

## FIRST SUNDAY IN LENT

### SERMON PREACHED BY REV'D GLENN MAYTUM

MARK 1:9-15

I have never seen the Jordan River, but I have seen the Murrumbidgee.

From the fresh, cold, clear water in the high country around Tumut, I have crossed and re-crossed the 'Bidgee to the slow, brackish, languid river around Hay and Balranald.

Water gives life!

Just look at the crops and livestock and wildlife in the Murrumbidgee Irrigation Area (MIA) around Narrandera and Griffith. Wheat and grapes illustrated on my purple stole given to me as a gift in Riverina. Along the river there are skiing and swimming spots, like waterholes at Lake Talbot, 5 Mile, or Gogeldrie Weir. These spots are well-known. And, when it's 40 plus degrees this water brings refreshment, renewal -life- to the many who go there.

The river and its environs can also be dangerous. The underwater bank of what seems like a slow-flowing stream can quickly fall away to reveal you are out of your depth in cold, reedy, fast flowing water. So, teenagers hang swing ropes off overhanging trees where you know there is a safe, deep enough hole for you to swing out and dive in and get wet.

Getting back to the bank can also be tricky: after many people have jumped in the bank gets wet and slippery, muddy and smelly and you can get that way, too, as you lose your footing and slide back down!

Today's Gospel, the start of Lent, takes us to the Jordan River- to a well-known spot, a waterhole- so well-known even Jesus knew exactly where to find John. Typically, Mark, in just a few lines, shows Jesus being baptized, being driven into the wilderness and then starting His ministry. Today's Gospel is also rich in symbols.

**Water** is the first. Water gives life.

Jesus came to the waterhole where John was baptizing. In artwork we often see a beautiful, riverside location. It might have been like that. But, I don't think it was a specially beautiful spot. I don't think John would have said "Uh-oh, here comes Jesus. Let's go somewhere better."

No, I think Jesus went into the **same** water at the **same** place as everyone else- the same waterhole that others had just left: a typically well-worn, muddy, slippery from over-use, river bank: John was, after all, well-known.

And, in that same water Jesus enters into all that is left by others. Not just sin and repentance, but the pain of their lives, their struggles and troubles. Murky, muddy, smelly. When He came to John to be baptized with water, Jesus was expressing His willingness to be **immersed** in the entirety of the human condition and to be refreshed to start His ministry.

And, then there is the **Dove**.

Waterholes bring birdlife. Lots and lots of birds. At Gogeldrie you can see pelicans and ducks; galahs and cockatoos. Swooping and gliding and paddling and nesting in the reeds that grow on the edges.

In our reading today, the Holy Spirit descends like a DOVE. Doves are like pigeons. Unlike seagulls, doves are persistent but gentle. Try shooing away doves or pigeons: they come right back from

another angle every chance they get. They push their way in closer, persistently, descending, settling making themselves at home. In the same way closer, persistently, descending, settling the Holy Spirit makes itself at home wherever he finds us, just like with Jesus.

And, God declares to us: "You are my beloved son/beloved daughter, I am pleased with what you've done."

And, then there is the **wilderness**.

Places along the Murrumbidgee, like Gogeldrie, are located in "the middle of nowhere". How do you find it? You turn off the back Whitton road and drive south! Like into a wilderness. And, when you get there you need to keep away from those reeds I mentioned because that is where you'll come across brown snakes. And, they are very nasty!

In the wilderness Jesus is put to the test. Like a brown snake, Satan –"the one who hinders"- is lurking. And if you stay overnight, as Jesus did for a number of nights, it can also be daunting. There are sounds all around. The night can be moonlit and full of stars, overwhelming for many; or, it could be so dark you cannot see your hand in front of you. Very eerie. The wilderness can be a very scary place to be. Especially if you are on your own. In life, as many of us found in 2020, you don't have to go far to find yourself in a wilderness.

This is today's story of Jesus. And, it is our story, too.

We have been baptized; We have faced our own wildernesses where we were being hindered from being faithful to God and to one another; and, we have been sent to bring the Good News to others.

But, finding our waterhole is easy! It is here, St James. We need to come back and jump right in!

In Lent we find our refreshment and renewal in Bible Reading; or, joining in Morning Prayer; or in participating in a Lenten study group or a Quiet Day; and, most especially, in coming into Church and joining in the Sunday Eucharist or a weekday Eucharist. The truth is, the call to observe a holy Lent does not ask us to **believe** something; it calls us to **do** something. It is a time for **action**.

So, rather than just letting ourselves be hindered, we need to jump right in! Lent calls us to care for ourselves and for what is outside of ourselves. Today's Gospel shows that God, in Christ, has joined us as we constantly struggle at finding new ways to be fully human. Like Jesus, each of us received the Holy Spirit at our baptism for us to start our ministry, to assist us in our difficulties, our "wildernesses".

In Lent we remember we are Christ's Body on earth, consecrated to announce the Good News: God's gospel of justice and peace; to witness to God's love; and to care for the poor, the sinner, the humble and the weak.

So, following Jesus' example, may we each find our waterhole, get our baptism wet again, and make a good Lent, this year.