

Lent 1B, 2015

Mark 1:9-15

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.

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."

Baptism, temptation, proclamation: we have all three in today's Gospel reading, in condensed and concentrated form (so typical of Mark!).

We first read that after Jesus has been baptized and is rising up from the waters of baptism, the heavens are torn apart and the Spirit descends upon him. Now, if the heavens were merely *opened*, they could be closed again; but Mark says they are *torn apart*, which means there is now a **permanent** breach in the barrier between heaven and earth. Heaven and earth will forever be united – and Mark is saying that they are united most clearly in the person of Jesus. Mark's Gospel doesn't *have* any story about Jesus' birth, or poetic words about "the Word becoming flesh"; but this sparsely-narrated story of Jesus' baptism states the same incarnational truth: the Holy Spirit and human flesh are one. John Shea notes that "the Spirit does not merely descend 'on' [Jesus]; it descends 'into' him, fully inhabiting his being and preparing him for mission... Union replaces separation [in the world]... A new divine-human condition is revealed." (p. 79)

But this divine-human condition is precisely what this sinful world cannot abide. The conflict is drawn vividly in the temptation story: On the one side, Satan tempts Jesus to *sever* this unity of God and human, and the wild beasts attempt to tear him and his divine-humanity apart; on the other side, we are told the ministering angels sustain Jesus in the wilderness against these attacks.

Now, knowing that we moderns don't always relate to Satan as a man with red skin and horns, a pointy tail, and a pitchfork in his hand, Fr. Shea brings Satan closer to home. "Satan should not be imagined as encountering Jesus in a definite individual form," he writes. "Satan is the inner, invisible energy of people, groups, and social and political structures that inflict suffering on people... Satan and the demons actively keep people *alienated* from God and *divided* among themselves. **Jesus** actively seeks to *unite* people to God and to one another. These two are [therefore] irreconcilable." (p. 80)

Fr. Shea notes that “Because of this divine/ human unity, [Jesus’] life in time is permeated by eternity.” This is what he means when he proclaims in our Gospel, “The time is fulfilled.” “The promise of union that lurks in every moment has happened. But according to the Gospel story, it has happened in the one human being, Jesus. It has yet to happen in others. Jesus’ mission is to offer to **others** that *potential* that has become **actual** in himself...

“But the mere *offer* of the kingdom does not **make** the kingdom *arrive*.” The offer must be accepted, actively and willingly received by you and me. Jesus tells us how to do this: “Repent,” he says, “and believe in the good news.” The arrival of the kingdom depends on our repentance and belief. And what is “repentance”? John Shea explains: “Repentance entails turning away from ways of thinking and acting that reinforce alienation from God and separation from people,” he writes. The problem is that these ways of thinking and acting from which we must turn are deeply ingrained in us. Therefore, “Turning away, refusing to allow alienating thinking and acting to have influence [in our lives], takes [perseverance and attention].”

But repentance alone is not enough to cause the arrival of the kingdom of God. “Turning *away* must be complemented by turning *toward*, by believing in the ‘good news.’ But [again], this good news is not easy [to believe,] to grasp; and, [even] if grasped, is not easy to integrate into all the dimensions of our human makeup. In the parable of the sower there are **three** soils that *cannot* welcome the seed of ‘the word’ (the good news) and bring it to fulfillment; only **one** soil successfully nurtures the seed into incredible abundance (Mark 4:3-20)...” Accepting the Gospel, receiving the Good News deep within ourselves, is difficult.” It is the road less travelled.

“Why is it so difficult to repent and believe the Gospel—that we are loved by God, and are called to embody that love in the time and space of earthly life? ... Because we harbor so many *other* beliefs that do not **fit** into this Good News... [Beliefs such as:] ... “The world is here for us to exploit.” “No one can be trusted.” “There have to be winners and losers.” “They hurt me, so I must get even.”” This last one is at the heart of much of the conflict in the world today. It is the old law of “eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth” which Jesus replaced with, “If someone strikes you on one cheek, turn to him the other also. Do good to those who persecute you.” How many of us lifelong Christians can say we always turn the other cheek and do good to those who persecute us? How many of us follow Jesus’ command to “take up our cross and follow him?” “Repentance entails finding and letting go of beliefs that compete with or contradict the Good News.” But that is easier said than done!

There is another reason we find it so difficult to “repent and believe the Gospel - that we are loved by God, and are called to embody that love in the time and space of earthly life: It is because the Gospel is about spiritual reality, and how we come to *believe* in spiritual reality is an involved, lifelong process.”

We teach our children to obey rules because they don't yet have a sense of right and wrong embedded within themselves. So we tell them, "Don't play in the street." "Don't hit." "Share your toys." As they grow older, they don't need to rely so much on rules, because they have incorporated the consciousness of right and wrong into their very beings. That **same** maturation process occurs in spiritual growth, says Fr. Shea. He notes that "initially there is a need to have faith *in* Jesus without having incorporated his consciousness of divine love... into ourselves. The Christian community and tradition initiates all its members into this faith and supports it with strong argumentation and multiple practices. But eventually this 'faith seeks understanding,' as St. Anselm would say... [Faith] wants to move away from 'complete' dependency on Jesus" as an *external* authority, and gradually "put on the mind of Christ," as St. Paul says, (1 Cor 2:16) so that our consciousness becomes more and more the consciousness of Christ. We live *in Christ*, and he in us, as St. Paul is constantly saying, and we no longer need a list of rules.

This matter of incorporating the divine spirit within the human heart is not some new teaching. On the contrary, it is exactly what God is saying in that remarkable passage from Jeremiah: "The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the LORD. But **this** is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts... No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, 'Know the LORD,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD..." (Jeremiah 31:31-34)

"The days are surely coming," God promised in Jeremiah. "The time is fulfilled," Jesus proclaims in today's Gospel. The potential offered by Jesus of both God and human dwelling together in us will be realized. Let us repent and receive the kingdom of God, for "The promise of union that lurks in every moment has happened."

AMEN

Quotes are from John Shea, *Eating with the Bridegroom*, Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2005, pp. 79-84