

During the Middle Ages there was a popular story which circulated about Martin of Tours, the saint for whom Martin Luther was named. It was said that Satan once appeared to St Martin in the guise of the Saviour himself. St. Martin was ready to fall to his feet and worship this resplendent being of glory and light. Then, suddenly, he looked up into the palms of his hands and asked, "Where are the nail prints?" Whereupon the apparition vanished.

Our gospel reading today consists of three very short versions of longer episodes in Matthew and Luke. As I have already talked about in a previous sermon, Mark was on a mission... to tell the story of Jesus as succinctly as possible, concentrating on his passion and death as he wanted people to understand that this was good news. Israel has been waiting for a long awaited king and he has now appeared...not as perhaps most had expected, but nevertheless, he has come to release the oppressed and with his own message of what his kingdom will be. I don't know how many of you have now read the whole of Mark, but suffice to say that Mark has already begun to set out the fact that Jesus was the one that many OT prophets, especially Isaiah had been talking about. And now he was here.

Three different events...three short points!

Firstly...his baptism. Mark talks about the heavens being torn apart...which echoes Isaiah 64 v1: "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence" Quite a moment for Jesus...not only is it affirmation from his Father but also empowerment as the Holy Spirit descends on him. With the help and power of the Holy Spirit, Jesus will be able to exercise his ministry. But he does not go and celebrate his baptism with a party or a holiday...he is sent at once, by the Holy Spirit out into the wilderness which is the second event.

And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness.

Immediately is a vivid word..an action word which goes along with Mark's fast-paced gospel. It also joins the two events together...it is consequential. The greek word for sent out literally means that the Spirit threw or drove him out into the desert. Mark uses it when he is describing Jesus confronting demons in people and It is also the same word in the greek translation of the Hebrew bible for when Adam and Eve were sent out from the garden of Eden. This is a way of Mark explaining that Jesus is the new Adam. But then it appears again when the Israelites are sent into the wilderness when they refuse to go into the promised land. So here there is an understanding that, being tempted by Satan...Jesus is following in the footsteps of god's people ...why? Someone once said that it was one thing getting the Israelites out of Egypt but another getting Egypt out of the Israelites...changing their mindsets from being slaves to a free people. In the book of Deuteronomy we read "Remember the long way that the Lord your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness, in order to humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commandments. He humbled you by letting you hunger, then by feeding you with manna, with which neither you nor your ancestors were acquainted, in order to make you understand that one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord. The clothes on your back did not wear out and your feet did not swell these forty years. Know then in your heart that as a parent disciplines a child so the Lord your God disciplines you. Jesus is reliving Israel's story but he is doing it differently ...theirs was a story of disobedience and complaint whereas Jesus is being obedient and humble... so Mark is saying that not only is Jesus the new Adam but he is also the new Israel. Chosen by God to

illustrate who God is and how much he loves his creation. Through his time of temptation, Jesus never wavered and was then ready for his three years of ministry which leads us to the third event.

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe in the good news. As I mentioned in my previous sermon on Mark, Galilee was a backwater yet Jesus

chose it for the start of his ministry. And Mark is also reminding his readers once again about what the prophet Isaiah said...The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; this was a prophecy of someone coming to usher in a new-world order where the Lord was king - the kingdom of God. And this was happening through Jesus. And what is this good news? 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe in the good news or as is translated in The Message: "Time's up! God's kingdom is here. Change your life and believe the Message." There are many ways of explaining the kingdom of God but basically it is God's rule or reign, a place where God's will (Your kingdom come, Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven) is done...where he is king and exercising his authority. Jesus coming to earth first time has inaugurated the kingdom but it is not until his second coming that he will usher it in completely. There is a German scholar called Oscar Kohlmann who gave this example..If you have done Alpha, you might remember that the kingdom drawing near is described as 'the now and the not yet' - and he likened it to D-day and the Normandy landings when the Allies established a beach head - the beginning of the end - but it was not until VE day, nearly a year later, with quite a few heavy battles in between that Germany was totally defeated. In the same way, Jesus first coming and his death and resurrection is a bit like D-Day and there are quite a few heavy battles before he comes to bring peace on earth. In a seminar on the Kingdom of God, John Mark Comer explains what the kingdom is NOT, to help us see what it is and I have put some notes down on your flyer along with links to one or two other things I am mentioning today. Until Jesus comes back, we are still in a battle because here on earth there are other wills that are in conflict with God's will including our own. Hence the need to repent.

As I have said before, repentance is not just saying sorry. The greek word is metanoia and made of two suffices meta means renew or restore...noia - to think...to change your mind...see things in a whole new way, make a hundred and eighty degree turn away from your old life. God is bringing in his kingdom and this message demands a response - abandon the old lifestyle of indifference to God and his will and live a new life as a royal subject. In other words, give up your agenda if it does not fit with God's kingdom principles. How do we do that? Jesus calls us to believe in the good news. That word is better translated as trust... the Good news bible says 'turn and trust'...Who or what do you trust? We all trust something or somebody in life and it is the basis of our worldview. Trusting is acting on what we believe, what we know to be true. When Jesus says repent and believe, he is not just saying believe in our head, but act it out.

What can we learn from these three events? I want to suggest that the Holy Spirit is at the center of all of them and wants to be at the centre of our lives. At our baptism, we are filled with the Holy Spirit and when we take hold of our baptismal promises for ourselves, we are able to ask God for his help which comes through the Spirit. He can direct us, comfort us, challenge us and encourage us as we endeavour to follow our Lord. Today is the first Sunday in Lent and it is the Spirit that also empowers us to overcome temptation. You might have given something up for Lent to discipline yourself but is it in line with God's kingdom? Did you even involve him in your decision? What do you need to give up in order to follow Jesus? And what is God stirring up in your heart and mind that has to do with God's kingdom ...are you acting on it? or do you believe but do not follow? This seems to be a command to all... but it is also not a one time event...it is ongoing. We are to keep giving up our own agenda, turning to God and trusting in the good news of Jesus through the help of the Holy Spirit. While writing this, I have heard God loud and clear about something I need to give up. This is not easy teaching but important, both for you and for those who you spend time with. Before we finish with a time of waiting on God and his Spirit to speak to us on this subject, your hand-out not only has notes about the Kingdom of God but also some suggestions on what you might do in Lent that is not just giving something up. I have done 40 acts of generosity for the past two years and find it very challenging yet rewarding. Whatever you are doing you will definitely need the power of the Holy Spirit to help you. It is he that can give you that supernatural power to become more like Jesus. Let us pray.