

## **2022 TALK FOR CAREY, 6.3.22, MARK 1:6-15 & ROMANS 5:1-8**

### **WILD HOPE**

Let me start with a question for us all. Where does the gospel come from? Where does the good news of Jesus originate?... (good answer, but not the answer I'm looking for this morning...) Look again our passage for this first Sunday of Lent, from the opening of the gospel of Mark. Think about what Mark writes about the location of John the Baptist and Jesus. Now, hopefully you can answer the question.

The good news of Jesus comes right out of the wilderness. Out of the middle of nowhere, if you like. The word 'wild' crops up five times in this opening to Mark's gospel. (x3 as part of the word 'wilderness' and x2 as a separate word).

There are a number of reasons for John and Jesus both choosing to locate themselves in the wilderness of the Jordan valley. And a lot of these reasons resonate with our experience of Lent. Periods of wandering. Times of testing. Experiences of finding God, after long times of seeking. Experiences of being refreshed and filled, after long periods of feeling thirsty and hungry.

There are some particular reasons I would like to suggest today, as to why John chose to hide himself away in the wilderness. And why Jesus chose to emerge from the wilderness at the start of his ministry. Yes, on a practical level, Jesus was called to be baptised by John in the Jordan. So, Jesus had to go there, to be obedient to God right from the beginning. But then God's Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness, for a time of testing. And certainly, the wilderness provided the best opportunity for John and Jesus to seek God. There is good precedent for this, with all those from the history of God's people who claimed to speak for God. The wilderness was an ideal location for John and Jesus to avoid the usual distractions of life. Now, this is what we expect to hear from a sermon on the first Sunday of Lent.

But how about these two reasons for the good news emerging from the wilderness:

- Firstly, it makes it very clear that this message is not of human origin; no person can claim credit for this surprising news out of the 'left field' if you like. That hope should come from a place of no hope is a reminder that both John and Jesus were sent by God. The God of the impossible. For those who first

heard the gospel of Mark, the wilderness was not only a place seemingly devoid of life, it was also a place which threatened death. If the teachers of the law could say of Nazareth: 'What good is ever going to come out of Nazareth?', how likely they thought that: 'no good will ever come out of the wilderness...?'

But what does the wardrobe and the diet of John the Baptist tell us? It tells us that in actual fact, the wilderness that God's people were so afraid of, was teeming with life. Surprisingly, a place of abundance. We know, eg, that camels can survive relatively easily in the wilderness. We know how numerous locusts can be. We know that bees can only make honey if there are plants and flowers. Just a quick reminder about last week's message: 'Your Heavenly Father knows your needs. So, seek first his Kingdom and you will be provided with food to eat, water to drink and clothes to wear (by some miracle).'

- The second reason that the gospel comes from the wilderness is this. It is to remind us that this is where we all came from. Both in terms of the story of God's people and also, the story of all peoples. We are all products of the dust of the earth, no less. (Or if you prefer, we are all products of 'stardust').

Both the wilderness of the earth and the wilderness of the cosmos is not a place of death, but a place of life. God gives us birth and life through the daily giving of creation. And just as Jesus was kept company by the wild animals, so with us too. All of God's good creation is our companion and friend. It's interesting that in this obscure verse of Mark's description of the testing of Jesus, he only mentions the angels as an after-thought. The wild animals are much closer companions for Jesus in his time of trial. (That has certainly been the case for many people during Covid; lots of people have found the company of pets to be invaluable).

Today, we kind of have a better understanding of the rest of creation than most of those in the time of Jesus. This is partly thanks to presenters of nature programmes like Sir David Attenborough. We have gained something of an appreciation of the wilderness, of places pretty much devoid of human life. Of course, God's people of old were threatened in the wilderness by wild animals like bears and lions and wolves, for example. But there is a deep irony here: we are only just beginning to gain an appreciation of the wildness of nature, now that we have supposedly 'tamed it'. Now that we have tamed the wilderness, we are in danger of losing it and ourselves also in the process.

Just this week I came across a Lent book. So, it's too late to recommend it. Maybe next year? It's a book by US author and naturalist, Gayle Boss, who lives on Michigan's West Coast. The book has a whale on the front cover and it's called: 'Wild Hope: Stories for Lent from the Vanishing'. The word 'vanishing' refers to all those many species of animal who are in danger of extinction and are indeed becoming extinct. She paints wonderful pictures in words of the stories of these creatures. These gifts of God to our planet. These gifts of God for us to both benefit from and to care for.

So, this is one of my 'wild hopes' for this morning: I hope it is not too late for us to regain a true appreciation for the real worth of all life. To understand that, we can only hope in God's goodness, by hoping in the goodness of creation.

How can we hope today? How can we hope in the midst of all the devastation and bad news we see? This last 10 days has reminded us forcefully of our uniquely human ability to reduce this good earth to little more than a poisoned, blasted, empty landscape. Where is our hope now? As the Psalmist puts it: 'I lift my eyes to the hills. Where does my help come from?' We can hope because: 'our help comes from the LORD, maker of heaven and earth'...

The President of Ukraine spoke of hope this week. He spoke of a vision of a new Ukraine, rising from the ashes. He spoke of Kyev and all these embattled cities being ultimately rebuilt. That's a biblical vision of hope. Something for us to pray into. (At the same time as we pray for the mighty to be brought down from their thrones and palaces and luxury yachts).

Yes, we continue to hope. But, I am also conscious that one of those facing up to this Russian onslaught is a Ukrainian scientist who helped to write the latest report on climate change. She, for one, will not leave Kyev, despite offers of lucrative jobs in the west. More important than that, she is acutely conscious that this latest global crisis only serves to obscure our bigger climate crisis. Yes, may Ukraine be rebuilt and may all those who have suffered and died in this latest war be remembered. But let us remember too, that during the coming years, many more species of animals will be endangered. Many will become extinct. What hope for them?

Let me give you a quick window into the future. Or one version of our future, God willing. After Easter I would like to preach a series on the 'Birds & Beasties of the Bible'. Just as Jesus showed us, we have much to learn from our fellow

creatures. We learn much about God and ourselves by learning about creation. A bit later, I am hoping to preach about the pictures of Jesus in the Book of Revelation. But again, I am probably getting ahead of myself. It is possible that none of this will happen, because our futures are in God's hands. More immediately, how will Carey respond to this latest time of testing and wandering through the wilderness?.

I'm conscious that, thanks to Covid, and thanks to the problems of life on this precious planet, many of us have been suffering more than usual. We seem to be going through a season of bereavement, in its various forms. A season of bewilderment. But Romans chapter 5 also speaks to us also of 'wild hope'. The belief that suffering produces perseverance, perseverance produces character and character brings us back to hope. We are able to hope and go on hoping because God pours out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit.

So we don't just hold onto the 'hope of glory', of a new day in the near or distant future. We also have an earthly hope, the hope of daily life. The hope that we will encounter God here, on earth. Because of the Holy Spirit (and because of the goodness of creation) we can experience the fullness of the love of God today. As Paul writes later in Romans: 'We are more than conquerors'. Why? Is it because of the hope of glory? Not according to Romans 8. 'We are more than conquerors - through Christ who loves us.' This is the basis for our hope: God's love for us today, which speaks of a new day tomorrow. (We are called not to rejoice because demons submit to us, but to rejoice rather that our names are written in God's book of life).

Love wins over all things. God's love for us and all creation. Our love for God. And our love for God's good creation. Here's our hope. That 'nothing we go through on earth (or even in heaven), can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus'. So, 'these three things remain: faith, hope and love, but the greatest of these is love'.

Alleluia! Praise God! ... Amen?