

SERMON: 21 February 2021 – Rev Alistair Cowper

Until the rainbow appears

Genesis 9:8-17

Mark 1:9-15

In many ways Jesus was so child like. The one who said to his followers that unless they changed and became children they would not be able to enter the kingdom of God.

According to the theologian that didn't just mean to be humble. It actually meant to be a nobody. Children were nobodies and Jesus wanted his friends to be nobodies too.

In fact he translates Jesus saying of the first shall be last and the last shall be first as being somebodies will become nobodies and nobodies will become somebodies.

Surely no one is a nobody, with God.

Surely everybody is a somebody?

But maybe we need to empty ourselves (of ourselves) in order to be filled with God.

In this way we need to affirm the idea that we are a nobody before we become a somebody.

Like Jesus, surely we need to submit to God before we can hear the voice that says we're loved as we are.

This is my Son. This is my Daughter. Who is loved and with whom God is pleased.

And maybe, like Jesus, it's then that we are best placed to be led, driven even against our will, into the many wildernesses in life.

In her recent blog "Journey with Jesus", Debie Thomas puts it like this:

"Jesus didn't want to go, and it is very possible he resisted. But the Spirit drove him, anyway.

Maybe it's strange that I find this detail comforting, but I do. Why? Because it rings true to life. Most of the time, we don't choose to enter the wilderness. We don't volunteer for pain, loss, danger, or terror. But the wilderness happens, anyway. Whether it comes to us in the guise of a devastating pandemic, a frightening hospital stay, a broken relationship, a hurting child, or a loss of faith, the wilderness appears, unbidden and unwelcome, at our doorsteps. And sometimes it is God's own Spirit who drives us there."

The same Spirit who comes to us and says we are loved and we bring God pleasure.

I don't know about you but I know I need to be constantly reminded of that simple truth.

There are too many snares in our wildernesses that want to hold us back from all that is good and pure and holy.

There are too many wild animals there.

In the wilderness, the Accuser tried to erode the truth of who Jesus was - a beloved Son, accepted for who he was - not just accepted but a son who brought pleasure to his Father in Heaven.

In his wilderness time, did Jesus wonder whether this fatherly love be sufficient when all else was gone?

When everything else was taken from him, like Noah, like Job, would this love fail?

I was thinking of the sort of things Jesus was doing in this time of trial in the wilderness.

He was resisting. He was enduring. He was clinging on. He was being vulnerable. He was trusting. He was hoping.

Probably he was even remembering.

Remembering the Scriptures that told of Elijah in the wilderness on the run from Queen Jezebel who was out to kill him. Things were so bad for Elijah that he had even prayed he might die. But as he fell into a sleep, an angel touched him and told him to get up and eat. The Lord had things ahead for Elijah (1 Kings 19:5-7).

Where there are wild animals there are angels too.

And where there are rain clouds there are rainbows.

(Photo) In April last year at the height of the pandemic and on the day it was announced we were past its peak, and people gathered outside to clap their appreciation for the NHS, a huge double rainbow appeared in the sky over London, and lots of people saw it as an amazing sign of hope.

Rainbows do that don't they? They are signs of hope, of sunshine after rain and so much more.

Since the days of Noah, the rainbow has been the sign of God's everlasting covenant or agreement with all flesh, all living creatures, and for all time.

It's true then that the love of God is all around. We are encircled by it. It's there for eyes to see and ears to hear.

Peter in the third chapter of his first letter tries to describe what the covenant between God and all living creatures means. He says that in the new covenant, Christ has brought us to God and made us alive in the Spirit.

18 For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God. He was put to death in the body but made alive in the Spirit. **19** After being made alive, he went and made proclamation to the imprisoned spirits – **20** to those who were disobedient long ago when God waited patiently in the days of Noah while the ark was being built. In it only a few people, eight in all, were saved through water, **21** and this water symbolises baptism that now saves you also – not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a clear conscience towards God. It saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ, **22** who has gone into heaven and is at God's right hand – with angels, authorities and powers in submission to him.

Just as Jesus himself was baptised we are also now saved through baptism.

How? By being made alive in the Spirit of Christ.

All these wilderness times are leading to resurrection, in which we are being made alive, as we resist, endure, cling on, feel vulnerable, weak, lost, a nobody.

Until the rainbow appears.

Until the angels come.

Then, we will rise and march on, battered and bruised.

With that Father's love in our hearts, raising us up above our trials.

Then, we will begin to understand how we are to be in the world, beloved and child-like.

Made alive in the Spirit, with good news to share.

May it be so today, for us all.

Amen.