Genesis 9: 8-17; 1 Peter 3: 18-end; **Mark 1: 9-15**

**May I speak in the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen**

I was harangued in the centre of Chelmsford on Friday afternoon, along with anyone and everyone else in the vicinity, by an old-style street-corner preacher, standing next to a man on stilts, who was making balloon sculptures for children. This preacher seemed only to have one message, which was: God so loved the world that He gave his only-begotten Son – and God knows and loves you, and gave that only-begotten Son for you. Which, as far as it went, was a good message to proclaim. But maybe not quite enough.

I actively like Lent! For the very personal reason that it was the season in which I first truly bought into, and entered into, and felt like I grasped what it meant for Jesus to have died on my behalf – and also when I first felt called by God to the life of a priest.

Lent is the time of the Christian year when the cards are most clearly on the table; when we are obliged to confront - quite plainly - what this Christian life is all about. And what it really means to be a follower of Christ.

Looked at from the outside, the church is often seen as a leisure option, something some people do in their spare time; you sign up to certain basic beliefs (although our beliefs are rarely that certain) and you come to church. Or you might have other more-pressing reasons for coming, which are not primarily to do with belief in God, but rather with belief in the importance of a good education for your child. If the church doesn’t make the most of having you while you are here, it’s the church’s fault, not yours…..(but do help us by letting us know how we’re doing and what you need). You might come weekly, monthly or hardly at all. You might even get involved in the running of the church in some capacity. But it’s all still pretty safe.

However, the readings today present a much more realistic and rather less rosy picture of the Christian life than that safe experience we might suggest. They certainly hint that following Jesus is - by its very nature - perilous, sacrificial, even tough.

Too many evangelists – rather like the one in Chelmsford on Friday - talk of becoming a Christian as if it solves all your problems. Believe me, it doesn’t. In fact it probably throws up as many challenges as it solves; it is in many ways an adventure; risky – and occasionally painful.

If we look at this morning’s gospel reading: Jesus is baptised. A voice from heaven booms out; it is a glorious moment. Some of us live on memories like that for a long time; except that - straight away - immediately - Jesus is pushed out somehow into The Wilderness.

Mark’s account of the wilderness scene is brief. It’s not important to Mark what temptations Jesus suffers nor what response he makes to them. All we have in Mark’s account is the fact that Jesus was sent out into the desert and that he was there for forty days.

And all that set me wondering what the desert or wilderness might look like for us……..

When I was a theological student, there were requirements to tick certain boxes, to do placements, to experience stuff way outside whatever we had experienced in life before. And one of the placements I did was in a hospice in Devon. It was, to say the least, a bit of a short sharp shock. I turned up on Monday morning, met for the first time the experienced hospice chaplain who would supervise my placement….. and was pretty well let loose on the wards. Go and do ministry. Go and be Jesus to these people. Many, perhaps most, of whom will not be believers in any way shape or form. Bring them comfort in their adversity. Of which you know nothing. And don’t mess up their final days on this earth. No warm-up or week of orientation; just dropped into the middle of the wilderness.

And there seemed to me to be so many ways in which I might mess up – saying the wrong thing, not being able to say anything at all, being completely and embarrassingly trite…

But here is Jesus, straight after this great, joyful, momentous occasion, with no previous ministerial experience that we know of, having to go into a frightening situation that, I suspect, none of us would willingly enter into ourselves. How does he manage it?

He does it because the Spirit is the one that drives him to it. The same Spirit that descended upon him as he came out of the water, the same Spirit that spoke the voice of God and called him beloved, is the Spirit that sends him into the wilderness.

In the same way, our own moments of baptism, confirmation, fleeting understanding, while they are joyful, celebratory occasions, are not an end, but a beginning. In the same way, that same Spirit that descended upon us at our baptisms, or confirmations or ordinations, sends us out into a world that is at times very, very challenging. We, like Jesus, have all at some stage taken first steps into some equally alien environment, and God has told us the same thing that that hospice chaplain told me: Off you go and do ministry. And we wonder how on earth we are going to do it.

And one suspects that Jesus, in his human form, was thinking the same thing out there in his own version of wilderness. Yet the gospel tells us that the angels waited on him, surrounded him, kept him up and supported him. The Best News was that he was not alone. Jesus did not embark on his earthly ministry totally on his own, and neither do we. Angels are all around us: all manner of people who minister to us so that we might minister to others.

Proclaiming the Good News may seem like a monumental task. To be sure, feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, preaching love to those who have never heard of it, and spreading the word that the Kingdom of God is here are not easy tasks. But neither are they impossible ones. As the angel said to Mary: with God, everything is possible.

This season of Lent is a time to remind ourselves of the call that God makes: that call to each of us – as individuals - to take up the good news and pass it on. Not to leave it to someone else to do the hard bits, but to step up and share the hard bits as best we can.

The same Spirit that came down upon Jesus at his baptism comes down on us, blesses us, calls us Beloved….and then drives us out into the Wilderness to proclaim Christ to others. In whatever way we can. Using words if there is no alternative.

That is our calling as Christians. Coming to church is not, after all, a leisure option; it becomes a necessity as we seek to support one another and pray for one another - as together we leave our comfort zones, enter fully into this world, and live and speak distinctively as followers of Christ. This Lent and actually for ever.

**Amen**