

St George's Anglican Church Malvern

First Sunday in Lent Yr B 1 March 2009

Genesis 9.8-17 Psalm 24.1-10 1 Peter 3.18-22 Mark 1.9-15

I hope you noticed the big black cover above the high altar of the church. It's covering up the work the gilder is doing on the wood around the lovely mosaic that is there. It will be uncovered again on Easter morning when the work is completed. From the glimpses we've seen, I know it is going to be really beautiful.

The glory that is emerging behind the black plastic is hidden from our eyes. It exists but we can't see it. It's there but it's veiled.

On Ash Wednesday I spoke about Lent as a good time to make ourselves available to God for God to work in us God's good and transforming purposes. As the prayer for Monday evening says

God who wonderfully made us and even more wonderfully restored our humanity: strengthen us by your Holy Spirit

God makes and remakes us, through the presence of spirit, pneuma, God's own life within us so that God can delight in us and we delight in God. That is the purpose of our lives according to the scriptures and the constant experience of faithful people in every age and every place. God delights in us and we can learn to delight in God despite the barriers, the fears and the flaws we know stand between us and the freedom before God we long for.

Did you notice in Mark's gospel – it is the Spirit who drives Jesus into the wilderness. The Greek word is very strong in its force. Jesus is thrown out, thrust out, almost banished to a lonely place. How confusing must that have been?

Jesus comes from Galilee – Mark means us to hear this Jesus comes from 'Nowheresville'. A stranger stands before John to be baptised. He's nobody from no place of significance. John plunges him under the water. The stranger comes up, he resurrects from the water and for him he's suddenly somebody. A voice comes from heaven – who hears it? Jesus certainly hears it. The voice speaks to him and of him as the unique, only – and so beloved son of the voice. Who else had a beloved son? Abraham of course. Abraham, who would have sacrificed his son if necessary; he had a beloved son Isaac. Is the shadow of the cross already cast in this gospel? Yes, it would seem so.

The voice – Mark implies it is God – delights in this son, this beloved one glistening wet from the waters of the Jordan. How many fathers and mothers have instantly called their new born 'beloved' as they emerge wet from the waters of birth? Most know the deep joy of a moment like this – as a parent or as a loved child. If that love has not been your experience as a child, God suffices and will, if you allow it.

The heavens are torn open and Jesus experiences the power and presence of holy spirit as if there was no distance, no minding of the gap, between heaven and earth. It is moment to bask in. It is a moment to savour. It is a moment that must carry Jesus along in the hard times; it is a memory that must sustain him when he doubts or fears that it ever happened.

I recall my parents talking about me once. I was in the room but not paying them much attention. I heard my father say to my mother: she'll be alright you know. I have no idea what prompted his comment, or what anxiety might have been behind it. I had been very sick for a long time with pneumonia – is the memory from that time? I don't know. It is a memory of my much loved father affirming me and it has stayed with me all these decades since. I think it is interesting that I wonder if the experience of loving regard followed my pneumonia when I struggled for breath. Interesting because it is and still is for me an experience of pneuma, spirit – of loving presence and being strengthened by that love to be who I am – and I link it to the pneumonia which threatened my life.

So Jesus is driven out to a wilderness place. If ever an image evoked multiple associations, it is the wilderness. In the wilderness Israel was set free from the oppression of the Egyptians but then faced new physical and moral trials that caused them to loose their way. In the wilderness they knew God with a clarity that they could not maintain and so built a golden calf to worship instead. The wilderness was both the place of privileged encounter with God and of their deepest shame before God.

Mark says almost nothing about those forty days and nights Jesus spent there. The Beloved must have wondered what the point of being that was if the in the next moment he is cast out and alone, tempted – how, by what? Perhaps it is always the same temptation disguised in different formes – the temptation not to be, not to trust, not to let God be God and thus accept who we are with God and before God – I mean accepting that we too are beloved of God.

That truth may not be apparent to you – you may even doubt it; it may be hidden from your eyes by some kind of black plastic that does not yet allow you to see the glorious truth about you that exists though unseen by you. Lent is about the uncovering of who we are – mortal, limited, unkind at times, maybe too many times for our own liking, black plastic clouding our eyes so that we fail to look with compassion on others. Yes, that's true. But Lent unveils another truth: when our illusions are stripped away by the wilderness events of life – the facing of our darkest selves, the inner loneliness perhaps most acute for most people in grief and loss, the diminishment of age and illness which rob us of even pretending we are in ultimate control - when these illusions go, then the voice can be heard and the heavens torn open and the pure gold of God's creation can emerge as we respond to the call to live as God's beloved. Let this Lent be a time of uncovering what is now hidden and on Easter morning this faith community will put that gilding in the shade with our joy to be alive to God in Jesus Christ through whom we are all made beloved and delightful.

Colleen O'Reilly