

Borderlands: Mark 1.1-3, Psalm 51



*The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.
Prepare in the desert a highway for our God.*

In the spring of 2011 I was privileged to go on pilgrimage to Jerusalem and the Galilee with a group from Chester Diocese (including some from our church). It was an opportunity to walk for ourselves the roads that Jesus walked, and visit the places where he lived and worked — real places where a real person lived and worked, died and rose again. One of my fellow-pilgrims loaned me a book written by her father, Douglas Duff, who was in Palestine at the time of the British Mandate in 1938. He wrote: “Jesus was much more lovable to me now that I had seen this place where he had lived and taught. He was emerging from the false, trailing clouds of myth, and becoming a man and a brother.”

I found this too, in a way I hadn’t expected. Seeing the actual physical places where Jesus walked, travelling the roads (albeit in a comfortable coach), experiencing the landscapes and meeting the people who lived there, made a huge impact on all of us. Somehow it brought the Gospel stories vividly to life, adding a depth dimension which is almost inevitably missing when we try to visualize these all-too-familiar tales. I’ll be using some of our photos from that trip (and the later pilgrimage in 2017) to try to convey something of the vividness and depth of Mark’s story, as we read through his Gospel during Lent.

Mark is the shortest Gospel — and almost certainly the first to be written down. Tradition tells us that Mark wrote down these stories as Peter told them in Rome,

capturing the essence of his memories of walking with Jesus, right from that first meeting by the lake shore, through to the darkness of Good Friday and the unlooked-for hope of Easter. Peter and the other disciples lived through that story over the three years that they were with Jesus, then re-lived it time and again as the memories were told and re-told, mulled over in the mind and solidified in reflection and retelling into the shape that we know as the Gospel — the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. Mark, of all the Gospels, retains some of the rawness and wonder of that first encounter — and of the other encounters that pepper the Gospel, of the men, women and children whose lives were changed for ever by meeting with Jesus.



The story begins in the wilderness. The ancient route from Jerusalem to Jericho is now a six-lane highway, cutting a straight path down to Jericho through the wilderness of Judea. (As you might guess, this picture was taken through the window of our coach.) This is the road where the Good Samaritan was attacked by bandits and left for dead — and it's still a forbidding place, with the stark bare hills of the Judean desert clustering right up to the suburbs of Jerusalem.

As the coach came down the steep desert road to the river-valley, we drew into a ramshackle parking lot, with the usual scatter of tourist souvenir-stands and depressed-looking camels. This was the border, where our coach had to take on a new driver and a new guide to take us into Jericho, which comes under the Palestinian authority. It brought home how precarious the peace is, in these border lands. As pilgrims, we were in a privileged, air-conditioned cocoon, travelling in and out of contested territories, crossing and re-crossing lines drawn on a map that meant little to us, but life and death to the people who live there.

This is where Mark's story begins — in the border-lands of the wilderness, where the people of Israel crossed over into the promised land. Mark quotes the prophet Isaiah, bringing good news to the exiles in Babylonia, preparing to face the long trek back across the barren lands to the land of promise. They are words that both respect and celebrate the wilderness. It is a place of letting go of safeness, learning to live with uncertainty, learning to trust God. A good place to begin our pilgrimage of hope, in this wilderness time of Lent 2021.

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*Wilderness is the place of Moses,
A place of no longer captive and not yet free,
Of letting go and learning new living.*

*Wilderness is the place of Elijah,
A place of silence and loneliness,
Of awaiting the voice of God and finding clarity.*

*Wilderness is the place of John,
A place of repenting,
Of taking first steps on the path of peace.*

*Wilderness is the place of Jesus,
A place of preparation,
Of getting ready for the reckless life of faith.*

*We thank you, God, for the wilderness.
Wilderness is our place.
As we wait for the land of promise,
Teach us the ways of new living,
Lead us to where we hear your word most clearly,
Renew us and clear out the wastelands of our lives,
Prepare us for life in the awareness of Christ's coming
When the desert will sing
And the wilderness will blossom as the rose.
[Francis Brien]*