

Sermon Sunday 1st March 2009 St Paul's Chichester

Today is the First Sunday in Lent and we hear in the Gospel that Jesus is driven out into the wilderness by the Spirit. This is the same spirit that descended upon him from heaven as he emerged from the Jordan, from being baptized by John. Mark's description of the spirit was explained thus by the first commentary I looked at:

What precisely 'like a dove' means is not clear, but it seems difficult to picture anything else than the spirit was in the form of a pigeon.

Instantaneously I was transported back to my childhood and a vision of cartoon I used to watch called Pigeon Street, which some of you may have seen - a story about a community and some pigeon racers. Among them the bird stars would forever be alighting on places and people with a certain cooing sound accompanied by an utterly confused look on their face. One of the human characters, Bob, did have a look about him which could be stereotypically Jesus with long hair and a beard – the only difference being Bob wore a duffel coat. Therefore the scene was set and in my mind Jesus now emerged from the water, clad in duffel coat to have a pigeon land on his shoulder, coo, and gaze at him with a confused look. A bit of a Monty Python moment I fear.

I have to say I'm not the only one who has rather abstract images of Jesus with animals. In a presentation I give trying to explain what the New Testament says about Environmental Responsibility I have a wonderful picture of a church banner where Jesus is depicted in a forest glade looking a bluebird sitting on his right hand while stroking a baby deer with his left. The picture is completed by a couple of rabbits happily gambling by his feet and sunlight from heaven beaming down on the whole scene.

My comment about this is that nowhere in the New Testament will you find this scene described about the life of Jesus. However we have a tantalising hint about Jesus relationship with the animals of the wild in what we hear this morning.

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.

Mark states that while in the wilderness Jesus is tempted by Satan but he does not say that he was threatened in any way by the wild beasts. In fact the 'was with' is a simple term of companionship, the same way Jesus is later described as being with the disciples. Also Mark does not say that Jesus befriended, domesticated, dominated or in any way sought to control or rebuke the wild animals – just merely that he was with them.

In the presentation I give about the New Testament one of the main points I try to get across is that it is impossible to understand the message it gives concerning the environment unless you read what it says in the Old Testament. Jesus says in Matthews gospel account:

Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfil.

Although there is not much said which is explicit, made obvious, about the environment in the New Testament its message is one built on the earlier Jewish scriptures. One of the most explicit places in the Old Testament about the environment is in the beginning of the book of Genesis, with the account of creation at its beginning and the roles given to the first human to 'till and to keep' the Garden of Eden. The other reading we heard this morning is taken from the book of Genesis shortly after this account where people have spread

all over the Earth but with only evil in their hearts. That is with the exception of Noah and his family. God decides to devastate the face of the earth by a flood and destroy all the people but save Noah and family. In addition God saves the animals he created making Noah his instrument for doing this by building the Ark which is to keep them all safe through the flood. Noah, like Adam, is given responsibility for looking after what God has created.

Now the flood waters have subsided and Noah, his family and other animals set forth into a new world and God makes a covenant with them that no such destruction will be wrought by God on the earth again because of humankind. This promise makes for difficult reading today as we may wonder how God allows the apparent destruction being wrought on the earth today by climate change.

That is not a discussion I'm going to go into now but I'll be happy to chat more, and hear your thoughts, about it afterwards.

Instead what I will talk about is the changed relationship God now brings between humans and animals where just prior to making the covenant we hear of this morning God sets fear and dread in the hearts of all the animals as they are delivered into the hands of the people for food. Prior to this the people were only permitted to eat of the green plants but now they are permitted to eat meat too, but on the strict understanding that it is properly killed.

What seems likely is that these passages were put there simply to explain the world as it is. Or rather should I say as it was. The eating of meat happened before scripture was written and people knew how the year turned. God promises that:

As long as the earth endures,
seedtime and harvest, cold and heat,
summer and winter, day and night,
shall not cease.'

Again today we may wonder at that promise as we witness the seasons change their nature within our lifetimes. But again I would welcome a chat after if you are worried by this.

Instead look at who the covenant is made with in our reading this morning. Not just with Noah, with his family, will all the people but with all the creatures on the earth. Their lot is together and not apart. They share in the same covenant and the same promises.

Returning to Jesus and the animals what Mark may very well be trying to make a link with when he describes Jesus time in the wilderness as being with the wild animals is that vision of the future given by the prophet Isaiah:

The wolf shall live with the lamb,
the leopard shall lie down with the kid,
the calf and the lion and the fatling together,
and a little child shall lead them.

That Jesus time in the wilderness was somehow an illustration of that heavenly future where fear in the relationship between people and animals is gone and a relationship as in the Garden of Eden is restored. Thinking this makes that image of Jesus petting the animals in that church banner more believable – but still it sounds a bit too much like a Disney cartoon to me.

That may be what the future holds but it is not where we are. What Isaiah describes is a vision and may be like Mark describing the Holy Spirit as a pigeon – trying to put into words what is indescribable. Like the Sadducees challenging Jesus with the question about the resurrected life using the example of the woman who has had seven husbands each of whom died and asking, whose wife will she be?

Jesus answers them by telling them they don't know what they are talking about:

For in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven.

The future in heaven is beyond what we know. What we do know of it is in the relationship of love we hold here on earth. Fear will not be part of any relationship in heaven.

Speaking of angels, the final part of Mark's description of Jesus time in the wilderness says that he was waited on by angels. Maybe he is thinking of how the prophet Elijah was cared for in the wilderness by ravens and angels who brought him, meat, bread and cakes to sustain him. If so it means he thought that Jesus physical needs were being taken care of in the wilderness and instead the struggle was not against hunger, the environment including the wild animals he shared it with, but against those forces which sought to draw him away from God.

As we now try also to enter into the wilderness as we come to our time of Lent the message from this is clear - that our focus is on God and not anything physical.

Hurrah! As I'm sure you may have been told before Lent's not about giving up chocolate and alcohol. You give up these things if they get in the way of your relationship with God - when they start to take God's place in your time of need – a quick fix.

What I am challenged with today in preparing this sermon from the readings is putting our relationship with animals into Lent. I am not particularly an 'animal activist' or even vegetarian. As far as anyone knows neither was Jesus. But is there something missing from our understanding of God's relationship with us when we fail to recognise our relationship with the 'wild beasts'?

I'm already doing things like supporting wildlife charities and in looking closely at where any meat or fish I buy comes from but now I am looking at doing these things afresh because of the relationship

with God I share with the animals. In doing so I hope it will help put right my own relationship with God.
Perhaps you might want to join me?
Amen.