

The Time is Fulfilled : Repent

PREACHER : Canon John Armson, Canon Emeritus

Sunday, March 5th 2006

Sung Eucharist : 10.30am

Lent I: Mark 1.9-15

I come to you at the start of Lent. As the vicar said to the happy couple before their wedding, 'You can't have the organ: it's lent.' 'Lent?' said the incredulous groom: 'To whom?'

Often church talk doesn't make sense to people outside our circle. Can we put today's gospel reading in inclusive talk? If we can, it may make more sense to us insiders as well as to non-believers. Let's have a try.

We heard from St Mark. Jesus was baptised by John. A baptism – a christening? No, this was not christening. This baptism – a word which simply means 'washing' – was pre-Christian. John was a man associated with that ascetic sect who produced the Dead Sea Scrolls, and who finished up committing mass suicide at Masada. John was known as the 'the baptist', the washer-man, because he adopted this ritual sign to mark the penitence of his people – penitence for neglect of their proper obedience to God, as expressed in the customs and laws of the Jews.

Jesus comes to be washed. Why? We are told he was the one without sin. What had he got to confess?

I suspect that, good though it is, that's not the right question to ask. I think Jesus' reason for coming to John was different. John was calling *all* Jews, and Jesus was a Jew. So, in solidarity with his people, Jesus submits to John's renewal ritual. He binds himself to his own people.

And he is washed in the river Jordan – the holy river Jordan: the place of so much of his people's history. He is linked – in solidarity again – into his people's past, which thus became his *own* past: their story and his. You have to read the Old Testament, the Jewish bible, to know about that story. It is a huge story, full of tragic glory.

Now Jesus was a Jew living in mixed society. We read of Samaritans in the gospel: there were other races there as well. Think of all those people who heard the apostles at Pentecost. Plus: Palestine was an occupied country, under the Roman thumb. So it was a mixed society. And in mixed societies people tend to become defensive, more conscious of their roots, where they belong. Division can result. Well, we know about that: one of the difficulties facing us British – we who are used to being thumbs – is the possible fragmentation of our society as new peoples arrive. Hold that for a moment.

At the Jordan, Jesus heard God's voice – in his ears? in his heart? Matthew's gospel favours ears: God's announcement is 'This is my Son'. Everyone there could hear it. Today's reading – from Mark's account – prefers, 'You are my Son.' It was personal, private. I prefer Mark, because we *all* hear things in the secrecy of our hearts from time to time: challenging things, wonderful things – which we then have to work out what they mean.

Jesus had to work out what this extraordinary, this stunning message meant. 'You are my Son: the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.' And how to sort that out? He needed space, he needed time. He goes off to be with God by himself. He went into retreat. Of course. Where better?

A time out, a standing back, away from the pressure of little things (or even big things). Time to listen more deeply, and sort out priorities. Time to go back to first principles. Any of us can recognise that. Who can possibly live a significant life without that kind of stock-taking? We do ourselves – and therefore others – down when we leave it out.

Mark says for Jesus it was a testing time. He was at a critical moment – it was 'make or break'. He could

- plod on, do a good job as a carpenter, quiet life, wife, children, and a peaceful death?
- Or
- be a prophet, like John, only greater?

We don't know just how much of this went through his mind at this, the threshold of his life's work. But he re-emerges 40 days later – mentally battered and bruised, no doubt – but clear. Was his passion and cross were already discerned? Mark gives us no reason to be certain about that. And even less about any resurrection.

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OK: let's try and apply all this.

We are at the start of our '40 days'. We are being called – not to be good, but to be Christians, which you may say is the same thing. But it's not. We are called to be Christians whether we're good or not. We have been baptised – ah, yes, in our cases *christened* indeed – made Christ's. Our baptism was a ritual – sacramental – sharing in a path that rises:¹ death and resurrection indeed. Our 40 days is a time to let all that that means be formed within us.

But doesn't that mean being good? Yes... but 'good' is too small a word, too boring. It suggests goody-goodies. How much more thrilling is that voice at the end of the reading today:

The time is fulfilled. The kingdom of God has come near!
'Are you up for it?' asks Jesus. 'If so, Repent!' says Jesus. Change course, change attitudes, change job if necessary, change anything for the sake of this kingdom.

But a preacher would say that, wouldn't he? Well, yes, he would. But, you see, it's *true*. That's the point. Not my point. It's the point, the 'spiritual' and *human* point, of St Mark's account of the Good News – which is not, as one modern translation of the opening verse of Mark's puts it, 'The good news *about* Jesus Christ'. It's not *information* that Mark is on about; it's *proclamation*. The ball is rolling. Jesus Christ *is* the good news.

Mark's point is – but here I may go out on a limb, I suspect: tell me afterwards – Mark's point is. Jesus is the one who *provokes* us to risk growing up and, in solidarity with him, following him into God's story.

Is this a devotional point? Yes – but much more. It has social implications, and never more so than now, here, in England. Let me draw out one possible point. (This is certainly not the main thrust of Mark's account; but it could be a component part.)

Every people has its story. A people without a history has no present, and no future. Read Eliot's poem *Little Gidding*. A people *needs* a story to feel rooted, secure, confident.

¹ see Nikos Kazantzakis, *Christ Recrucified* 1954, p.322. It is the story of a passion play put on by a Greek village under Turkish occupation.

I said earlier, our 'British' story, is changing as people with other stories arrive in this island. They make 'the people' a different people. Can they help us write a new chapter for old stories – theirs and ours? A new, *common* chapter for old stories, indeed. Stories which then will more nearly approach God's story. That's the question.

In Britain, we Christians have been used to having it all our own way, so far as faith is concerned – though by ourselves we've never managed to agree about what faith means. Now we have friends and neighbours who hold other faiths, use other language, are fired by other images; people who do not own the Lord Jesus – or if they do, they place him alongside other prophets and leaders.

So, is it significant that Jesus bound himself to his *own* people's story, even though he lived in a very mixed society. *That* gave him his future. He didn't berate or try and change or reform the incomers – the Roman or Samaritan or whoever – *strangers* in his land. His eyes are fixed on his own people.

So: Could a message to we Christians be that all of us need to be better rooted, better belongers – not just to our 'British' story, but to our 'Christian in Britain' story? – so that we can reach across divides with more confidence, less fear; seeing the common ground rather than the differences.

Clearly, there is much hard, practical work to be done here. Our British Christian experience is still so young, so raw. But if today's gospel reading has any social force for us – and we can't just read it off straight: any parallels are too limited – could it be that *one* point might be: we must be more rooted, more confident, less anxious, less possessive: more loving.

I believe God wants us to love him more, not protect him more. Indeed, how can we say other when, at this start of lent, we have heard how Jesus left the wilderness and set out to his undefended cross?