

“Pause, Reflect, Repent” – Mk 1:9-15 – Feb 26/12

Are you finding the pace of life these days to be a bit hectic? Maybe it's just me, but it seems like before I'm finished one thing the next thing is rapidly coming due? I can't keep track of which day of the week it is because they're all starting to blend as they whiz by in a blur! I'm not complaining, because it's all fun stuff (or at least most of it), but it does feel a bit out of control.

Our reading from Mark's gospel has that same flavour of rushing past in a chaotic blur, doesn't it?? Mind you, Mark has a certain leanness to his writing: he rushes breathlessly from one event to the next. Nothing in Mark's gospel develops over a period of time, or happens slowly. His favourite word is 'immediately', and he conveys a sense of breathless urgency as we rip "yee-haw" through the entire gospel story.

But even for Mark, our reading today seems to cover a lot of ground in a really short time. These three short but fully-packed sentences contain the second part of Mark's three-part introduction to his gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ. (The whole introduction to the story is only fifteen verses long: the ministry of John the baptizer; the baptism of Jesus; the temptation of Jesus. Bada-bing, bada-boom, and we're into Galilee after John's arrest!) In order to fully appreciate what Mark is saying we need to put on the brakes, we need to say, "whoa, Nelly!" and refuse to let Mark drag us so quickly through these incredibly important events. We need to slow down, to savour the details, to ponder the implications, and to be affected by them anew. We need to pause, to reflect, and to repent.

First of all, recognizing Mark's headlong style, I am curious as to why he takes the time to introduce Jesus at all, never mind that he takes what for him is an inordinate amount of time and words to do so. Perhaps even more surprising is the effort Mark takes to introduce John the baptizer: we skipped that part, but Mark actually provides a description, and although incredibly brief his short description paints a somewhat detailed picture of a strange yet charismatic and powerful figure.

Our reading then begins with his opening statement, "In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan." Mark goes on to tell us immediately that this baptism was not only substantially different but also unique, a particular event during which the echoing of the events of creation ushered in a new creation and proclaimed a new age. The heavens are torn apart, the Spirit descends upon Jesus like a dove, the voice from heaven deliberately and with true parental affection confirms Jesus as the Son of God. It is a grand and powerful start to a new creation, a new age, through the beginning of Jesus' ministry and mission.

"The Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness ..." the story continues, and isn't that almost always the way? Here Jesus is, right at the beginning of his ministry, and the first significant thing that happens is a rough patch. Now Mark doesn't go into the details of the temptations as Matthew and Luke do, but the outcome is the same - Jesus resists the temptations and continues to love God with all that he was. Jesus not only overcame these temptations and was obedient not just here, but through to the cross of death, and beyond, so that we can echo and proclaim with St. Paul that Christ, although tempted like us, was in all ways blameless and pure.

We live in a world where temptations swirl around us, offering endless opportunities for us to succumb. We try to resist, and to various degrees we are successful, but we are not perfect. Sometimes we fail, and when we do we are not pleased with ourselves. That's why it is good, especially during this time of Lent, for us to pause, and reflect upon the times we have yielded to temptation and failed to live out our love for and of God. I don't mean just the 'simple' temptations of food and trinkets (most of us can handle those kinds of temptation, although I still

can lose control in a university bookstore!), but the more subtle and more dangerous kinds; the temptations to behave in ways that cause hurt, or despair, or people to turn away from God. Sometimes we yield to temptations that cause us to turn away from God, and to focus upon ourselves; to turn service into “serve-us”. We are frail and fragile creatures, we are not perfect, and we do yield to temptations from time to time and so it is good to occasionally pause and reflect upon our thoughts and actions.

As strange as it may seem, there is a positive aspect to the wilderness, however, and that is that the wilderness is by definition often an isolated and lonely place. Free of the noise and commotion of human activity, the wilderness is often a place of quiet where you can actually hear your own thoughts. A few years ago I took the camper to a Provincial Park near Castlegar in the Interior. I spent a delicious week during which the only human I spoke to was the attendant selling firewood ... twice, for a total of perhaps ten words. The rest of the time I could actually hear my own thoughts – and as Genesis Ch. 1 reports, “it was good!”

Having paused, and reflected upon the impact of our actions, the next step is to repent. Today the meaning of that word has changed somewhat from what it meant when Jesus and John proclaimed it and Mark penned it. Today ‘repent’ seems to describe a feeling, of being sorry or feeling badly or experiencing remorse. But to Jesus, and John, and Mark the concept behind repentance meant something much deeper, more significant, more meaningful. For them, to repent meant literally to undergo a foundational change of mind, to turn about – a u-turn from doing what did not please God to doing that which would and does please God.

And doing that presents us with two difficult challenges: changing our minds in a foundational way and doing what pleases God. Changing our minds is never easy – we have worked a whole lifetime to set our views, our opinions, our outlooks as firmly as if embedded in cement! We have spent that lifetime reassuring ourselves that what we do and say is not only right but perfectly natural; i.e. is a constituent part of the fabric of the universe, and to change any of that would rip heaven and earth asunder. However, one of the blessings we have from God is that our brains are actually malleable, that we have the ability to deliberately make such radical changes simply by willing to do so. Medical science is even discovering these days that as we do so, and continue down the new path we have chosen, our brain actually reshapes itself so that it becomes ever more easy to flow in that direction.

The second major challenge that faces us here is understanding what it is that pleases God; what does God require of us once we have made that mind change and change in living? Sadly this is where people become vulnerable to being misled by those who have agendas of their own to satisfy. But if we read scripture – all of it, not just a few selected passages – then a theme emerges of what God desires from us. From Old Testament prophets such as Micah we hear that God calls us to “love justice and walk humbly with your God.” From Isaiah we hear “comfort, comfort ye my people.” From the ancient laws of Deuteronomy we hear injunctions to treat the stranger among you with kindness. And from the New Testament we hear Jesus declare that the greatest commandment of all is to “love God with all your heart and mind and soul and love one another as you have been loved” and Paul echo with “the greatest of these things is love.”

So, there’s the opportunity and challenge before us as we begin this season of Lent. The opportunity to pause for a moment from the usual hectic activities of life and faith, to use these moments to reflect upon who we are, and what God has done for us in Christ’s death and resurrection, and to consider how we might change our minds and modify our lives in response to our refreshed understandings. Thank God for these opportunities and for the strength and direction of his Holy Spirit to help us as we pause, reflect, and repent.