

**Lent 1**  
**5/03/2006**

**Mark the Evangelist**

**Genesis 9: 8-17**  
**1 Peter 3: 18-22**  
**Mark 1: 9-15**

## **Baptism & Temptation**

**Sermon by Bruce Barber**

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Mid-Lent Sunday is usually one, which allows for a little relaxation of the pre-Easter As sometimes happens with the Lectionary readings, today each requires the other two for its completion. Each is about those most fundamental realities of land and sea, wilderness and water. Therefore each has to do with human experiences of chaos and creation.

One of the conceits of modernity has been to destroy the language that for millennia made sense of the mythological character of these realities of land and sea, and their ever-hovering potential to threaten human life. In the beginning, their always-present destructive possibility needed to be interpreted through ritual, through dramatic enactment, and by story. Today after at least three centuries, the fundamental meaning of historic texts like the story of Noah and the Ark has been diverted by the modern question: 'Did it really happen'? In other words, in the modern world meaning has become subordinate to the test of facticity, whereas in the beginning the fact, as well as the meaning, of land and sea were inextricably joined in the story.

This modern obsession with 'facts' has served to depreciate the much more crucial question of the *significance* of the story. So the word 'myth', has frequently come to be preceded by the word 'primitive', as a way of insinuating that the story is now outmoded. It has, of course, then been but a short step to the reigning confusion we are now familiar with. The word 'myth', has today in general use become the contrary of 'the fact', and therefore has come to stand for what is 'untrue'. So we utter, without embarrassment, sentences like: 'It is a myth that...', to be followed by whatever we are against.

These blinkered categories of modernity have in truth made Christian faith, like Humpty Dumpty, fall off its long inhabited wall. If Humpty Dumpty's reconstitution was unsuccessful, it remains to be seen whether we shall live to see our culture come to its senses and recover again the ability to hear what, for example, Noah and his Ark is really about. Whatever be that outcome, these lectionary texts today, at any rate, help us towards a helpful remediation.

In this regard, it is scarcely conceivable, albeit equally a matter of great hope, how events in the world in but a few short years could make just such a new hearing possible. For the ancient story of the flood has effectively become our story. Tsunami, hurricane, global warming, salinisation of arable land, avian pandemic, drought and fire: all make water

and wilderness once again the story of human lostness in the world, so that the marks of human alienation from the good earth, if not from God, are everywhere about us. The waters of chaos, inundating if not completely extinguishing human life, make Noah once again our contemporary, as he was for those primitives so long ago. Land and sea, water and wilderness; these are no longer figures of speech, but harsh realities.

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In the Noah story, it is clear that water has a double function: it is both an instrument of judgement as well as the means by which the Ark was brought to safety in the midst of an unbelieving and disobedient people. Noah's Ark thus provides a framework for all subsequent texts.

So it is in the gospel today that in the figure of the new Noah - the embodied Word - watery chaos is again addressed by God. In his baptism, Jesus both descends into the chaos, but rises from it under the overseeing and overshadowing of the Spirit. When he comes up out of that chaotic water, he alone hears the voice of calling from above. Living baptismally for Jesus thus means living through that process of chaos, a descent of the Spirit, and an emergence into a new identity.

This recapitulation of Noah in Jesus' baptism is about the naked Jesus, up to his neck in watery chaos, and only there, and from there, hearing fully and finally his proper identity in such a way that empowers him to go forward in ministry to death and resurrection. Thus the baptism of Jesus, far from being the *removal* from chaos, actually demonstrates its continual nearness. It is not so much that baptism is for him is a removal from chaos, a cleansing as it were from the world; it is, rather, a willingness to be contaminated by the forces of chaos in an act of sheer grace. This is at least one dimension of Paul's surely shocking observation: 'He was made sin - for our sake'.

Perhaps it is just here, in the understanding of our own baptism, that we have to repent of the persistence of the assumption that to be baptised is to find one's place in a body of Christ distinguished by its purity. To be sure, Christians are called to be holy. But the nature of Christian holiness is not a human possession - a set of achievements, a set of qualifications. It is rather a relationship, and can only be understood as such. To be holy is to be, we might say, in the neighbourhood of Jesus. And this means to be in the neighbourhood of whoever Jesus is in the neighbourhood of. And that, the gospel everywhere makes clear, is ever-redemptive presence in the midst of chaos.

All this is why the story of Noah, the story of Jesus' baptism, and the story of our baptism cannot be separated. It is, as we have heard, just this correspondence which the imagery of the epistle today makes transparently clear. Just as water is the means by which the Ark is brought to safety in the midst of an unbelieving and disobedient people, so water is the similar means by which the ship of the Church in its worldly voyage is to be saved. There is a fine double analogy here. First between the flood and the waters of baptism, and second between the eight persons in the Ark and the Christian community. The contrast between the few in the Ark and the multitudes who perished in the water has its

counterpart in the smallness of the Christian community called to live out our baptism in the world.

In baptism, then, the Church is given an identity which restores the identity of the first creation. In baptism, God remakes out of chaos. In our second birth in baptism, in solidarity with Jesus, we return to something that was lost at the very beginning of the human story.

But the gospel today speaks not only of water and baptism; it speaks equally of wilderness and temptation. It tells us that baptism and temptation must never be separated. It was certainly not so for Jesus. It cannot be so for his Church. A faithful church is always a baptised church. A faithful church is always a church in the wilderness, in the place where the world is most worldly, where the demons live who have us in their grip, and where it is not yet apparent what the outcome will be.

Our wilderness, like that of Jesus, is the temptation, the desire, the passion, to be successful rather than to be faithful. That is why it is already good news to know that the One in whose name we are joined as Church also did time in the wilderness facing just such temptation.

What do we learn from this conjunction of baptism in the waters of chaos, and temptation in the aridity of the wilderness? At least these two things:

First of all, we hear that Jesus' experience of the wilderness *followed* his baptism. The order is crucial, since it is the difference between Jesus as a hero, which he most definitely is not, and Jesus as witness to that which he called the reign of God, which he certainly is. Taking account of the order requires us to understand that Jesus did not first of all go into the wilderness like some religious genius and there, having wrestled with the ultimate issues, seek baptism as the mark of his overcoming of temptation. No - the reverse is the fact. His suffering of temptation follows his baptism, as indeed is true for all of us who have been so baptised. Baptised faith is always tempted faith.

Therefore we should not be surprised to hear that it is by the Spirit, and not as we usually imagine by the Spirit's opposite, that Jesus is driven - 'thrown out' is the actual word - into the wilderness. A heroic Jesus would require impetus from Satan to achieve a victory. But Jesus, we are told, is driven out by the same Spirit which had brought him in his baptism into solidarity with the very forces of chaos, now to be encountered again in the wilderness.

The sober Lenten reality for us in the gospel today is that we hear nothing of the victory of Jesus over his temptation, only the fact of it. That is our human experience. Unrelentingly, we must plumb these depths for the next 7 Lenten Sundays. The gospel must be allowed to take us all the way down, telling us how ultimate victory for him remained to be secured in the wilderness of the cross, that quintessential location of absolute chaos: a victory of which sign he will, on Easter Day, come to be amongst us as risen Lord, not above and beyond chaos and temptation, but precisely through it.

Of that wilderness, and that victory, today as every Sunday, this supper is both sign and promise. Sign and promise for us, yes, but equally sign and promise for the entire chaotic

creation. That is why the prayer, in and for the world, that the new Noah has given to his Church is located in its very eucharistic heart:

‘Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven’.