

Wild beasts and angels

So – welcome to the season of Lent, a season traditionally of fasting and penitence, when we recall the 40 days that Jesus spent in the desert being tempted by the devil. And our readings this morning take us back to those beginnings of Jesus’ ministry when he was baptized in the Jordan River, and then driven by the Spirit of God out into the desert for his showdown with Satan, followed by his arrival in Galilee. There he proclaimed that God’s rule was breaking in on his ancient people. And I want this morning to focus on those forty days spent in the wilderness being tempted, but there is a problem here with Mark. His account is so sparse. Matthew and Luke’s Gospels speak of Jesus being tempted to turn stones into bread. They describe Jesus being tempted to leap from the parapet of the temple in an eye-catching display. They portray Jesus being tempted to receive global power and authority but by submitting to Satan. Mark gives us none of that – not a word. He does, however, furnish us with a little detail that is not found in the other Gospels, a striking phrase that certainly grabs my imagination. Mark tells us that Jesus ‘was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him’. Matthew actually tells us that angels waited upon Jesus, but Mark alone refers to the wild beasts. So what is this all about? What is the significance of the wild beats and the angels?

Well, there are various suggestions. Do we perhaps have here a subtle reference to the ancient story of the Garden of Eden, when Adam lived in peace among the animals? Is this a suggestion that Christ is the new Adam, come to restore Eden, to recreate paradise on earth so that we are once again at peace with nature and our fellow creatures? This would also echo passages from the prophet Isaiah that speak of humans living at peace with wild animals. Certainly this would be an interpretation that would have compelling relevance for our world today, where the covenant between human beings and the rest of creation has been so disastrously broken.

Or maybe it’s something different. Maybe the wild beasts represent threats to Jesus during his ministry, the destructive powers and forces that are arrayed against him, the religious and political enemies who will hound him to death. In which case the angels are there to protect him and to ensure that

Jesus' ministry takes its course. And that interpretation would suggest that the angels and the wild beasts are in some kind of tension, that they are not just side by side but that they are set in fierce opposition to one another. And this morning I would like to pick up that idea and run with this tension, but take it in a slightly different direction. I would suggest that out there in the desert Jesus is being pulled in two opposing directions as two competing forces battle for his soul. There is, as it were, a force pulling him from above represented by the angels. Such angels in the Bible are kind of semi-divine beings whose home is heaven where they dwell in the nearer presence of God such that there is something of the divine radiance upon their faces. And we might say that the angels direct us upwards. They direct us upwards to our destiny as children of God made in the image of God, exalted over creation. I'm reminded of that great verse found in the psalms, in psalm 8, which celebrates the status of human beings:

‘You have made them a little lower than the angels,
And crowned them with glory and honour...’

Here is the ‘upward pull’ upon human nature, the pull in the direction of the angelic and the divine. And it is interesting that this psalm goes on to say:

‘you have given them dominion over
the works of your hands;
You have put all things under their feet,
All sheep and oxen, and also the beasts of the field...’

Could Mark have had that passage in mind in his description of Jesus in the wilderness, presenting Jesus as the human one, whose destiny is to be a little lower than the angels and to have dominion over the beasts of the field? This is our privileged position and status in God's created order.

Yet in this story of Jesus' temptations we might see another, opposite pull upon Jesus, one that pulls not upwards but downwards. Here the wild beasts represent all that would conflict with our humanity, all that would deface the divine image upon us. This is our lower nature that resists the pull of the angelic and renders us less than we have been created to be. And there stands Jesus in the desert, poised between these two forces, between these two destinies: the angelic and the bestial. There is a struggle taking place here, a struggle for Christ's soul. And so too with us: we stand in that place where Jesus stood. We stand caught between the angels and the beasts, between heaven and hell, between light and darkness, between life and death. We are

suspended between our angelic and our animal natures, between the spirit and the flesh, between the heavenly Jerusalem and the dry, lifeless desert.

There this passage locates Jesus – and us - balanced in that precarious place, pulled from above and from below. And the problem with our modern, secular, ‘enlightened’ world is that we have cut the cords that pull us from above. We have emptied the sky, drained it of God, banished the angels, abolished heaven and we now have nowhere to turn - except downwards. Reinforced by Charles Darwin and by our discovery of evolution we have emphasised our connection to the animals, and that is important and good and has crucial implications – but not when it is no longer balanced by the pull of the angels and our higher nature. In one of his songs Leonard Cohen sings of ‘an ape with angel glands’ - an apt description, perhaps, of a human being. But what happens when we surgically remove the angel glands? Nature is violent, red in tooth and claw, driven by the survival of the fittest and strongest, but our faith tells us that there are other forces at work: the lure of the divine, the angelic realm which tugs at us. What hope, however, when we renounce this? Where does that leave us? So, we might expect, given our enlightened state, and given the astonishing developments in science and technology, that we might be on an upward path – away from the bestial. But sadly, the evidence from our world on this first Sunday in Lent suggests otherwise. Our love affair with violence is as strong as ever and it stalks the globe – and even American schools - like a predatory beast. And we – or should I say men? - seem incapable of taming the wild beast of lust which has defiled any number of bodies and institutions, and so we have the #MeToo movement and hardly a day goes by without yet another sexual harassment story or scandal.

Yes, we might expect better in our modern, progressive times, but sadly not and we find ourselves back in the world of our other reading, from Genesis chapter 9, a profoundly violent world. If we read the early chapters of Genesis we find that it was the appalling, spiralling violence of the world that prompted God to destroy it with the flood. And God is under no illusions that the flood will purge the world of violence. In the previous chapter, as Noah and his family emerge from the ark, God’s sober assessment of human nature is that ‘the inclination of the human heart is evil from youth’. In other words, God knows the violence that is in us. God knows the strength of the pull from below. Yet despite all that God promises never again to destroy the earth. God makes a covenant with the world, promising never again to cut off all flesh.

And precisely here this story is so beautiful. For having acknowledged the wild beast that lurks in our earthbound nature, what does God do? Well, God puts a sign in the heavens. And so Noah and his family are summoned not to look down into the dark depths of human nature but to look up, and what do they see? Well, they see a rainbow! And why the rainbow? Well, the explanation that appeals to me is that this is God's bow as in God's bow and arrow. It is God's weapon of destruction, God's weapon of violence – only now it is undrawn and laid aside, laid down never again to be taken up. God makes peace with the world, even such a word as this. However much violence may be written into the constitution of the universe and however deeply it is entrenched in the human heart it will not finally prevail. The bow of war has been laid down and nothing can now jeopardise God's plans and purposes for this world – and for us, human beings. No matter how powerful is the law of the jungle, our destiny as human beings does not lie finally with the beasts. No matter how strong is the downward pull, the downward drag of our lower nature, we look up, drawn by the pull of the angels and the tug of the rainbow which finally triumph.

So to this season of Lent. Lent, you could say, is a time for looking down. It's a time to focus on the wild beasts that Jesus faced. It's a time to become more sensitive to the power of violence and death in the world, to confess it and to pray against it. So traditionally in Lent we look inward and identify the wild beasts within, our lower nature, and we discern how it operates in our lives and how it infects our relationships and our behaviour. And traditionally Lent has been a time to struggle with those beasts and to find strategies for resisting them. And we do this because this is the truth of our human condition. It is not the whole truth, however. It is not the end of the story. For come Easter we will look up. Come Easter we will be met by angels at a tomb who will declare to us the truth of our final destiny. And so we live in hope. Amen.