

Address from Adrian Butland for the First Sunday of Lent

Cutting to the Chase

Good morning. I suspect for many of you I will be a new face, so some introductions first. My name is Adrian, I am married with two grown-up daughters.

I am an ordinand from South West Ministry Training on placement with Nigel and his team at St Davids and St Michaels.

Some of you may remember me as I did spend some time here during my Church Discernment process, so may I say greetings to you all from myself and my home church St Ida in Ide.

So let's start with prayer. Heavenly Father through the power of your Holy Spirit guide my thoughts and words and open our hearts and minds to your truth. Amen I have always liked the way Mark in his Gospel doesn't hang around. He opens up his gospel in chapter 1, very simply.

This is what I am writing about, Jesus, the Son of God. He points us to an OT prophecy about Jesus through Isaiah preparing the way in terms of the past and moves straight to the more current preparation for Jesus in the form of John the Baptist.

All done in 8 verses.

Mark is very much a person who likes to get to the point or as a well-known saying goes he cuts to the chase. This leads us into the six verses of today's gospel reading. Again Mark doesn't waste any time; he lays out three important scenes in just in six short verses.

Now the first Sunday in Lent always brings us to the story of Christ's temptation in the desert, so let's focus on this wilderness for a moment.

Not far beyond the city of Jerusalem, the wilderness stretches out to the east as you would see from the top of Herodion, the fortress Herod the Great built for himself just outside Jerusalem. The way to Jericho lies in what is commonly called "The Valley of the Shadow of Death." The road through this valley is treacherous, and in Jesus' time the dangers would have included robbers as well as wild beasts and thirst. As you get nearer to Jericho you would find the Mount of Temptation rising above the city.

Some traditions hold that Jesus spent his forty days in the wilderness on this mountain, and if so Jesus would have been able to see the oasis of Jericho just below him, less than an hour's walk away. He would have seen fresh water springs, palm trees, and cultivated fields, only minutes away from the barren wasteland where he was being tested.

Fresh food and cool water could have been within his view throughout those forty

days, yet these were not what Satan used to tempt Jesus according to the other gospels.

Mark's story is laid out in three distinct scenes, and each scene gets only two verses. The initiation scene is Christ's baptism; the temptation scene sends Jesus into the wilderness for forty days, complete with wild beasts and angels. And the final scene brings Jesus into the world proclaiming the Kingdom of God is near and the need to 'repent and believe the good news'.

There's only one problem with this story, as brief as it is, because the story isn't over yet. Certainly, Christ already reigns over the Kingdom of God in resurrection power, but that kingdom is not yet complete. It's what theologians call the "already but not yet" aspect of the Kingdom of God. There is still evil in the world. We are still broken people. God is still at work among us to bring all creation to its fulfillment. And the part we play is written into this story.

To understand how we fit into this great story, let's take a look back at the Old Testament reading we heard earlier, the story of God's covenant with Noah, and compare it to this passage from Mark's gospel.

Jesus may be heading into a wilderness filled with wild beasts, but Noah has just spent more than a year cooped up with his two of every kind of animal.

He and his family must have been fulltime zookeepers.

Mark doesn't explain why the wild beasts are important to his story, and he is the only gospel writer who mentions them. We are left to decide if the wild beasts pose a threat, or if they are symbolic of the coming Kingdom, where all is at peace and wild animals no longer present any danger. Certainly in Noah's story, the animals represent God's desire to start over, to give creation a second chance.

There are more significant parallels between these two stories, though. For example, there's the water, and the voice of God. Just as Jesus comes up out of the Jordan River's baptismal waters, Noah comes out of the flood. Both Jesus and Noah immediately hear the voice of God make an announcement. For Jesus, it is the assurance that he is God's beloved Son, and God is pleased with him.

But the words God speaks to Noah form the very first covenant we find in the Bible. That word 'covenant' is so important; God mentions it seven times in these nine verses. Unlike the covenants that will follow, *this* first agreement is completely one-sided.

There is no requirement for the "party of the second part" to *do* anything in this covenant.

God simply says, "I promise I won't ever again destroy the earth by flood."

And to seal the agreement, it is like God has put a very big post-it note in the sky, and

God being God has made it a multi-coloured one, very visible to all as a reminder.

