

The Baptism of Jesus

The Temptation of Jesus

Creation

Based on an address at St Alkmaund's Whitchurch – 6 April 2025, Seeking the Kingdom on Foot

Mark 1.9-13

This dramatic story, at the beginning of Mark's book, is a reminder that the gospel narrative, while it is of course about our salvation, is not limited to humanity, but extends to the whole created order. Baptism and temptation belong together here, not only in Jesus' story but also in their environments: the valley of the Jordan river is alongside the wilderness of Judaea, just as fertile irrigated land abuts the desert in other key sites of the earliest history – Mesopotamia, Egypt, the Indus Valley.

And this not just a static description: the focus of the gospel moves from the river to the wilderness in the way that the Bible's account of creation begins with the waters and moves to the dry land. In fact, the account of Jesus' baptism has clear echoes of the opening chapters of Genesis account: above the water and the earth, the heavens are opened and the Spirit or wind (the word is the same) appears. A little later in Genesis, the story of Noah's flood was seen by the earliest Christians as a prefiguring of baptism: the church is represented as the ark that saves, and after passing through the waters Noah releases the dove which symbolises the spirit. The theme of drowning and rising again appears again in the sign of Jonah, to which Jesus himself will later refer. Richly textured with references to the Old Testament, this is cosmic imagery, focused on one man but affecting the whole world.

If water is the place where life is first created and nurtured, the desert is the place where life is tested and toughened. The wilderness is a harsh place, but it is also a place of formation: away from the city and the arable land, where we learn to be God's people again, as the observance of Lent emphasises. Who is present in the wilderness with Jesus. Three parties are mentioned: Satan; the wild beasts; and the angels. Mark is not so interested in Satan as Matthew and Luke are – his gospel has no psychologically challenging dialogue between Jesus and the devil, and 'testing' for him is more a matter of meeting a challenge than resolving any sense of inward temptation. The wild beasts and the angels are more significant for him, though.

Jesus goes through his learning alongside other creatures – the wild animals are no longer objects of threat and fear, but rather a sign of the kingdom of restored peace and harmony, as Isaiah foretold (Is 11.6): 'The wolf shall live with the lamb; the leopard shall lie down with the kid; the calf and the lion will feed together, and a little child will lead them'. Note that it is an innocent child who will restore peace to the natural world – and Jesus has just been

proclaimed by the voice from heaven to be 'God's beloved Son'. Throughout the history of the Church, seriously committed Christians have often sought out the desert as a place where they may grow to grow in a renewed relationship with the other creatures whom God has made.

Then, at the very end of this passage the angels also appear, a reminder that creation is greater than that which can be physically seen. Angels are always, as it were, waiting in the wings in the gospel story, but occasionally they appear in centre stage – as here, and as in the agony in Gethsemane and as in the glory of the resurrection morning. We need to be constantly attentive to their presence, expanding our vision so that we can remember that we are not alone – in particular, recalling the great moment in the Eucharist where, as we are about to praise the majesty of the thrice-holy God, we confess that we do so 'with angels and archangels and the whole company of heaven'.

Jesus' engagement with nature follows directly as a consequence of his baptism, and precedes his interactions with humans: it is only on his return from the wilderness that he begins to talk with humans. So for us, attending to the earth is not an add-on to discipleship; with our Lord, we are called into a cosmological fellowship. That means that we need to widen our horizons, recognising our place in the whole created order, and acknowledging the impact we can have on it for good or ill. The story of the God who makes himself known in Jesus Christ is bigger than our own story: the Lord is not only our personal Saviour, but also the Second Adam, in whom the world is created anew.

How do we celebrate the glory and breadth of creation in worship?

What can we do to restore the messianic kingdom of peace?