

Sermon Mark 1:9-15

Over 50 years ago now I went to a talk by someone who was encouraging us to look at things differently. He called it lateral thinking and I believe he made a lot of money from talking and writing about it. It became one of the standard topics on management courses. The basic idea of his thinking was that something which appears puzzling or difficult when viewed in the conventional way can become much easier to comprehend when looked at the other way around.

It would be fair to say that I was grateful for the idea of lateral thinking when I read this morning's gospel passage. At first reading it seemed to be just a series of unrelated events, almost like the reproduction of someone's diary where there was no obvious link apart from the fact that they were all things involving Jesus. Baptism, temptation and the beginnings of ministry – the sharing of the good news.

When I started at the end and looked at that list again, it became clearer. Instead of random events these now appeared as the building blocks needed before Jesus could share the news. Almost the building of a rostrum. They gave Jesus' teaching stature, credibility without which it would lack authority. As it says in verse 15, a time of fulfilment.

We begin with the baptism. Mark's account is briefer than Matthew's. The focus here being not on Jesus' relationship with John, who was reluctant to carry this through, he wanted Jesus to baptise him, but on how this was what many other ordinary people were doing. Jesus was doing what other people did – an emphasis on his human nature. Then we hear of the voice from heaven, 'This is my beloved Son'. Here was God underlining his divine nature. Here then is a public demonstration of Jesus both fully human and fully divine.

Jesus goes out into the desert for 40 days. Put this into the context of Lent. If you are giving up chocolate or alcohol, 40 days can feel like a very long time. Mark is again brief - tempted by Satan, among wild beasts. But that is enough for us to get some idea of the difficulty that he went through. This is so far from the experience of most 21st century people that more detail would not make it clearer. The hostile desert environment, lack of food and water, the constant badgering by Satan, the fear of the wild animals. But he is not alone, God has sent angels to watch over him and he emerges at the end of the 40 days strong and resolute.

In the Old Testament reading we heard of God's promise and the symbol of that promise, the rainbow. Even today when primary school children learn the science behind splitting the light into the colours of the spectrum we still marvel and comment at the sight – a rainbow is still something special. In his anger God had flooded the earth, but now in his love he promised never to do it again, and the rainbow symbolised his promise.

Jesus' contemporaries would have been as familiar with the story of the flood as we are, although living in an area with less frequent rain they may have seen the sign itself as a greater rarity. We assume that the people present when John baptised Jesus would have heard the voice from heaven and been aware of the sign from God. God showing his love for his son.

What we have read of in today's gospel is very much Jesus' apprenticeship. His being made ready for the task ahead - the fulfilment. The task of sharing with others the good news of God's love.

It is not an apprenticeship that I would wish to share, the cold of the river – described in the version of the story we use at Open the Book as 'being dipped'. The loneliness and physical hardship of the desert, the constant need to resist the temptations of Satan. It makes curacy and reader training look

like a walk in the park. And yet we often fail to reciprocate God's love for us, to fail to do what we need to do.

It is hard to describe the feeling of the invisible arm around your shoulder, the voice inside telling you the right thing to do but how will anyone who has no experience of these things recognise them if we don't share our experiences? It can be hard sometimes to be honest with ourselves about how we feel and why, how our own needs can get in the way of us being our best. It is not just the obvious things but some people really need to be needed, others need personal space or just to be left to get on with things. Most of us need someone to say 'I am pleased with you'.

God's love so freely given in the form of his son, his words at Jesus baptism leaving no doubt of his feelings, the way in which we ourselves experience God's presence. Along with the rainbow they are all signs, signs for ordinary people to understand what God through Jesus was trying to achieve.

Looking at it differently has enabled me to hear the clear message through the noise.

Jesus, the Son of God, but tempted as a human has shared the good news.

God loves us. God loves us 'despite'..... fill in your own 'despite there.

God loves us, that's you and you and you and you

And me.