

First Sunday of Lent

Dear Parishioners and Friends,

The gospel of Mark, which we read this year on the First Sunday of Lent, gives us only the bare facts about Jesus' forty-day sojourn in the desert. That Satan tempted him is mentioned, yet there are no details of the temptations to which he was subject. Yet the details Mark does share are interesting. He tells us that Jesus was driven into the desert by the Spirit. He shared his desolate surroundings with wild animals. And, presumably when his period of self-imposed trial came to an end, angels ministered to him. The fact that Mark moves on so briskly to what Jesus did next suggests a link between the forty days in the desert and the beginnings of his public ministry. He went immediately to Galilee (the presumption being that the desert was in the south of Judea, east or west of the Dead Sea) and set about proclaiming the imminent arrival of the kingdom of God and issuing his own call to conversion and repentance.

It is interesting to speculate on what Jesus was thinking of during those forty gruelling and challenging days. We do not know quite how much Jesus thought about his possible future during his hidden life in Nazareth. We do know from the evangelist Luke that already as a teenager Jesus had an awareness of his duties to his heavenly Father: he told his mother that discussing the scriptures with the wise men in the Temple was "about my Father's business". On the banks of the Jordan he had heard a voice from heaven assuring him that God considered him his "beloved Son" in whom he was well pleased, so he must have had some awareness of a unique identity and a special mission at that stage. The time in the desert doubtless enabled Jesus to deepen his appreciation of his unique filial identity and to think strategically about the mission he was soon to launch in Galilee. He was later to teach his disciples to pray, and one of the things they were to wish for is *thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven*. So, we can imagine Jesus probing his Father in prayer to discern for himself what his Father's will was.

How well did Jesus know himself at that stage? Did he have to ask his Father to give him courage, to enlighten him in making choices, or for strength to overcome his natural inclinations? His own character was put to the test by Satan and he probably emerged from the desert pleased with himself for having resisted temptation. Did he plan his mission? Having endured solitude in the desert, one can imagine the human and gregarious side of Jesus longing for companionship. Maybe that experience made him resolve on recruiting friends and disciples. His mission was one he was determined to share with companions he could trust and whose company he could enjoy. Young men like himself made a change from wild animals or angels, however kindly their ministrations to him in the desert. We might ask ourselves some other questions about this period in Jesus' life. The desert forty days must have made a deep impression on Jesus, he must have shared some of his experiences there with his friends (otherwise the evangelists could never have written their gospel account of Jesus' temptations). It might also be worth our while, when our forty-day pilgrimage of Lent is over, asking ourselves what effect it has had on us.

Father Patrick