

## **Jesus in the Wilderness according to Mark**

**(Preached in St Andrew's church, St Andrews, 25 February 2007,  
the first Sunday in Lent)**

Mark 1.12-15

Mark's Gospel tells us that, after Jesus' baptism, when he was anointed with God's Holy Spirit as Israel's Messiah, the same Spirit drove him into the wilderness. And only after spending time in the wilderness did Jesus begin his messianic mission of announcing the arrival of the kingdom of God. Whatever that period in the wilderness was about, it was important – the Spirit impelled him – and it was a necessary prerequisite to embarking on his mission.

When we think of Jesus in the wilderness, we probably think of the much longer accounts in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, which tell us of the three temptations Satan put to Jesus and how he dealt with them. But this morning let's stay with Mark's much more concise account and see what it tells us.

The Spirit drove Jesus into the wilderness. Wilderness is a word with all sorts of biblical resonances. Israel after the exodus wandered in the wilderness and was tested in the wilderness for forty years, as Jesus was for forty days. The prophet Elijah fled to the wilderness for safety and in the forty days he too spent there he had his most profound encounter with God there.

But more generally and more obviously wilderness for people in biblical times was the place where people didn't and couldn't live. It wasn't necessarily sandy desert. It could be the rocky terrain of the wilderness of Judaea. It would be whatever was alien and inhospitable and hostile to humans, the opposite of the fertile land where people settled and made a living from the soil. Leaving aside a few nomads, no one would travel across such terrain if they could help it, still less linger there.

For the wilderness that could not be home to humans was home to other kinds of creature with whom humans did not generally want anything to do. Wild animals, some of them dangerous to humans. And demons – the wilderness was thought to be the haunt of all manner of evil spirits.

Jesus goes into the wilderness – the non-human, even anti-human sphere of creation – in order precisely to encounter the non-human creatures. For some reason, it seems, he must do this before he can begin his mission in the human sphere.

Mark summarizes –  
Jesus was tempted by Satan  
He was with the wild animals  
And angels ministered to him.

Three kinds of non-human being. None of them appear very much in the rest of the Gospel story. No wild animals, only domestic ones, those that belong in the human world. No angels again until after Jesus' resurrection. Not even Satan, at least not in any direct encounter with Jesus, though there are plenty of indirect ones. Before he could embark on his mission to

people, to Israel, Jesus had to sort out his relationships to these non-human inhabitants of the world – on their own territory, the wilderness.

Those relationships of course are all about being the Messiah, the one who has come to bring salvation into the world. How must the Messiah, if he is to be true to the vocation he has from God – how must the Messiah relate to the great adversary of God and God's people, Satan? How should he relate to the wild animals? And how to the angels?

Satan, of course, is intent on deflecting Jesus from his messianic mission. These are no ordinary temptations, the little daily ones we all know about. Jesus did not have to go into the wilderness to be tempted in all those ordinary ways. What Jesus faced alone in the desert was the temptation to make some thing of his life that was not the vocation to which God was calling him. There were many ways of being some kind of a messiah and Satan suggested all of them to him – all except, that is, the true one. There were ways of being a messiah that would much more obviously bring success than the way that God required. How tempting to be the kind of messiah people wanted, the kind they would cheer all the way to his glittering triumph and his golden throne.

At the outset of Jesus' mission there had to be a decisive choice of God's way rather than Satan's. Everything else Jesus did followed from that. When John Milton decided to complement his great work *Paradise Lost* with another called *Paradise Regained*, he chose to tell only this little bit of the Gospel story: Satan's temptations of Jesus in the wilderness. Not perhaps the most obvious choice but an inspired one. For in *Paradise Lost* he had told the story of the original temptation, the one to which Adam and Eve succumbed. Their choice of Satan's way rather than God's was decisive for the history of the human race. Its damage could only be undone by someone who faced in a way the same choice but chose God's way rather than Satan. That was the first messianic act, decisive for all that followed.

Mark then says of Jesus that he was with the wild animals. Not many people pause to think about that. Isn't it just a bit of picturesque scene-setting, evoking for us the alien or dangerous environment of the wilderness? I don't think Mark in this very concise account would waste words in that way. The animals are the second in a series: Satan, the wild animals, angels.

Through the Old Testament, if you look for it, from Noah onwards, runs the enmity between humans and wild animals, the ones they don't domesticate and put to use in the human world. The animals are threats sometimes to human life, often to human livelihood: they have to be fought off, the way David the shepherd boy proved himself by fighting off the lion and the bear that would have carried off his lambs. So should the new David, the Messiah, do likewise, more effectively. Well, no, according to the prophets. When the Messiah comes he will heal the enmity between the human world and the wild world of the other creatures. The lion will lie down with the lamb instead of stealing it. The little child will safely play beside the adder's nest. They will not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain, says the Lord, in the book of Isaiah. *Paradise regained* in that respect too.

So Jesus does not go into the wild in order to defeat the hostile creatures of the wild. Mark says simply, 'he was with the wild animals.' 'With' is a little word but it suggests quite a lot. A couple of chapters later Mark tells us that Jesus appointed the twelve apostles to be with him. It's not just a neutral term as though they just happened to be there. If Jesus was with the wild animals it was a peaceable and perhaps, in an appropriate way, friendly relationship.

While Satan was the enemy Jesus could only defeat, the wild animals were the enemies of whom Jesus made friends.

Nowadays the word wilderness has a connotation it didn't have in biblical times. It still means the non-human sphere - or the parts of the world we don't inhabit. But we perceive it not so much as threatening, more as threatened – by us. Significantly, many of the wild animals Jesus would have encountered in the wilderness of Judaea are no longer to be found there. People – protecting themselves, making a living as best they could – have driven them out, sometimes to extinction. The image of Jesus peaceably with the wild animals, leaving them their wilderness, leaving them to be themselves – I think is a suggestive one for us now.

Thirdly, Jesus encounters angels who minister to him. Now we might not expect to find angels in the wilderness. Demons yes, but not angels. I think the angels are there because Jesus is. When Elijah fled into the wilderness, an angel brought him food and drink. For Jesus, I think, the angels show him that God has not left him to fend for himself. This place devoid of other humans is not without God's provision. The angels are usually unobtrusive in their service, but here in the wilderness Jesus is aware of them – so that, once again, he can get his relationship to them established at the outset of his mission. I said the angels don't appear again in the Gospel story until after Jesus' resurrection, but there is one verse in Luke's Gospel that is not in all the manuscripts and some scholars think it's not part of the original text of Luke's Gospel. So you won't find it in all the modern translations. But here it is: in Gethsemane, as Jesus wrestles again with his messianic vocation – must he, after all, follow it as far as death – 'an angel from heaven appeared to him and gave him strength.'

Well, in conclusion, a suggestion for a Lenten agenda a little different from usual – just in case this is right for any of you (it may or may not be):

First - To be with Jesus in the wilderness may mean to sort out where your life is going in God's intention, to face up to all the temptations to take it in other directions that may be very tempting but are not God's will for you.

2nd - To be with Jesus in the wilderness may mean to sort out how we relate to the other creatures of God in this creation that is now so threatened

3rd - To be with Jesus in the wilderness may mean to become more aware of God's day by day provision for us - the unobtrusive ministry of the angels.

But none of those things should we do on our own. We *can* do them only because Jesus has already done them, once, for us.