

“Potholes Along Faith Avenue” – Mk 1:9-15 – Feb 18/18

I suspect I’m starting to sound a bit like a broken record here, as for the nth time in only a few weeks I’m grumbling that the pace of life these days is certainly picking up. The only way I can reliably keep track of which day of the week it is requires using either my cell phone or my 7-day pill box! The days are all starting to blend as they whiz by in a blur. I try not to complain because mostly it’s all fun stuff, but more and more I feel increasingly that I’m losing it!

This feeling of increasing chaos is exacerbated by our readings from Mark’s gospel that have that same flavour of zooming past in blur. We’ve noticed in the past few weeks that Mark has an evident leanness to his writing, rushing 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 at breakneck speed through the entire gospel story.

But even for Mark, our reading today covers a huge amount of stuff in a REALLY brief text. In merely three short but fully-packed sentences he presents the second of his three-part introduction to his gospel, namely the good news of Jesus Christ. (The entire introduction to the story is only fifteen verses long: the ministry of John the baptizer; the baptism of Jesus; the temptation of Jesus. Hello, goodbye, and hey-presto we’re into Galilee after John’s arrest!) This oh-so-brief introduction forms the beginning of a really, really important story and the only way we can begin to fully appreciate what Mark is saying is to take a breath, pause for a moment, and refuse to let Mark hurry 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.

As I’ve said before, in recognizing Mark’s headlong style I am curious as to why he takes any time to introduce Jesus at all, never mind that he takes what for him is an inordinate amount of ink and words to do so. Perhaps even more surprising is the effort Mark takes to introduce John the baptizer: not long ago we looked at that part in which 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 today then begins with this opening statement, “In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan.” So many questions, the first being, “which days?” followed immediately by, “why was it necessary for Jesus to be baptized?” Mark moves quickly on to tell us that this baptism was not only important but unique, a particular event signaling a new creation and proclaiming a new era in the relationship between God and humanity. The heavens were torn apart, the Spirit descended upon Jesus like a dove, the voice from heaven deliberately and with true parental affection confirmed Jesus as the Son of God. It was a grand and powerful start to a new creation, a new age, the formal beginning of Jesus’ ministry and mission.

And then, “The Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness ...”, and isn’t that almost always the way? Here is Jesus right at the beginning of his ministry, and the first significant thing that happens is a rough patch. Mark doesn’t go into the details of the temptations in the ways that Matthew and Luke both do but the outcome is the same - Jesus resists the temptations and carries on with his commission with all that he was. Jesus not only overcame these temptations and was obedient right through to the cross of death and beyond, so that we can echo and proclaim with Paul that Christ, although tempted like us, was in all ways blameless and pure.

This is good news for us since we live in a world with potholes in Faith Avenue; a world in which temptations swirl around us, offering endless opportunities for us to succumb. Oh we do

try valiantly 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 season 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 those 'simple' temptations of food and trinkets (most of us can handle those kinds of temptation, although I still can lose control online at Amazon or Sparkfun electronics or any number of sites selling books or computer stuff!) I refer to 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 – and also upon the redeeming action of God in Christ.

As strange as it may seem, the wilderness does offer something positive, however, and that is that the wilderness is by definition 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 – and that can be truly frightening! Whether deep in the interior on an abandoned logging road, or at anchor in a small cove, or just in your own head space on a crowded bus, that peace and quiet allows not only one's own thoughts to be heard but also if you listen carefully you can even hear the still small voice of God.

However, we are inevitably drawn back into the noise and bustle of everyday life – and that is exactly what occurred to Jesus. Refreshed from his time alone he set out on the course that would change not only those he encountered but indeed change the whole world. Certified in his role, commissioned by God, and over the initial threshold, Jesus now headed forth calling to people to repent and to believe in the good news. Yes, not a message of doom and gloom but Good News in that the kingdom had come near and that reconciliation with God was not only possible but promised.

Even, or perhaps especially, in the noise and bustle of our daily lives we have this opportunity during Lent to pause and reflect, and having done so to then repent. Today the word 'repent' seems to have changed somewhat from what it meant when Jesus and John proclaimed it and Mark penned it. 'Repent' at best now describes a feeling of being sorry or feeling badly or experiencing remorse and at worst has a negative image of religious fundamentalism. But to Jesus and John the baptizer and Mark the concept of repentance meant something richer – something much deeper, more significant, more meaningful. For them, repenting meant literally undergoing a foundational change of mind, a turning about – a u-turn from doing what did not please God to doing that which would and does please God.

For us 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 our 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 learning 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 – and the good news – that lies before us as we begin this season of Lent. The popular view of this season is one of sadness and gloom, of depression and despair. But the opposite is the truth – this is the time in the church year to hear afresh that the message Jesus brought was one of good news, not doom and disaster. His call to believe in the good news was a call to hear anew the covenantal promise of God to love his people and to provide a path back to him through faith in Christ. This is the time to once again believe in 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, repent, and believe in the good news.