the desert experience of Babylon. The Early Church Fathers, Origen and Gregory of Nyssa, understood the wilderness as a symbol of the soul's journey to God. Gregory said that it was in the desert that Moses climbed Mount Sinai and entered the cloud, the darkness, and enjoyed union with Eternity. For Gregory, the Eucharist, the Sacrament of Bread and Wine, was entering the cloud, the darkness, moving beyond sense and reason, and enjoying the union and communion of love.

St Mark's second word is baptism. John was the baptiser, the immerser. Within Judaism, ritual cleansing was well-established. Immersion often took place in a river or spring: it was important that it was living water with movement and energy, clean and a source of life. Baptising people in the River Jordan, John's work would bring to life the power of the Exodus myth: it was through the Jordan that the people entered the Promised Land. Their ancestors had moved from one world to the next: the Jordan was a symbol of liberation. John's offer of repentance and the forgiveness of sins undercut the

religious claim of the Temple where the priests controlled forgiveness for a fee, a fee many of the poor could not afford. The poor (or the poor in spirit) went into the desert to John and there they found freedom, liberation and a taste of eternity. Biblical stories operate at different levels all the time.

Jesus was baptised by John. After His baptism, in an inner vision, Jesus saw the *Ruach haKodesh*, the Spirit of God, descending like a dove upon Him and a voice saying, ‘This is my child, the child I love, the child in whom I take great delight.’ This is a vision for every baptism: to discover that we are beloved souls, loved by our Heavenly Father, our Divine Mother. In the opening verses of the earliest Gospel, we are introduced to the desert experience, to liberation and to intimacy and union with God.

The final word the evangelist stresses is forgiveness. In a public lecture, the former Moderator of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, David Lunan, one of our own tradition’s spiritual leaders, spoke of healing, of wholeness and holiness. Carl Jung said that

most of the people he saw, people over fifty, would be healed if they could forgive or be forgiven. Lunan cited the experience of the comedian Billy Connolly. In an interview, Connolly said that he had learned the art of nothingness, of the immense power of silence; advice he was given by Sean Connery. Connolly's mother left home when he was four. He and his sister Florence were brought up and bullied by two aunts. When his father returned from serving in the RAF in Burma, Billy was physically and sexually abused by him.

Connolly says:

Forgiveness: it's the answer to everything. The abuse didn't bother me much as a child. It was after his death it got worse. I thought it would go away but it didn't. It kept recurring in my mind. I read a book about forgiveness that [my wife] gave me, about taking the load off your shoulders, putting it down and walking away. It's like having a rucksack full of rocks. You're carrying around this guilt. Shame. Nobody's told you you can walk away from it, but it's a miracle. It works. You can't let it dominate. It'll make you sick.'

Connolly says forgiveness is a miracle: it's the answer to everything.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu has written about his sense of guilt because he, as a young boy, regularly witnessed his father verbally and physically abuse his mother. Tutu says:

If I dwell on those memories, I can feel myself wanting to hurt my father back, in the same ways he hurt my mother, and in ways of which I was incapable as a small boy. I see my mother's face and I see this gentle human being whom I loved so very much and who did nothing to deserve the pain inflicted on her.

When I recall this story, I realise how difficult the process of forgiving truly is. Intellectually, I know my father caused pain because he himself was in pain. Spiritually, I know my faith tells me my father deserves to be forgiven as God forgives us all. But it is still difficult.

Tutu tells us that 'forgiveness takes practice, honesty, open-mindedness and a willingness....to try.' He says:

It isn't easy. Perhaps you have already tried to forgive someone and just couldn't do it. Perhaps you have forgiven and the person did not show remorse or change his or her behaviour.....It is perfectly normal to want to hurt back when you have been hurt. But hurting back rarely satisfies. We think it will, but it doesn't. If I slap you after you slap me, it does not lessen the sting I feel on my own face, nor does it diminish my sadness over the fact that you have struck me.

The only way to experience healing and peace is to forgive. Until we can forgive, we remain locked in our pain and locked out of the possibility of experiencing healing and freedom, locked out of the possibility of being at peace.

Tutu recalls the occasion when his father asked to speak to him. Tutu had driven for hours and was tired. He told his father, 'We'll talk in the morning.' That night his father died. Tutu was grief-stricken. He said, 'It has taken me many, many years to forgive myself for my insensitivity, for not honouring my father one last time with the few moments he wanted to share with me. Honestly, the guilt still stings.' Part of Tutu's journey has been to acknowledge his own anger, anger that as a boy he did not stand up to his abusive father. He realised that he needed to forgive himself. Tutu wonders if the three hardest words to say are 'I am sorry'.

Human beings are the most complex creatures: we – all of us – are kind and not so kind, creative and destructive, selfless and selfish, forgiving and in need of forgiveness. God is in our desert experiences, speaks words of love in baptism, and is there in the journey of forgiveness.

Amen.