

## Sunday 21st February – First Sunday of Lent

### Sermon by Harold Toms

As we start Lent this year it would seem to me odd to try talking about the usual thing that I have in previous years, namely the traditional Lent idea of giving something up or fasting. Over the last year we have all had no option but to give up so much: going to Church; going on holiday; meeting friends and family; eating out; I could probably fill whole pages with things that we have all had no choice but to stop doing. Traditionally Lent, as a penitential season looking forward to Holy Week and Easter, is a time of introspection when, by cutting other things out of our life, we make time for self examination, we can think, perhaps, about changes we would like to make, about those things that we might be better off without, not just for the forty days of Lent, but permanently. This year it seems almost as if we might like to do the complete opposite and think about something to start in Lent rather than what to give up. So, as I approached the readings I thought it would be a good idea to think about them differently to my previous Lent sermons, to try and find something new to say about them.

Mark's account of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness is by far the shortest of the three accounts in the Gospels, and, as is typical of Mark, as well as being short it has a real sense of urgency (I suspect "immediately" was Mark's favourite word). But interestingly, as I compared his account with that of Matthew and Luke, I noticed that in spite of its brevity there was one detail that only Mark includes. A detail that, in the context of today's other readings is actually very important. This version of the story is contained in a single sentence, verse 13 which is:

"He was in the wilderness for forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him." Mark 1:13

And the little detail that jumped off the page at me was the words "he was with the wild beasts". As I say, neither Luke nor Matthew include this detail, so the fact that Mark does, immediately gave it significance to me since it takes up almost a third of the entire account. My first thoughts were about how to interpret this detail. Are we to consider it to be making a point about just what sort of environment the wilderness was? Not only is Jesus in a generally uninhabitable (and uninhabited) place, but does the presence of these wild animals also imply that it is a dangerous place. In a desert what sort of animals might we expect to find? I can't readily think of many friendly animals in that harsh environment, it's much more likely to be reptiles and insects... snakes and scorpions, if there are mammals perhaps mountain lions or maybe rats. We're certainly not talking about domestic or even agricultural animals - they're described distinctly as "wild animals". Yet, when you consider the

readings that we have alongside that Gospel, we have not one but two mentions of the story of Noah and the Ark. The animals taken into the Ark, of course, included domestic animals but also two of every kind, including snakes, scorpions, rats and lions. So perhaps I shouldn't be thinking of them in terms of making the wilderness as inhospitable as possible but rather, linking Jesus with the story of Noah and the Ark, which is a story that concludes with that great covenant that God makes with the rainbow is its sign and seal.

At the start of this year I was inspired like many, I am sure, by the new BBC wildlife series - hosted by David Attenborough - "A Perfect Planet". It was an interesting choice of title for such a program, recalling very clearly the way God looks on His creation at the start of the book of Genesis and sees that it is indeed "very good". The conditions on this planet that we call home are just perfect to sustain life, as the program demonstrated even when sometimes they seem to be almost the exact opposite - as in a volcano for example, which as well as being hugely destructive turns out to be a wonderful natural incubator for Iguana eggs. In the first four programs Attenborough looked at the factors that make the Earth so perfect, then in the fifth program considered a factor that could be making it even better, but is actually undoing the good and possibly destroying our perfect planet. Us.

The Bible, in its creation account from the book of Genesis, and then repeatedly afterwards, for example in the Psalms and the book of Job, reminds us of the perfect balance of creation, of how God has created everything around us and how good it should be. But the Bible also contains warnings of how we should not usurp God's place as the only Lord of all creation. So when Mark tells us of Jesus going in to the wilderness, the presence of those wild animals should not strike us as threatening or menacing. The very next phrase gives it away, as well as being with the wild animals Jesus has the angels waiting on him. This is actually the first of many places in the Gospels where we see Jesus as Lord of creation, no accident then that it's in chapter 1 of this Gospel, which, let us not forget, begins very like Genesis with the words "The beginning". Throughout the Gospels we are reminded of how Jesus is truly the Lord of creation, think for example of how he calms storms.

I have talked recently about how lockdowns, with the reduction of human activity, have enabled nature to flourish and wild (or not so wild) animals to re-appear in the modern wildernesses that we call cities. The first chapter of Mark's Gospel has various references to water, John baptising in the desert, Jesus calling his disciples by the Sea of Galilee. But the story of Noah is a reminder that as well as being a source of life, water can also wreak great destruction. As Christians, indeed as humans, I believe God calls us to be stewards of His creation. When we can see that we are doing harm, our stewardship responsibility should drive us to strive to undo that harm.

This Lent I intend to try and change the way I think about the world, to stop seeing "wild animals" as menacing and to try and see their place in God's creation. To try and live in harmony with them as we find Jesus doing when he went in to the wilderness. I'm not entirely sure of how I can do that. But I'm certain that, if I want to inhabit the world in the way that God intended, then I need to look to the example of how God lived on this earth and that means trying to follow the example of Jesus. In the longer accounts of His time in the wilderness, in Matthew and Luke, we learn that the temptations he faced were about how he should use his dominion over creation - for selfish ends and self aggrandisement or for the glory of God. So this Lent, to each of us I'm not asking "what will you give up" but, "what will you take up" to try and help keep God's creation perfect.