

Lent 1 21st February 2021

Mark 1:9-15

Contemplatio: Michael Wood

Kingdom shaped third ways

In the six verses of today's gospel reading, there are five contrasting images presented:

- Water and wilderness
- Heaven and earth
- Spirit and Satan
- Wild Beasts and Angels
- John's Arrest and Jesus' proclaiming the Reign of God

Jesus, the Human One (the Son of Man) experiences himself in the midst of these contrasting possibilities. He has these experiences because the Spirit has actually cast him right into the middle of these apparent opposites. The NRSV says, "the spirit DROVE him out into the wilderness" ... Another way of translating it is that he is CAST into the wilderness.

I think we have to read wilderness here as a symbol of the place of struggle and temptation. While it might be spiritually useful to have a 40 day retreat in the desert, most of us probably will never do that...so let's read wilderness as the place where we need to engage in the inner struggle...living with inner choices...with both wild beasts and angels:

So now I want to make this concrete and ask us (if we haven't already) to identify a current tension in our lives involving another person or persons?

(pause)

There are two very common attitudes to other people that we can slip into when we are in a kind of tense relationship with them – the attitudes of FIGHT or FLIGHT and in each of these we can use religion to justify our attitude.

One response is **FIGHT**...this is where we make a victim of the other person...we cast the other person as a 'problem'...if only THEY would change, then everything would be wonderful and the problem (which is them) is solved. If I were to put a religious justification to this then I'd say, "I am godly...they are not...I'm righteous and they are the sinner...the angels are on my side against the wild beasts". So that is the FIGHT response...when we try to change the other person as the solution to the tension. This often plays out in the political landscape as a clash between left and right. The stakes associated with demonising the other can be high, as we saw in the American capital a few weeks ago.

The other response to tension is **FLIGHT**...I am still right and they are still wrong (the angels are still on my side), but rather than try to *change* the beast, I'll do nothing and just pretend the problem doesn't exist. I'll just be quiet and locate myself on the side of the angels in a more inactive way. Sometimes Jesus teaching to 'turn the other cheek' can be misused as a justification for avoiding a necessary encounter with a wild beast. The FLIGHT response is sometimes accompanied by a deep and holy and slightly Martyr- like "sigh". (Oh...poor me).

In both cases, either fight or flight, I have located myself as the angle and other as a beast. Well that's the bad news, what about the Good News?

The Good News is that there is a third way...or another alternative, which is neither fight nor flight....and we see it beautifully demonstrated after Jesus emerges from the wilderness.

The interesting thing is that in the desert, in Mark's story, Jesus simply lives WITH the reality...both beasts and angels...Jesus sits right in the middle of both...(having been PUT there by the Spirit)....God is obviously going to USE the struggle in some way. There is no evidence that he calls the beasts BAD and the ANGELS good. He simply lives in relationship with both until himself arrives at some new relationship to both.

We see the transformative change...what we could call a "third way", demonstrated in Jesus's response to the arrest of John the Baptist.

We have to remember that John the Baptist is an immensely popular figure among the people of Galilee. This is man who has changed people's lives. Jesus himself must have felt very close to John, because it was at Jesus baptism that Jesus had this powerful experience of being God's beloved.

I wonder if we can think of someone who we've loved deeply who has really changed our lives. How would we feel if that person had just been imprisoned or murdered by the one of the Herod's of this world?

Might we be tempted to FIGHT...to take arms and to overthrow this evil Roman beast? Or perhaps as a close friend of that person, we would be tempted to FLIGHT...to take our family to safety lest we be tarred with the same brush (remember Peter in the Temple courtyard where he flights – where he denies Jesus out of fear for his own safety – as many of us would of course)

In the fact of the arrest of John the Baptist, Jesus neither fights nor flights...Jesus response to John's arrest is absolutely fascinating....he does something completely unexpected...

Listen to what Jesus says:

"The time is fulfilled, and the Kingdom of God has come near, Repent and believe in the Good News".

Now under the circumstances, I find that fascinating. John has just been arrested and Jesus says "God Reigns...repent and believe the Good News". HOW CAN THAT BE TRUE....Herod has just locked up the man I love most in the world!

I can see Jesus doing two things:

Firstly, Jesus tells us that God is in, and works through, EVERYTHING...God's reign does not depend on how we judge things to be looking at any particular moment. This is clearly rooted in Jesus own experience at his baptism of being God's beloved child....nothing from that point on will EVER be able to stop him speaking and acting the truth.

Secondly, Jesus refuses to demonise other people, including Herod. Jesus doesn't go on the attack and say, "That Roman Beast Herod is the problem". Jesus says.... "God has got this

situation and is going to do something with it...so turn around and get with the program". Jesus does not fight Herod, but neither does he flee from him.

So does this shed any light at all on the choice, or the tension or the dilemma in our own lives, if we identified one earlier. Do we need to sit IN the conflict a bit longer until a way forward becomes clearer? Could there be a third way possibility which is neither fight nor flight but which opens up new possibilities in the relationship or the situation?