

Contexts

Mark's Gospel

- Composed between 65-70 CE
- Generally accepted as the first Gospel written.
- Authorship is unclear but possibly written by John Mark, the companion of Peter in Rome.
- Begins with the ministry of John the Baptist in the wilderness, then the Baptism of Jesus, then Jesus battling the forces of evil in the wilderness.
- First action of Jesus is to establish a community to establish the kingdom of God.
- Major work of this community is the work of healing and restoring God's right order, as opposed to the order of Rome, or the order established by the scribes and Pharisees, or religious and cultural norms of the time.
- Cleansing & healing stories restore people to their proper (rightful) place in the Kingdom and in human society (no longer outcasts, despised, unclean, etc).
- The right order of God's kingdom shatters and goes beyond the human and religious limitations placed on some of God's beloved sons and daughters.
- There is a characteristic starkness in Mark's Gospel – it is the shortest of the 4 canonical Gospels.
- The Gospel is an 'action story', things happen quickly. Mark's use of 'immediately' occurs so often in the Gospel that the word is often omitted from translations.
- The disciples aren't heroes; they are more like us – well intentioned, sometimes misguided and stubborn men and women. One moment they can be admirable and the next so very dense, lacking all comprehension of what is really happening. Discipleship is a big concern in this Gospel. (Jude Siciliano OP)
- Often the story is told by contrast – who is truly blind: the blind beggar or the seeing disciples, etc.

Mark 1:12-15

- Note the 2 parts in the Gospel reading for this Sunday: Part 1, the Temptation of Jesus. Part 2, the beginning of Jesus's public ministry proclaiming the nearness of the kingdom and calling to conversion.

Part 1

- Typically, Mark's account of the Temptation of Jesus is a no-frills, bare-bones account. It has none of the detail or developed symbolism and theological reflection we find in Matthew or Luke's account.
- The Spirit *drives* Jesus out into the wilderness – note the action here – Jesus is compelled by the Spirit. This indicates that Jesus not only possesses the Spirit but is seized by it; that he acts according to the will of God.
- Note that 'wilderness' is not 'desert' – it is simply the place where no one lives (ie outside the towns and cities).
- He stays in the wilderness for 40 days – note the use of the symbolically-laden biblical 40. Simply means – a long time, but its use in relation to episodes like: 40 years in the desert means that it is often associated with a time of testing or trial; a time of purification; a time of transformation, etc. Is also associated with hunger/fasting (Moses, Elijah & Jesus). Lent is 40 days before Easter and Easter is 40 days before Pentecost.
- Essentially, the temptations are understood to be the temptation to place ourselves at the centre of our lives rather than God. The journey of conversion is about

placing God (and neighbour) at the centre of our lives. But because of the Mark's lack of detail, we don't quite know what he is trying to tell us.

- 'He was with the wild beasts..' – There is some discussion as to the meaning of this detail. Broadly, the consensus seems to be that this is an allusion to Jesus being at home with created reality (the wild beasts). It is taken as a reference to returning creation to God's initial purpose – living in harmony with him.
- 'and the angels looked after him..' – another reference to the biblical tradition of angels ministering to prophets, Moses, Elijah. A sign that God is with Jesus.
- It is interesting to note that Jesus is accompanied by wild beasts and angels while in the wilderness. Wild beats and angels are not opposed to each other – they simply represent both parts of creation as understood in biblical times.
- It is interesting to note that all the Gospel accounts have Jesus emerging from the temptations to take up his public ministry. So, what happens in this time of temptation? In Mark we are left to speculate.

Part 2

- John the Baptist's role is brought to an end with the words, "Now after John was arrested..." We hear no more about John until the account of his death in Chapter 6 (14-27).
- 'Jesus went into Galilee..' Note that the public ministry of Jesus (as in all the Gospels) begins in Galilee, not in the capital and centre of Jewish life - Jerusalem. In all four Gospels there is a strong sense of journey from beginnings in Galilee through to crucifixion and resurrection in Jerusalem.
- In Mark, though, it is a little different. Jesus spends a long time in Galilee, a shorter time on the journey to Jerusalem and a longer time in Jerusalem.
- "The time has come, and the Kingdom of God is close at hand. Repent, and believe the Good News." better translation: "The time is fulfilled, and the Kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe in the good news." (Frank Moloney)
- "The time is fulfilled.." An Old Testament expression which imagines a divine timetable – when this timetable has reached its goal, the Kingdom of God was expected to arrive. Jesus says that this moment is now occurring.
- The Kingdom of God in the Judaism of Jesus' time referred primarily to God's future display of power and judgement, to the future establishment of God's rule over all creation. (JBC)
- Here Jesus announces that the Kingdom is near, not far away; not something which only lies in the future, but something already here among the people. Perhaps it is also Mark's way of saying that the kingdom has drawn near through the presence of (the Spirit in) Jesus. That would provide a link between the two sections of the Gospel.
- Call to conversion: The time has come to 'repent and believe the good news'. Disciples are called to a profound reorientation (conversion) of life. This will be the central message of Jesus' life and ministry – recognise the nearness of God and change your hearts to follow him.
- Discipleship is a journey of transformation, in the company of Jesus, of coming to believe in him and in the God who sent him. Remember that the image of God which Jesus portrays is radically different from the understanding of God which prevailed in his day. Perhaps that is why it is called 'good news'.

