

Monday Evening Bible Reading Group: September 9th 2019: St Mark Chapter 1 verses 1-13

Content: Some sacks of peanuts for bird feeders have almost as much space as nuts. Others are jammed tight, and the peanuts have to be prised out. Mark jams into his first 13 verses: the doctrine of the Trinity; God's foundational purpose; the core message of the Old Testament prophets (social justice and divine love; the mission of John the Baptist rooted in repentance and forgiveness; the public response to John from everybody in Jerusalem; John's wildman character and hark-back to the OT prophets; the promise of the Messiah and the coming of the Holy Spirit; the birth, baptism, affirmation of Jesus; and the temptation in the wilderness. This is a wealth of material that other writers spent chapters on. The trainee preachers who tried to pack all this material into a two minute homily might find his tutor advising cutting back to *one* key point! The TV drama producer would see a whole series in this agenda.

Some Background:

The OT quotes are from Malachi Chapter 3 verse 1, followed by Isaiah Chapter 40 verse 3. Malachi was writing about cleaning things up, including stopping abuses in the Temple itself. Rome needed cleaning up: the Roman writer Juvenal described Rome as an open sewer. Christianity is about amendment of life, not just about going to church! A reporter sent out to find dirt on the preacher Billy Graham was astonished to find that shopkeepers in BG rally towns were getting customers coming in to settle ancient bills, with apologies! There is an antiseptic aspect to Christianity!

Baptism was already familiar to Jews at the time of John, but mainly as part of the initiation rites for non-Jews signing up to Judaism. For those already Jews to be Baptised was newish, but ritual washing was very much part of everyday Jewish life. When I had lunch in Blooms (famous Jewish restaurant) there was an official on duty to watch that Jewish diners washed properly before eating.

Confession has 3 or 4 implications: confession to yourself (recognising what you have done or failed to do, and facing up to this); confession to the person you have wronged, where omission or commission has harmed someone else; confession to God (who, of course, knows already but likes you to say it and say sorry – He is also hurt by our sins); confession to a third party/ a priest. This last is an option for some Christians, and an obligation for others.

John dressed like Elijah and lived like Elijah. The Gospels are a bit ambivalent about this, but John can be seen as fulfilling the prophecy of the return of Elijah. Locusts and honey might be what they sound like, or might be wild beans and tree sap: poor people's "food". John lived his message as well as saying it. John points beyond himself, and challenges people to put their living where their speaking is.

Jesus' Baptism is odd in some ways: what did He have to repent from? He is identifying with us, and He is marking the turning point after 30 years of humble ordinariness. We know next to nothing about that first 30 years of God on earth; and are only well-informed about the three years of public ministry.

The 40 days is less about 5 and a bit weeks than about "an extended period". Here Jesus, on the threshold of His public ministry, has to wrestle with how to use the short time available to Him. However you envisage the Satan, the experience of testing/temptation is real and universal. Those of us keen on a good relationship with the natural world are rather keen on the bit about Jesus having the wilderness animals as His friends. A lovely story is that these animals included a "Scape" goat; the sacrificial animal carrying human sins. (One goat was slaughtered; one sent off into the wilderness – re-assuring human sinners that their sins had gone away.

Questions (some among many): *What is a wilderness experience? Do sins ever go away? Did Jesus need John? Does infant Christening have anything in common with adult Baptism? Why did John attract a following? Why did some John disciples never shift to Jesus? Is Christianity always going to be a Voice crying in the wilderness? What one thing do you take from these verses about the Christian message for us to preach? What one thing do you take from these verses about Christian living?*