

## Lent 1, 2018 – 40 Stories of Hope – Fresh Start: Mark 1:9-15

So today is the first Sunday in Lent, and in some ways Lent this year started with a bit of a bang. As most of you will be aware, this year, Ash Wednesday, the traditional start of Lent, fell on 14<sup>th</sup> February this last week. In other words, for the first time in 73 years, Ash Wednesday and Valentine's Day fell on the same day. Which did make me wonder about the opportunities for social faux pas you could have by confusing the two. Did anyone get up on Wednesday and put an ash cross on their partner's foreheads? 'Turn away from sin....'

Or even better, how one might construct a Valentine's Day ashing service? Come to the front and receive a love heart. Free hug anyone?

I don't know about you but I'm not a fan of Valentine's Day. All those fluffy bears and heart shaped balloons, and extremely expensive flowers – all, we are told, in the name of love. (Nothing whatsoever to do with the marketing industry, of course). In fact you could say that both Ash Wednesday and Valentine's Day celebrate love, but from two very different perspectives.

If Valentine's Day is mostly love as sentimentality, **Ash Wednesday reminds us that true love is agape – costly, self-giving love**. Here we have two images of love side-by-side – and, let's face it, only one of them is real. Agape love, self-giving love, *Ash Wednesday* love, was in fact a whole new understanding of love – it was a completely new word, invented by the early Christians in the first century, because the words they had didn't do it justice. It was inspired by Jesus, who embodied the selfless, abundant, generous love of God that is the highest and holiest thing human beings can imagine.

Our passage today celebrates real love, agape love, this Ash Wednesday kind of love – and we see it in 3 different ways in these 3 very short vignettes all crammed into 7 verses. Mark doesn't waste his words does he? In our short passage, we got Jesus' baptism, temptation in the desert *and* the announcement of his public ministry – it almost took me more words to summarise it than Mark to say it! But each of these 3 episodes give us a beautiful example of true love.

**Firstly, in Jesus' baptism, we see the love of the Father for the Son.** That's what the voice from heaven declares: 'You are my Beloved Son; with you I am well pleased.' What a beautiful image that is. Any of you who are fortunate to be parents will have had this same experience. That moment of looking at your children with such joy and pride. And often not because they've achieved anything at all – their very existence, their life, brings you great joy. 'You are my beloved child.' You just *are*.

The writer of the Hebrews (our other reading) puts the theological clothing on this story – he or she quotes the Old Testament verses that proves how Jesus fulfils a historic promise of God's, to come to this earth in the form of his son. READ 1:5. And that's good, that's important. But let's just for a moment focus on the image instead, that simple scene of Jesus and John in the water, and let's imagine the Father looking down on Jesus with such love, such joy. Like Spike the dog in the Tom and Jerry cartoons: 'That's my boy. That's my boy.'

But there's more to this as well. Some of us may not be able to resonate with the parental imagery, but the good news is that none of us misses out here. Because what God said to Jesus is what he says to all of his children too. What happens when we become Christians is that God puts his Spirit into all who follow his Son – which means what God says to Jesus he also says to all who love him now – 'you are my beloved son/daughter'.

And more than that, he says, 'With you I am well pleased.' Many of us can accept that God loves us – but not so many that he's pleased with us. We assume that the fact that we need to confess our sins means that God is permanently disappointed with us. We need to learn that God is as pleased with our expressions of obedience as he is sad at our sin. Maybe today one or two of us need to hear the whole of that phrase: 'You are my beloved son/daughter. I am pleased with you. I delight in you. I'm proud of you.' (PAUSE)

We've paused longer there than Mark does! But the text moves on to **the Temptation**. **Here we see the love of the Son for the Father**. I think many of us scratch our heads at the 40 days in the desert. Why would Jesus, who already knew God's love and blessing, do this? Perhaps that's why all the gospel writers emphasise that Jesus was led by the Spirit to do this – in other words, there's a genuine purpose to it: it was no accident, it was God's will, and Jesus was being obedient.

Which then begs the question: well if Jesus has just been declared to be the Beloved Son, why does the proud Father send him into a period of trial and testing? The point here is that this time of testing in the desert, away from everything and everyone else, was making Jesus ready for battle. With everything else stripped away, Jesus was undergoing that process of learning to rely completely on God. He was still Jesus bar-Joseph, with a close human family, but what God was calling him to next was going to lead him away from his family to an independent life and ministry. Now his source of strength was no longer going to be primarily his earthly family but his Heavenly Father.

Lent is often seen as a season where we choose to undergo a little tiny bit of what Jesus went through in the desert. If you were at the morning service on Ash Wednesday you'll have heard me speak on this in more detail, and if you want that detail the sermon is on the website, and I commend it to you. But briefly, what's relevant for today is that the purpose of these disciplines is to produce renewal and growth in our lives. Denial is first and foremost about devotion and delight. It's about saying to God: God, you are still, and always will be, the most important thing in my life, and nothing should ever get in the way of that.'

That's what led Jesus into the desert and brought him out tougher, more focused, and ready for what lay ahead. I hope and pray that Lent for us, too, would bring more joy, more delight, more renewal and growth in our lives.

And finally, we've had the love of the Father for the Son and Son for the Father – now the battle-hardened Jesus is ready to make his mark on the world. **Now the Father and the Son are going to demonstrate their love for the world: 'The time has come.'** I love that phrase, it's so full of anticipation, excitement. *Everything* from now on will be different. The kingdom of God has come near. God is not just in heaven – up there, looking down. He is *here*, agape love has come to this world. And what else can we call that other than good news?

For those of you who are doing the Lent book, I hope you've enjoyed the first few days. There's been some great testimonies and some lovely reflections. I have to say, I'm delighted that this is the first main passage on this the first Sunday of Lent. So often we miss the point of Lent, we get fixated on the hair shirt and all the enforced misery. But let's never forget that the journey towards Easter is good news. It's the salvation of the world. It's death *and* it's life, it's forgiveness *and* resurrection power. It is the kingdom come near – it is good news.

I hope lots of things for us as a church. I long for us to fall more and more in love with Jesus, to find in him all that we need for life and hope and joy and purpose. I long for us to serve each other and each discover our gifts and potential. What I also long for is that people will look at us, and beyond us to Jesus, and think 'good news'. We are good news people. We know that good news for ourselves and are enthusiastic about passing that good news on.

This week we celebrated a real good news love story, and it wasn't Valentine's Day. Ash Wednesday is the real good news, the story of agape love – of the Father for the Son, of the Son for the Father and of the Father and the Son for the world.

And the best news of all is that we get to share in that: in Christ, God calls us his beloved children too. In journey of Lent, we can also know that deep intimacy and delight that comes through self-denial. And as we hear Jesus bringing good news to world, we get to both receive and pass on that good news, to be good news.

**The time has come, and the kingdom of God has come near. Change your life and receive the good news. Amen.**