

Preparation

O Lord, open our lips and our mouth shall proclaim your praise.

Hear our voice, O Lord, according to your faithful love; according to your judgement give us life.

Blessed are you, God of compassion and mercy, to you be praise and glory for ever.

In the darkness of our sin your light breaks forth like the dawn and your healing springs up for deliverance.

As we rejoice in the gift of your saving help, sustain us with your bountiful Spirit

and open our lips to sing your praise. Blessed be God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Blessed be God for ever.

Psalm 25

1 To you, O Lord, I lift up my soul; O my God, in you I trust;
let me not be put to shame; let not my enemies triumph over me.

2 Let none who look to you be put to shame,
but let the treacherous be shamed and frustrated.

3 Make me to know your ways, O Lord, and teach me your paths.

4 Lead me in your truth and teach me,

for you are the God of my salvation; for you have I hoped all the day long.

5 Remember, Lord, your compassion and love, or they are from everlasting.

6 Remember not the sins of my youth or my transgressions,

but think on me in your goodness, O Lord, according to your steadfast love.

7 Gracious and upright is the Lord; therefore shall he teach sinners in the way.

8 He will guide the humble in doing right and teach his way to the lowly.

9 All the paths of the Lord are mercy and truth

to those who keep his covenant and his testimonies.

Glory to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit;

as it was in the beginning is now and shall be for ever. Amen.

Readings

I Peter 3: 18-end

For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God. He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit, in which also he went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison, who in former times did not obey, when God waited patiently in the days of Noah, during the building of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight people, were saved through water. And baptism, which this prefigured, now saves you—not as a removal of dirt from the body, but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers made subject to him.

Mark 1:9-15

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.' And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness for forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him. Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.'

Address:

The Gospel, in brief.

From the elevated position, metaphorically and physically speaking, of the Mount of the Transfiguration which we shared last week, today we have been brought back down to earth and to almost the very beginning of things. In our first lesson Peter, who was present and marked for life at the Transfiguration, says in his epistle that in the same way that Noah and his extended family were saved through the flood, now we experience a similar rescue through the waters of baptism, which brings us into the new relationship with God through the work of Jesus.

All of which brings us neatly to the Gospel reading, for Mark's Gospel is sometimes thought, *possibly*, to be based on the reminiscences of Peter. Mark is the shortest of the Gospels, and he doesn't hang about. He's not interested in the events surrounding the birth of Jesus; Mark plunges straight in to his account of Jesus' adult life and mission. And even then, his narrative, at least to begin with, is short on detail. The very first words in his gospel are: "The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." It's the sort of introduction which, if you were to pick up a book in a bookshop to see what it is about, and were to read these first words, you would either say, "Not interested!" and put it down, or, "I wonder what on earth this is about?" and read on.

Now in our reading which started only 8 verses later, we have in the space of 7 more verses, Jesus' baptism, the temptations, the arrest of John the Baptist, and the beginning of Jesus' ministry. Mercifully the pace does slow down soon after this, but here we are being given in summary form 3 major indicators; what, "the Gospel of Jesus Christ the Son of God," is all about.

First the true identity of Jesus is revealed as he is baptised, and we are made privy to his Father's words to him, as he says, "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased." The idea of an individual as God's son is not something which was a part of Jewish thought. The *whole nation* was sometimes referred to as such, to show the closeness of this chosen people to their God, but not a single person. So clearly Mark is making the point that here is no ordinary man from the far north. Far from it; here was a unique man with a relationship to God much closer than anything experienced or witnessed before.

But there is no further elaboration; Mark rushes onwards to the second point, saying that "immediately" the Spirit drove Jesus into the wilderness. Unlike Matthew and Luke,

Mark gives no specific details about what happened there. We are told that he was tempted by Satan, and he was with the wild beasts. And that's all.

Our mental images of Satan are usually based on the sort of cartoon figures with horns, tails and tridents we see in comics, but in fact Jewish thought is more clearly revealed in the book of Job, where he is better described as “the accuser.” We are probably all too familiar with that inner voice that says, “Who do you think you are, that you think you can do ---” [whatever it is we are aspiring to achieve.] And we may well have seen TV programmes showing the mental, emotional and physical battles of recovering addicts, where the conflict is almost elemental in its intensity.

Doing battle with our inner demons is not such a far-fetched idea as some modern sceptics might have us think, and Jesus, fully human as well as divine, no doubt had many internal struggles as he faced the challenges which his mission and identity were bound to produce. He was sent to seek out and do battle with all that sets itself up in opposition to God, and, (Mark's third and main point about the gospel), it would be finally overcome once and for all upon the Cross.

Mark is telling us that the Gospel in brief is about Jesus who is revealed as God's Son; he initiates the Kingdom of God on earth; he battles with the powers of darkness on our behalf; and he will ultimately conquer them once and for all. That is a tremendous amount of material for us to reflect on, found in the space of a handful of verses. It seems as if Mark has decided to make the purpose of his writing clear from the beginning for those who can understand it, but from hereon we become more aware of the difficulty people of his own time had in accepting the true identity of Jesus, and maybe recognise some of our own struggles. Even as the Gospel reading drew to a close today with the arrest of John the Baptist, and we knew that this would culminate in his being beheaded, so the shadow of the Cross begins to fall across what had begun so promisingly for Jesus' ministry.

The full truth will only shine out after Jesus' death and resurrection, and we have quite a journey to make through Lent before we can celebrate the glorious life-changing event which is the climax of the new creation. This opening Gospel of the season of Lent challenges us to use this time fruitfully, reflecting on not only what we believe, but also admitting honestly our doubts, and exploring them. Having done that, we will be better prepared to face the events of Holy Week, and the eventual shocking climax of Jesus' life and work.

Prayers

Heavenly Father, we pray for the church as it holds up the beacon of your word to enlighten the world. May our leaders speak with clarity and strength as they share your truth and your unfailing love. As we journey through this Lent, renew in us your call and the strong desire to follow you. Grant us the discipline to find and protect the time to reflect on all that you have done for us, that our lives may be changed for all the days to come.

Your Son willingly gave up his power in order to serve humanity and came to a life of poverty;

we pray for all who lead the nations of our world, that they may seek the common good, and eschew the temptation to use their position for their own purposes. We pray for all people who are oppressed, who are longing for freedom, and whose hope is dimmed by harsh treatment. We bring before you all who are struggling to make ends meet, especially those who fear the loss of their housing, and find it difficult to feed their children adequately. Increase the understanding and compassion of those who have it within their power to make radical changes to these circumstances.

Your Son provided healing to so many who were sick in mind and body; be present to all who suffer now. Bring them hope, skilled medical help, and the knowledge of your presence at all times. We pray for all doctors, nurses and medical staff, that they may be encouraged by signs of the pandemic coming under control, and that they may have time and space to recover mentally and physically from their recent exertions and experiences.

Lord, by your cross and resurrection you have redeemed the world. Renew in us the trust in that hope, as we remember those who have died and gone before us. We ask all these things in the name of Jesus our Lord and Saviour. Amen.

Collect

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; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

The Lord's Prayer

The Conclusion

May God our Redeemer show us compassion and love. Amen.
Let us bless the Lord. Thanks be to God.