

Jesus' ministry begins without people

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Lent 1b – Gen 9 8-17, Mk 1 9-15

Four things happen right after Jesus passes through the waters of baptism; ¹ he sees the heavens torn apart, ² he sees the Spirit descending onto him; ³ he hears God the Father call him 'my Son, the Beloved' and declare he's 'well pleased' with him. So surely he must be ready for his public ministry now; powerful, blessed and deeply connected with God. But no, there's something else. Suddenly, immediately, ⁴ the Spirit throws him out into the wilderness for forty days where he's tempted by the enemy – the accuser – and he's with the wild beasts, and the angels minister to him.

We need to notice two things here. ¹ The ministry of Jesus is *not* to come out of his divine power, but out of his human vulnerability. And ² humans are not the whole of God's plan: part of it, yes; but not all. Once he's baptised, Jesus goes first to be with creatures other than us: wild beasts; angels. We are not the whole story

Jesus comes out of the water and he's propelled into the wilderness for forty days; being with beasts. The beasts connect him with the flood story we just heard, and the wilderness connects him with the central story of God's ancient people; the Exodus. God rescued the Israelites from slavery in Egypt bringing them to safety through the waters of the Red Sea. They got across safely, but found themselves in the wilderness; in their case for forty *years*.

And at the end of the Exodus story, Joshua (*same name as*

Jesus) led God's people across the Jordan River into the Promised Land, and suddenly they had to fight battle after battle if they were to keep hold of the land at all. For God's people, coming up from the water is not a conclusion, but a new beginning – not a statement that from now on, we are self-sufficient, but that here, we rely on God.

It's not always an easy beginning. We land in a new adventure that God's been planning for us. We make our landfall only to feel like we're starting from scratch. Kindy – school – work – marriage – parenthood ... Repeatedly, we're reminded of how helpless we are – utterly reliant; like newborns. Jesus knows this feeling. And that's good news. In Mark's gospel, Jesus's experience of the wilderness is one of nurture and care; angels minister to him. Temptation is not the centre of Mark's version; it's being in a real world and receiving care when you need it. Jesus is one of us; not aloof – not all-powerful; not invulnerable; quite the opposite.

We learn from him that our pilgrimage is a journey into learning to rely on God; learning to discover God's care for us – *and* for the beasts and angels – to learn it from experience; not by right.

We learn from today's Gospel that like Jesus' baptism, ours was always going to be a signal of testing to come, but that none of us approaches that time of testing alone. Jesus had beasts for companions and angels to meet his needs. Who do we have? Who's committed to sharing our years of pilgrimage with us; who are our companions? Who are God's ministering angels in our wilderness times? Animals?

I'm not being flippant. Those wild beasts out in that wilderness; God loves them just as we know God loves us. What we learned from the flood story this morning, and what we can learn from elsewhere in the book of Genesis ^(1, 8 etc), in the Psalms ^(50, 105, 128), and in the prophets Isaiah ⁽¹¹⁾ and Jonah ^(4.11),

is that God has a special care for the wild beasts. Scripture says the wild beasts Jesus was spending time with were creatures that God had declared to be good, creatures that God also made a covenant with, creatures who, as the Psalms tell us, praise God by their very existence.

I believe that now, as we grow increasingly aware of our impact on the other families of Earth, a part of every Christian's pilgrimage must include owning our responsibility for what happens to God's other creatures. We can be ministering angels of God to those wild creatures, just as we've always been protectors of any human beings who, for whatever reason, can't speak in their own defence.

We can raise our children and grandchildren to know how to choose to be ministering angels of God to silenced people and wild creatures. But we have to make sure those people and creatures survive now, so our children might have them to care for.

And we have to make sure that children can grow up in a way that gives them space and time to experience wilderness – not distracted, but simply in a wilderness – where they can have the opportunity to learn how they rely, at the most basic level, on their God; the God who calls them into existence, the God who loves them, the God who calls them on their pilgrimage with all God's people as ministers to all God's beloved.

And finally, should the world change and our own children come to number among those who are silenced by poverty, disaster or tyranny, we have to ensure that these Bible stories are told everywhere – that the Gospel reaches all families of the Earth – that God's words might go forth. For when they do, they will not return empty. God will call other carers to follow the example of Jesus – to minister not out of their strength, but simply out of who they are. Amen.