

Third Sunday service, 21 Feb 2021

Talk: A very human spiritual experience

I hope you enjoyed the Lego pictures to go with today's Gospel. I don't intend to make a habit out of Lego in the service, but Mark's Gospel is so quick and punchy that I thought it was useful to have something there to add more flavour to the story!

Today isn't just a Third Sunday, of course. It's also the first Sunday in Lent – the first Sunday of the season of preparation for Easter. I've always found it strange that the church's year rushes straight from Christmas to Easter, and then leaves months and months of the summer and autumn with almost nothing to do!

But it does make a sort of sense because Christmas and Easter are, at their cores, about the same thing: the God who became human, and what humanity's response to that was. At Christmas, we have shepherds and magi offering worship, and a king determined to kill his rival. At Easter, we have disciples and crowds offering worship, and religious and political leaders determined to kill the rebel.

In today's Gospel, as we begin our journey to Easter, we see Jesus begin His ministry.

We'll never know why this was the right time, why – after 30 years, after countless abuses of imperial power by Rome, after countless experiences of blindness and hypocrisy among religious leaders – why the time was finally right for Jesus to begin His ministry.

Before this, Jesus lived a normal life as far as we know. He grew up in a family with a mother, brothers and sisters. He earned a living. He was part of a worshipping community. He had friends, acquaintances, aunts and uncles.

But, one day, his life changed. More than that, Jesus *decided* to change it.

The story of Jesus's baptism and the start of His ministry is the story of a man who encountered God and realised that it was time to change.

Now, we see Jesus as a complex figure: he was fully God, but also fully human. This is pretty hard to understand! It's easy enough to look at Jesus and see a man, a very wise and spiritual man, with a unique insight into how to live a good life. And many people do look at Jesus and see that.

It's also easy to look at Jesus and see God: perfect goodness, perfect power, perfect wisdom, perfect strength, perfect love. And many people look at Jesus and see that.

The strange but vital thing about the Christian faith, though, is that it claims that Jesus was *both* of these things: fully human and fully God, at the same time. How are we to relate to another human being who is also God? How are we even to understand what that means, to be flesh and blood and weakness and mortality and limitations, but also creation and life and strength and power and love?

Part of the purpose of the Gospels is to *show* us who Jesus was, so that we can start to know Him for who He is. The Gospels don't lay out doctrines like a textbook, but introduce us to a person – a person who the authors and those they interviewed had known in the flesh and come to know in the spirit.

Stories like today's are vital because they show us Jesus the man, not Jesus the teacher or Jesus the miracle-worker or Jesus the trouble-maker. Today's story shows us a man who went through a spiritual experience, was blessed by God, and found a unique mission based on His unique identity. None of us will share Jesus's experience exactly – none of us shares *anyone* else's experiences exactly – but this story is a potentially universal experience for all of us.

Jesus went a long way to get baptised. I often get the impression that Jesus was hanging out near John's revival movement but Mark says that Jesus made a special journey to be baptised. It's about 30 miles from Nazareth to the Jordan. That's probably a couple of days' walk there, and the same home again. And that's assuming that John was doing his baptising at the nearest bit of the river, up by the Sea of Galilee!

Jesus decided to be baptised. And this baptism began a major change in his life. Theologians have argued for centuries about why it was even necessary. After all, baptism signified repentance for sin. Jesus, we believe, was without sin, so why did He need to be baptised?

Perhaps it was about another meaning for baptism: the death of the old life and the beginning of a new one. Perhaps Jesus felt his mission approaching and knew that He needed to show Himself and everyone else around Him that a definite change was happening.

Whatever the reason, Jesus went. He travelled, he queued among a crowd, waiting His turn. And finally, he walked into the river and was baptised by his cousin John.

What's remarkable about this, I think, is that God responded to his choice: even Jesus, God Incarnate, needed to make a decision and to make it publicly, in order to make a real change in His life. And, as He makes the choice openly and publicly, God responds.

An essential part of the Incarnation – of Jesus becoming human – is the giving up of the divine knowledge and power that were His. Humanity means being limited, but here the human and the divine are joined once more in the person of Jesus.

We don't know whether this vision of the Spirit descending and the voice speaking was just for Jesus, for Jesus and John, or for everyone. None of the gospel writers seems very concerned about that.

What matters, I think, is that Jesus heard. Having made His choice and been baptised, Jesus hears God speaking very clearly to Him, sees a vision of the Spirit descending. Jesus's decision to accept His vocation, His ministry, is recognised, affirmed and celebrated by God.

After this great spiritual high, though, the Spirit 'drove him out into the wilderness' for 40 days. This is something I can certainly relate to and I'm sure many of you can, too: spiritual highs are often followed by great lows – affirmation by temptation.

So, Jesus had come to His great moment of religious commitment. Even if no-one else really knew what that baptism meant to Him, Jesus knew. And at that moment, Jesus had received that direct affirmation from God. It must have been fantastic!

But highs cannot last, and Jesus is driven out from the crowd and the visions into the desert with the wild animals and the temptation.

Jesus goes to the desert with God's words and vision ringing in His ears and shining from His eyes. But, again, we don't know why He goes. Perhaps He needed time to process the baptism experience. Perhaps He needed to think and plan His mission.

But we do know that He was tempted there. Again, Mark glosses over this and we get a rather more elaborate account of Jesus's temptation in Matthew. But the details aren't really important. We know that Jesus goes into the desert – from the spiritual high to an extended period of isolation.

Spiritual highs are great. I've had a few, and I hope you have, too. But the lows can be constructive, too. The lows are when we reflect on our lives, when we realise where God has spoken and where God has not spoken, when the highs turn from experiences into lived reality.

Highs cannot last, and lows are something we all experience. But lows aren't the end either. Jesus lives in the desert for 40 days – which means a long time, not a specific number of days – and He experiences temptation there. Again, like every human being, Jesus is tempted. He's tempted to change His mind, to go back to the easy, normal life. To leave the desert and have food. To use His power and rule the world!

But Jesus survives. He survives the physical trials, He survives the emotional trials, He survives the spiritual trials. And not because He's God but because He's human. God cannot be tempted, and until God became human, God had never experienced temptation. In Jesus, the human, God was tempted and resisted and won. Jesus the man relies on God – that great message, that assurance that Jesus is loved by God – and so survives the lows of the desert.

And, after the low, after John is arrested, Jesus begins his mission.

Jesus has made His choice. He's received affirmation from God. And Jesus has accepted the mission that will govern his life from now on.

And that's the journey we're invited to share this Lent. We're invited to make the choice to commit our lives to God. We're invited to remember the great spiritual high of Christmas, the coming of God into the world and the great announcement that we need not fear, and that peace will be on us.

But, most of all, we're invited to spend some time in the desert. To accept restrictions. To reflect on God's words. To overcome temptation. And, ultimately, to be waited on by angels and to emerge into a new world, where we can say with Jesus that the time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God has come near, to us and to everyone.