

Sermon

Sunday 21 February 2021

Lesson

St Mark 1: 9 – 15

No sooner had Jesus come up out of the waters of the Jordan at His baptism than the Spirit of God descended on Him, like a dove. At once, the Spirit then drove Jesus – still dripping wet – deep into the desolate wilderness. For forty days and living among wild beasts, Jesus struggled against the temptations of Satan. Uninhabited, a waste land which suffered the extremes of temperature day and night, and with little water, the wilderness was a central and powerful biblical image. In the mythology of the Old Testament, for forty years Moses led the Hebrew people from the slavery of Egypt to the freedom of the Promised Land.

Centuries before Jesus, Moses had endured his own wilderness experience. Before he received the Ten Commandments, the tablets of stone, Moses had faced forty days and forty nights alone, without food or drink, on Mount Sinai. Like Moses, the other great Jewish prophet, Elijah, similarly journeyed and fasted for forty days and nights as he made his way to Mount Horeb. For Moses, Elijah and

Jesus, wilderness experiences were fearsome, menacing and formative. For me, the wilderness stories are metaphorical. They represent times in our lives, times of growth surely, but ones that may be painful, distressing, and challenging. It is in our wilderness experiences that we face our greatest temptations, failings and brokenness.

In the Gospel of Mark, we read that the Spirit descended on Jesus at His baptism, like a dove: it is a heart-warming image of peace, gentleness and love. But, immediately after that serene moment, the same Spirit drove Jesus, forced Him, to face His temptations: the vulnerabilities of body and soul. In the desert place, in His aloneness, Jesus was tempted by Satan. Satan: what do we think about Satan?

In our time, when government buildings are stormed, opposition politicians are imprisoned, a journalist is murdered, conflicts rage, school children are kidnapped, and a virus spreads effortlessly among the entire human population, do we think of supernatural evil, of

Satan at work in the world? Jesus faced Satan: who or what is Satan?

According to tradition, Satan, Lucifer or the Devil, is said to lure people to Hell. Often depicted with horns, a tail or wings and with eyes that penetrate and terrify, Satan is the personification of evil and the enemy of God. In the Gospels, on one occasion, Jesus said to Peter, 'Get behind me, Satan!' Elsewhere, Jesus described Judas Iscariot as a devil. In the first chapter of the earliest Gospel, Jesus was pushed by the Spirit into the desert where He was tempted by Satan. A few verses later, Jesus healed many people who were demon-possessed. In chapter three, Jesus' own family come to take hold of Him because they think He is out of His mind: the scribes said that Jesus was *Beelzebub*, the ruler of the demons. In reply, Jesus said that it was Israel which has been overtaken by Satan. In his Second Letter to the Corinthians, Paul wrote about rival teachers. Those whom he believed were interpreting the gospel wrongly he said were the servants of Satan.

In the third century AD, the ascetic, Anthony, a spiritual giant of the Church, taught his monks to picture Satan as the most intimate enemy of all, an enemy who speaks through our inner thoughts and impulses, through imagination and desire. The reformer, Martin Luther, believed that life was a spiritual battle with Satan. In one of his hymns, Luther wrote of lying chained in the devil's dungeon. He said that we are like a donkey, at times ridden by God and at other times by the Devil. Is Satan real to you?

In the Old Testament, 'Satan' meant adversary or opponent. In the earlier part of the Old Testament, God had the capacity to do good and evil. In the Book of Job, Satan is not a demonic, evil figure but the agent of God: Satan is there to test Job at God's behest. The theological problem we have is how to account for the presence of evil in the world. As time went on through the Old Testament period, the cause of evil became one step removed from God in an attempt to preserve the goodness of God. There is a story told of King David in the Second Book of Samuel in which God urges David to take action which, in turn, leads to God's harsh judgement of

David. In the later First Book of Chronicles the same story is told but this time it is Satan who is the agent who tests David.

It is easy to dismiss Satan, Lucifer or the Devil as mythology of the past which no longer has any meaning for us today. I would certainly want to distance myself from the belief that there is a spiritual or immaterial being called Satan who brings about evil in the world and I would certainly want to distance myself from all notions that there is a Devil with horns, a tail and wings, who may or may not look like a dragon. In the Bible, read imaginatively, Satan is almost always the enemy within. We may have notions of a supernatural being with independent existence eager to pounce on us from without, but the truth is – the biblical truth is – that Satan is a personification of the enemy within.

The former Chief Rabbi, the late Jonathan Sacks, said that there are three kinds of evil. The first evil is in the natural world, such as the tectonic plates which cause earthquakes and tsunamis. The second is that which humans commit against each other and the third is that

which we commit against ourselves. The second and third evils, those we commit against others and against ourselves, are there because God created us with free will *and freedom comes at a high price*. Our freedom to choose and shape our future is what makes us what we are. Satan is the enemy within. We are moral decision-makers.

Rabbi Sacks told a joke; let me close with it:

There is a Jewish joke, a tragic one. The time, 1938, the place, a travel agency in Germany. A Jew has entered. He tells the woman at the desk that he would like to buy a ticket for a foreign journey. 'Where to?' asks the travel agent. 'What are you offering?' asks the Jew. The travel agent passes him a globe. He turns the globe slowly, looking at country after country, knowing that each has closed its doors to people of his faith. He pushes the globe back to the travel agent with the words, 'Don't you have another world?'

Satan is the enemy within. It is that inner voice which tempts us, diminishes our humanity, encourages selfishness rather than selflessness, and serves power, status and wealth rather than peace, humility and love. In different ways, we have to face our own demons: it was the same for Jesus in His wilderness experience.

Amen.