

Sermon 18 February 2018

1 Peter 3:19-22 and Mark 1:9-15

You know that feeling you have at the very beginning of something, when you feel equipped for whatever lies ahead, when you feel you can do anything, achieve anything?

For some of us that will come as result of having trained hard for something – maybe a marathon For others it will be when we are confirmed in a calling, I remember when I was licensed as a lay reader, a licensed lay minister, for months I thought was caught up in wow, they think I can do this and I grabbed every opportunity to try something new. For many new Christians, it comes at baptism or confirmation, when turning to face God for the first time, brings light and clarity and a certainty of purpose.

And then it becomes harder.

Mark's gospel reading today focusses on Jesus, giving us clues to Jesus being the fulfilment of the Old Testament, being the Son of God, the Messiah, the bearer of the Spirit and the one will be the victor over Satan.

He first tells us about Jesus' baptism, when God rips open heaven and does more than give a glimpse of his purpose for humanity. Isaiah had beseeched God to rend the heavens and to come down. Here God does just that, it is when, through the person of Jesus, he sets himself loose among us, he comes to us whether we want him to or not. And the power of the Holy Spirit comes down, settles down, quietly and gently upon Jesus. As it did in Genesis when it hovered over the waters, so it now hovers over a human being, a sign of the new creation, suggesting that God intends to transform humanity.

And then God speaks: 'You are my Son, whom I love, with you I am well pleased'.

And it is at that moment, at the beginning of Jesus' public ministry, at the point when he is probably feeling, I can do anything, that the Spirit sends him off into the wilderness, where he is tempted by Satan, lives with the wild beasts and is waited on by angels. Notice that unlike the accounts in Matthew and Luke's gospels we are not told any details of the temptations. Instead the emphasis is on the fact that he did battle with Satan.

It is the old old story begun again. In the garden of Eden, there was temptation, and later we have Isaiah's prophecy that there would come a time when the lion would lie down with the lamb. Mark's account re-echoes that and his story is one of hope. Even though the setting is in the wilderness and not the Garden of Eden, here Jesus does not yield to temptation, here he lives alongside wild beasts and here he is ministered to by angels.

We remember too the wilderness experiences in the Old Testament. God spoke to Moses when he was tending sheep in the wilderness, he spoke to him out of a burning bush. And then the Israelites spent years wandering around in the wilderness after their escape from Egypt, Elijah fled into the wilderness when he was exhausted and God gave him rest, and food before sending him back to resume his ministry. In each case, they all met God in the wilderness and received grace.

I'd like to tell you the story of a man who, when his own country was going through a wilderness experience, remained true to what he believed God had called him to, despite the temptations there must have been to have taken an easier path. Because the path he stayed true to resulted in his own death. I want to tell you this story because it has a connection with us in Bristol and particularly with us in Bristol West Deanery. It is a hard story, but a story that continues to bring hope to many in the North of Uganda.

Yesterday was the day set aside in the liturgical calendar for us to remember a twentieth century martyr, Janani Luwum. Janani Luwum was born in the Acholi lands of the north of Uganda in 1922 and his childhood and youth were spent as a goatherd. Given the opportunity of schooling he qualified as a

teacher. He became a Christian in 1948 and immediately became an evangelist. Following training the following year he became a catechist (a lay reader) and in 1956 he was ordained. He became the Bishop of Northern Uganda in 1969. This was a period of massive unrest and fear for the people of Uganda. You will remember that Idi Amin, who was also from the north of Uganda, came to power in 1971, following a military coup.

In government he ruled by intimidation, violence and corruption. Atrocities, against the Acholi people in particular, were perpetrated time and again. The Asian population was expelled in 1972.

It was in the midst of all this that in 1974, Janani Luwum was elected Archbishop of Uganda. He warned that the Church should not conform to "the powers of darkness". Amin sought a relationship with him, probably in order to acquire credibility for himself and his actions. For his part, Janani Luwum sought to mitigate the effects of Amin's rule, and to plead for its victims.

On 12 February 1977 Janani Luwum delivered a letter of protest to Amin against all acts of violence that were allegedly the work of the security services, protesting against what was in effect the virtual institution of state murder.

Church leaders were summoned to Kampala and then ordered to leave, one by one. Janani Luwum turned to a fellow bishop and said, "They are going to kill me. I am not afraid". He was found dead the next day, together with two Government Ministers, apparently the victims of a car accident, but it soon became apparent that they had been shot on the implicit instructions of the President.

The Church of England remembers Janani Luwum as a martyr. He has a statue above the west entrance to Westminster Abbey and there is a small memorial to him in our Cathedral here in Bristol. His name lives on in Gulu in Northern Uganda where the theological college is named after him and where today catechists are still trained.

He chose to walk in the light, to defy the powers of darkness, even though it cost him his life.

We are unlikely to be asked to take such a wilderness walk ourselves, but there many Christians in the world today who have to do so and we can pray for them. Peter in his letter, reminds us that Jesus fulfilled the hope of Israel by defeating the spiritual powers in the world and that those who are baptised as Christians and who are suffering can find courage knowing that Jesus has experienced this too.

For ourselves, we will find ourselves experiencing wilderness times in our walk with God. When we experience emotions, relationships, jobs, a time of life when we feel apart from God or when we are drawn away from God and away from his light. Times when we have to learn to live in expectation that God will meet us where we are. Times and places when hope, despair and danger live alongside each other.

We are taught that baptism is a time of repentance, when we turn away from the old ways. We can also look at it as a time when we turn to face God, when we turn to Christ. And there will be times when we need to remember to do just that.

God told Jesus that 'You are my Son, whom I love, with you I am well pleased'. We can claim those words for ourselves. Try saying that to yourself slowly, inserting your own name at the beginning: Sarah you are my child, whom I love, with you I am well pleased. Say it to yourself now. God says this to you each and everyday.

And this Lent, as we have choices between light and darkness, between hope and despair, between fear and love, let us choose light, hope and love. Let us remember that God chooses us and chooses to love us.

Amen

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