

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

With The Wild Beasts

The animals went in two-by-two, hurrah! At their making, each one was to bear the name the man would give it, and thus be in some way ordered to humanity. Noah's Ark is a marvellous tabernacle of creation, floating on the waters that were stirred by the breath of God in the beginning, the flood-waters of chaos; the waters drown, *but also* uphold, save: the Ark itself is the providence of God, and we are all, in some sense, afloat in it. Water is like that: at the Red Sea, too, it will drown *and* save. Again, outside the Ark, destruction reigns: inside, the fidelity of the Creator endures.

His Faithfulness Is Eternal

Behind all of this we sense the great vision of Genesis: "In the beginning...the waters were divided, to make the firmament": think of a trifle-bowl full of air, inverted above a flat earth with immensities of water above and below it. The bowl is pierced with doors through which the waters can enter again - the forces of destruction are only a whisker away. God says, *Let there be light*, but chaotic darkness still returns each evening, and prevails over the glory of the sun. So the Ark-borne Creation floats over the chaos, only the thickness of the planks of gopher-wood keeping it from the deeps; that, and the fidelity of God, *enthroned over the surgings of the sea*. And in community, the seeds of man, of beast wild and tame, of reptile and bird, all survive in the space within the Ark, while the doomed world perishes amid the wastes of the Flood. (Notice that the end of our first reading today takes away the bitterness of that perishing: *never again*, God says: *this is not what I am really like*).

The Death Of The Beloved Son

In the very next verse after the Baptism of Jesus we find *him driven out into the wilderness* by the Spirit who descended on him like a dove. *You are my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased*, but pitchforked at once into a world of Satanic testing, *he is with the wild beasts*. If this seems grotesque to us, it is even more so in the time of Mark, when wildernesses were wilder than now. The rabbis thought peace reigned between animals and humans until the first sin, after which they share in the alienation of the earth (it yields thistles, and makes life generally hard work). Perhaps Jesus is *taming* the hostility of the beasts; certainly he is in the care of the angels, as he is tested. The theme

of testing (or temptation, as it is sometimes translated) will reach its climax in Gethsemane, where Jesus will tell his disciples: *Pray not to be put to the test*; it is much more powerful than just experiencing a tendency towards sin. It is the agony of freedom, a confrontation with the whole force of the enemy, an encounter with the power of death. This is not a little incident in one man's life; it is the beginning of the combat between Satan and the Son of Man, and behind it rises the form of the Cross itself. Lent certainly comes in with dramatic suddenness. That wilderness of testing is only a hairsbreadth from any of us.

Come Into The Desert

Indeed, the desert, however exotic it may sound, is not so far from us. Its vacant wastes lie just behind the glossy billboards and facades we throw up to keep it from sight. The emptiness of our hearts, the poverty of our love, the narrowness of our sympathies all reveal to us a desert within, unvisited, unknown, a haunt of wild beasts and little else. The truth is that we do not visit our heart, but live on the margins of our being, amid the bustle of bodily things, the urge to possess and to dominate, the jangle of tills, the demands of the world. Lent invites us into a desert where we will meet the real Governor of these earthly forces. Mark does not describe Satan's false offers. What he does tell us is that we shall also meet, in the desert, the quiet authority of the Son of Man, *tempted in every way that we are, but without sin*. What would he have to do with Satan, with these empty promises and false ways forward, unless he had come to be what we are, come to be at our side? And with him at our side, what have we to fear from falsehood and dead ends? Every meeting we find in the Gospel tells us that with Jesus near us we can come to repossess our true selves, and with him we can revisit the fountain of our lives in God: and knowing the love in which we were made, we can return to face the world and its slavery, with the power of God set firm in us.

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