

Forty Days

26 2 12

Almighty God,
whose Son Jesus Christ fasted forty days in the wilderness,
and was tempted as we are, yet without sin:
give us grace to discipline ourselves
in obedience to your Spirit;
and, as you know our weakness,
so may we know your power to save.

Today's text may be found in the gospel according to St Mark, chapter 1 verse 13:
'He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild
beasts; and the angels waited on him. '

We're five days into Lent: only 41 more days to go before the dawning of Easter.
But since you know there are 40 days in Lent and since you know Ash Wednesday
was last Wednesday, then how come we seem to be going backwards ? Could it
be your priest is 'backwards' – and can't count ? Or could it be that there are six
Sundays spaced out among those 40 days which don't count as part of our Lenten
discipline, our Lenten fast, since, as you know, Sundays are feast days ? So there
are, in fact, 46 days from Ash Wednesday to Easter Eve and Easter is, in truth, the
47th day after the start of Lent.

This year our gospel readings are mainly taken from the gospel according to St Mark. I love Mark's gospel because its sixteen chapters are so succinct yet contain such telling details. Mark is regarded as Peter's gospel – Peter's experience of Jesus which Mark distilled in his words. Alone among the four gospels, Mark recalls that in the Garden of Gethsemane there was a young lad on the edge of the group of disciples who was grabbed by one of the Temple guards but with the enviable agility of youth, he slipped out of his loose linen garment to flee naked into the night. That youngster was probably Mark. And only Mark mentions that when Jesus fell asleep on the boat crossing the Sea of Galilee – that night the disciples feared for their lives in a sudden, violent squall – Jesus' head was resting on a pillow. Nice touch that!

But this morning, we turn to Mark chapter 1 verses 9 – 13 and in four verses, some 95 words in our pew bibles, Mark records not only Jesus' forty days in the wilderness but also his baptism in the Jordan by John. In fact, Mark uses just 34 words to describe the 40 days Jesus spent in the wilderness – impressive brevity or what?

But just because it's short, it doesn't mean that it does not contain snippets of details to feed our imagination. In verse 12, for example, the verb to describe Jesus being motivated to go and spend the next forty days in the wilderness is particularly strong in English – 'drove'. In Greek, the verb is εκβαλλω 'ekballo' and literally means 'to cast out'. Curiously, ekballo is the same word that John uses in his gospel to describe what Jesus did to the money-changers and sellers of animal sacrifices when he cleansed the Temple !

Mark alone tells us that ‘he was with the wild beasts’ which inspired Holman Hunt, the pre Raphaelite artist, to paint ‘the Scapegoat’. All three synoptic gospels have the details that the angels waited on him. Only Luke and Matthew give us details of three of Satan’s temptations, albeit in a different order, but Mark contents himself simply with the fact that Jesus was ‘tempted by Satan’ without going into details as to what those temptations were – very wise. We are, therefore, free to speculate for ourselves which will tell us a great deal about what we ourselves consider to be temptations.

But before I finish this morning, let me invite you to speculate on what you understand by the word, Satan. Satan, the Devil, Lucifer, are all names Christians give to the evil which opposes God. As Christians, we are not dualists like Zoroastrians with the power of Good and the power of Evil in balance opposed. Rather to our way of thinking, the one allows the other to function to allow us the possibility of choice, of free will. Anyone who knows anything of the Holocaust and its parallels before or since cannot have any doubt that there is something called evil. But my question for you is ‘what is the form that evil takes?’ Is evil any more than a pantomime figure in red with horns, a forked beard and a trident used to frighten children? Or is evil a spiritual force waiting, seeking to be embodied in and through us? I am not sure; but of this I am sure: evil seeks to reify itself in the world in which we live. How he/it does so and what he/it might be is an open question.

But just before I stop – let me leave you with a bonus thought, an extra gift in today’s sermon. If you are ever engaged in speaking to a Jehovah Witness, they

might tell you that nowhere in the Bible is the doctrine of the Trinity expressed as such. And, of course, they are right. But profoundly wrong. And here in today's gospel, in just two verses, Mark succinctly names all three persons of the Trinity. Jesus, the Son of God goes down, into the water, to be baptised. And coming up out of the water, the Holy Spirit in the form of the dove descends on him and the voice of God the Father speaks to him, 'You are my son, the beloved with you I am well pleased.'

So there you have it: Jesus in the wilderness, tempted by Satan – and we only have another forty-one days to go before we unwrap our Easter eggs!

I have spoken in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,
Amen.

Preached at the Eucharist

St Bartholomew's, Dinard

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H: Sermon 25: Forty Days

