

22.2.15 – Lent 1

Genesis 9.8-17; Ps. 25.1-20; 1 Peter 3.18-22; Mark 1.9-15

*May I speak in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, Amen*

**“When we live like Jesus, God is glorified”.** Those words were in an address given to mark the retirement of Jane Kraft a few weeks ago, and they really struck a chord for me.

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So what can we draw from today’s readings that might help us to do that?

Well, the baptism of Jesus – foreshadowed by the saving of Noah and his family through the waters of the flood – is deeply significant. That’s borne out by the fact that this is the second time this year that a reading about it has appeared in our Sunday Lectionary.

To begin with it marked a *moment of decision* for Jesus; an acknowledgement of his mission on earth; a *moment of commitment* to the task ahead, and perhaps above all, *obedience* to his Father’s will.

It was also a public demonstration of his identification with us as human beings, so that in *every* way he was like us. He felt pain and hunger, anger and frustration, fear and sorrow, love and compassion. So in being baptised he identified completely with our human condition.

It was also the moment when he received God’s approval and was equipped with the presence and power of the Holy Spirit. We’re told that as he came up out of the water, the heavens were torn open and the Spirit descended on him like a dove, and a voice came from heaven “you are my Son, whom I love; I am very pleased with you.

The baptism of Jesus was, without doubt, a turning point in his life and marked the beginning of his public ministry.

What happened next, though, was *equally* significant.

We’re told that that same Holy Spirit, which was to empower him in his ministry, sent him straightway into the wilderness to be tempted. I don’t know about you, but I have sometimes puzzled about why that was necessary for Jesus.

The wilderness is a place of desolation, of loneliness, sometimes of vulnerability and danger. If we're going through a period of uncertainty, when we can't see the way ahead, we sometimes describe it as being in a kind of wilderness.

The number 40, in Biblical terms, represents, not a fixed number of days, but a considerable period of time. The Israelites wandered in the wilderness for forty years before coming into the promised land, a period of testing reflected in Christ's time in the wilderness. And make no mistake – if, as we believe, Jesus was truly human – his faith in God and his commitment to God would have been sorely tested.

Many people feel they are under fierce attack after some great spiritual experience. Martin Graham, who spoke at one of our Journey into Faith evenings some years ago, talked of the times when he felt his faith was being sorely tested; times when God appeared not to answer his prayers; times when he had to step out in faith, obedience and trust. And as much as they were anxious, sometimes stressful times, he felt that they were, at the same time, an essential part of his Christian experience. Why? Because they enabled him to develop what he called “Spiritual muscles”.

Andrew Proud, previously the Vicar of St Mary's, East Barnet, who went out to Ethiopia with USPG, had a similar experience. He wrote that whilst at times God seemed very near, at others he seemed almost out of reach, and he was forced to trust him more.

It is, perhaps, for this reason that God allowed Jesus to be tested, to strengthen and develop his spiritual muscles.

The same applies to us. Such testing is an essential part of our Christian experience *and*, we must remember, one that Jesus *fully understands*.

Nonetheless, we find ourselves asking, if Jesus was clothed in the same human frailty as we are – and faced the same temptations as we do – what was it that enabled him to overcome them when we so often seem to fail?

Well, St Paul, in his letter to the Ephesians, urged his readers to “put on the whole armour of God”. Jesus used three powerful pieces of armour to protect and defend himself – all of which are freely available to us.

The first was the presence of the Holy Spirit, promised to us at our own baptism.

The second, was his deep knowledge of the scriptures, through which the Spirit could guide and strengthen him. As we see in Matthew & Luke, Jesus rebutted each of the temptations with God's word. Bernard of Clairvaux said we should think of God's word in the same way we think of our food.

And last, but not least, we know that Jesus regularly took time out to pray, to both open his heart to God, and to listen to him. We're very good at talking to God, aren't we, but are we, I wonder so good at listening?

In any relationship with those we love and care about, we need *both* to *talk* - to share our joys and concerns with one another – and *also* to *listen*.

There's a little parable about listening prayer which I was told many years ago, about a priest called Jimmy. Jimmy prayed avidly every day, and yet God never seemed to answer his prayers. Then one day, when once more he was bombarding God with his prayers, a loud voice came from heaven. "Jimmy, Jimmy, Jimmy", he said, "will you just *listen* for a *moment*. I can't get a word in edgeways".

In November I was on a 4-day retreat run by an organization called Cursillo, which was challenging, stimulating, humbling and inspiring all rolled into one, with a great deal of fun as well. It's aim was to strengthen our faith and our ability to share it. In the final session, we were all encouraged to be diligent in our reading and reflecting on the Bible and in prayer, and one of the Spiritual leaders picked up a jug, like this one.

When a jug is filled, he said, it can be poured out. If we don't fill it, it is dry and empty and of no use to anyone. If we are to be fruitful in our Christian lives, he said, we need continually to be topping up the jug of our faith ... and then, pouring it out. If we don't receive, then the jug is empty and we have nothing to give, and nothing to sustain us when trials and temptations come.

We need, like Jesus, to do both, so that in and through our lives, by the power of the Spirit, God *will* be glorified.