The Liturgical Context – why does the church choose this passage to reflect on for this Sunday?

Note that, no matter which reading cycle we use, the First and Second Sundays in Lent always have the same two episodes from the life of Jesus: temptation and transfiguration.

It is like a roadmap for the Lenten journey (and indeed the whole of Christian life) – the journey from temptation to transfiguration; from concern about / dependence on one's own power, wealth & status to being 'shot through with' the living presence of God.

It is a journey of placing God, rather than ourselves, at the centre of our lives.

It is a journey of transformation from temptation, sin and preoccupation with self, to transfiguration, healing, wholeness, restoration and preoccupation with God (remember the healing stories we have listened to over the last 3 Sundays).

It is a journey of restoring us to right relationship with God and neighbour.

How do we get from temptation to transfiguration? The Year B readings suggest:

Only in Christ

who cleanses, heals and restores (Sunday 3)

who raises us to true life; who is the source of eternal life (Sunday 4)

who is God's forgiveness in action and salvation for all (Sunday 5)

The first reading this Sunday is from the book of Genesis and is part of the 'Flood Story' we are all familiar with. It is about God making a covenant with Noah after the flood. God promises never to destroy his people, animals and creation by flood again. God makes the rainbow the sign of his Covenant promise. In some ways the story reads as if it is 'God's conversion' away from anger and punishment towards care and love. As the response to the Psalm says: "Your ways, O Lord, are love and truth to those who keep your covenant".

A Lenten reflection

Our great Lenten journey has begun! It's a journey which begins in ash and ends in water. Fire is a profound part of our national experience. We know its power to destroy, blacken and reduce to ash. We know that evil can do the same - destroy our wholeness of spirit, blacken our lives and reduce the beauty of human life to so much dust.

We begin Lent in the ash of acknowledging our own part in harbouring, creating and doing evil - those places in our hearts where the fire of anger, bitterness, selfishness or narrowness of mind and heart has left nothing but cold ash.

The ash is a reminder that our true life is not found in mortal things which eventually turn to dust, but in eternal things. We also know that out of ash new life can bud, grow strong, bloom into fullness - that's the Easter miracle.

As always, the Gospels of the first two Sundays in Lent provide a road map for our Lenten journey from temptation (this Sunday) to transfiguration (next Sunday).

We allow ourselves to be tempted out of the ash of selfishness and narrowness of heart and into a life of open hearted goodness. We celebrate God's graciousness to us by sharing what we have with those in need whether it be food, wealth, time, love, friendship or compassion. That's what it means to 'repent and believe the Good News'.

In these days when we are so conscious of the impact of human life on God's creation, perhaps we could think about some permanent fasting from our excessive consumption of power, food and petrol in order to allow our earth to heal, to breathe and to continue to be a source of nourishment and life for the whole human family.

Another Lenten Reflection

Our preparation for Easter is dominated by two great themes: baptism and penance.

Recalling

our baptism and practising penance helps us to prepare for Easter. We recall God's grace in

which we have been baptised. We honestly take account of where we stand in our following

of Christ. What baptism began in us can readily be undone. Coming back to baptism is hard

work, like pruning vines. It takes discipline and commitment to enter into renewal and to find

the way to refresh our faith and turn again towards God.

The discipline of repentance helps focus our energy on the task at hand. Our penance is not a

self-imposed punishment for sinfulness. It is a sign of our gratitude to God for the forgiveness

and healing we receive in Christ.

Our self-examination during the Season is not an end in itself. It leads us to a fresh discovery

of forgiveness and to know how to better follow Christ.

During Lent we are encouraged to find our own ways of expressing our thanks for God's love.

The penitential action we undertake should have both a spiritual and a practical dimension.

For example, our self-examination might lead us to identify what we need to abstain from in

order to live better. Perhaps we need to fast from being so critical of each other so that others

are spared our negativity; from too much work in order to spend more time with those we love; from our ceaseless activity so that we can put a little breath back into our lives, to really

become aware of God's presence in us, making us easier people to live with.

Whatever form our penance takes it should always result in a benefit for others. Our fasting

from food, for example enables us to contribute alms in the form of money to the welfare of

the poor. Almsgiving is the material and spiritual benefit which we make available to others

so that they can live well too.