A sign that God intends only good for his creation, not destruction.

Noah doesn't even have to agree for this covenant to go into effect.

God makes a promise, and that's that.

As Noah climbed out of the ark, he accepted God's promise and headed off into his own version of the wilderness. Though the flood had destroyed everything, new growth had already begun by the time God called Noah out of the ark. Noah walked into a world that no one had ever seen before, a world that was being re-created right before his eyes. But he didn't go alone. When God placed that rainbow in the heavens, he was reminding Noah that he keeps his promises and that God would always be with him.

As Jesus walked out of the wilderness and headed up the road toward Galilee, he was also walking into a world being re-created before his very eyes, but the change was not yet visible to anyone else but he had a mission to preach it.

When the voice from heaven had spoken at Jesus's baptism, Mark tells us the heavens were ripped open. It's the same word he uses later to describe the rending of the curtain in the temple at the time of Christ's crucifixion (16:38). God was breaking into the world to establish his Kingdom once and for all.

Both Jesus and Noah experienced God's presence, God's provision, and God's promise as they made their way through the wilderness.

God's very first covenant was a promise to Noah that he would never again destroy the world with a flood.

God's final covenant is the promise, sealed with Jesus' own blood, that he will restore all of creation to its intended perfection and right relationship to God.

And this is where we come into the picture. This is where we are called to cut to the chase. Just as Jesus received the Holy Spirit at his baptism, we also can be filled with the Holy Spirit.

We already have been sealed or marked with the HS, when we accepted Jesus Christ as our Lord and Saviour. You can see this in Ephs 4:30.

The NRSV says that the Spirit descended on Jesus like a dove, but that little preposition in Greek really means "into." The Spirit descended *into* Jesus, filling and strengthening him, even as it anointed him.

It is only through the power of the Holy Spirit that we can accomplish anything for the Kingdom of God.

It is only through the power of the Holy Spirit that we can withstand the tests and temptations that bombard us every day.

God is present with us in his Spirit. By the Spirit, God stays with us.

Do be careful though.

That same Spirit also took Jesus into the wilderness, to be tested, to live among wild beasts, and to depend on God's provision. We need to remember this when we ask God to fill us with his Holy Spirit, we are asking him to change us to become more like his Son, Jesus, more Christ-like. At the same time we need to remember that this is the same God who gave his all in dying for us on the cross to save us from the consequences of our wrong-doing,

Jesus knew he had to go to the cross to save us as well as to release the gift of the Paraclete, the Holy Spirit. That wonderful Comforter, Guide, Teacher, Sanctifier and Healer just to name a few of the things he is and does.

When we seek God's Spirit to live in us, we must be prepared to set out on a spiritual quest that will transform us, as individuals and also as church. What we learn and our faithfulness in any task we are given, will determine how successfully we complete that task.

So what does cutting to the chase mean for us. It means cutting out the unnecessary noise in our lives, the clamour of things that pull our attention away (the mobile with its Facebook and Tik-Tok, the 24 hr news, the email loaded workstation at home).

Pulling us away from spending time in the presence of God, and with the things of God.

So cutting to the chase here means giving God our full attention.

When we cut to the chase, we can hear God say, "you are my beloved child, with you I am well pleased." We can hear God promise, "I'm not going to destroy you. I am with you. I will be with you always, even to the end of the age."

God did not leave Jesus in the desert, any more than he left Noah in the ark.

Just as the Spirit drove Jesus into the wilderness, the Spirit also led him into his ministry in Galilee. That same Spirit takes us, if you are willing to let him, to a place where we can learn to depend on God's provision and where we can learn to face our trials by depending on God's strength, not our own.

The season of Lent is a perfect opportunity to do just that.

These forty days give us time to seek God, to develop our trust in him, to walk in his way at any time, even in pandemic times such as these.

May be you could join the Lent course being run by the Church team to help encourage you in this endeavour.

Then we can be ready when the Holy Spirit calls us from where we are at present, whether in a wilderness or not and into our purpose as individuals and as a church.

Our purpose is the same one Jesus carried with him from the wilderness into Galilee.

Christ calls us to repent of following our own way, to turn, and to follow him.
He calls us to join him in proclaiming and sharing the good news that the Kingdom of
God is here, in the strength and fellowship of the Holy Spirit. Amen