

Sunday 21<sup>st</sup> February 2021 Lent 1

As we know, Mark is the most “economical” of the gospel writers in his use of words; so we can be pretty sure that every word, every phrase, is packed full of spiritual meaning. Our challenge, then, is to *extract* that meaning and apply it to our own lives as Christians.

Of course, we know that Jesus was tempted for 40 days in the wilderness—that’s part of the Biblical inspiration for the 40 days of Lent that we began a few days ago on Ash Wednesday. But how often do we reflect on the *second* part of that verse, about Jesus “being with the wild beasts” and being “served and supported by angels”? What does that mean, for Jesus and for us?

For most people, the desert is a hostile and inhospitable terrain, a place of threat and danger. From small but dangerous scorpions, up to the jackal, the hyena and the leopard, the wildlife of the Judean desert can pose a real threat to human beings who are wandering on their own, hungry, disoriented and alone. Spending long, solitary periods in the desert was a risky thing to do.

But, as some of the early Church Fathers have pointed out, sometimes wild animals are used symbolically; and in this story, they perhaps symbolize the many temptations, both large and small, that must have harassed Jesus during the roughly six weeks he is said to have fasted and prayed alone in the wilderness.

Of course, there were the big, dramatic temptations of the devil that we know about but, almost certainly, there were *other*, smaller, more subtle temptations and struggles which were like wild animals, snarling and circling around Jesus, looking for the right moment to make their move and to attack him when he was weakened and presumably unable to properly defend himself. Temptations to impatience or selfishness, to envy or doubt ... temptations to seek another, different path ... temptations to give in or give up ... struggling with hunger and all of the other yearnings that go along with being fully human, which Jesus was.

Seeing Jesus tempted here helps us to understand his full humanity, so that we can relate to Him more directly and identify with him more closely. Most of us has similar struggles with our own temptations daily, too; and we can also sometimes feel we are alone in our own personal wildernesses.

Although this passage uses the symbolism of “wilderness” and “beasts” to represent the kind of obstacles which can get in the way of human beings as we stumble through life, Jesus’ example shows us that the wilderness is not a place to be feared, but one of great hope! The wilderness turns out to be a place of revelation and of intimacy.

This passage shows us that in our darkest moments, when we feel we are alone and most in need of God, he is actually alongside us. Yes, Jesus was by himself among beasts, exhausted from battling Satan's temptations but, at the same time, the angels ministered to him to assure him that his beloved father was watching over him. God was on his side, and for this reason, Jesus emerged from the wilderness in proclamation!

The beauty of this succinct passage is that it wraps up the purpose of Lent in 8 brief lines. Jesus remained in a dark place, confronting his temptations in both the vulnerability and the fullness of his humanity, for 40 days, during which the angels offered Jesus their loving, caring support.

If we feel we are in a wilderness at the moment remember that, although it can feel like a frightening and lonely place, there are angels alongside us on our journey, too. Their voice is one of love and compassion, a supportive voice that speaks God's mercy and reassures us when we are dejected and unsure.

Let it be *those* voices we listen to this Lent; and let us remember that the angels also model for us what we are meant to *be*, and to *do*: to be angles to one another, reaching out as instruments of God's care and compassion to those who are going through wilderness times in their lives.

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