

baptism, which may or may not have taken place at the traditional site. You can't believe everything you read in the guide books.

Mark is clearly anxious to get started on his account of Jesus' ministry. His preface is only 15 verses long— there are no birth stories, there is no annunciation, no star in the east, no manger, no magi, no flight into Egypt – just a declaration of his theme, which is the good news Jesus brings, and a few verses about the ministry of John the Baptist, before he plunges, if that's the right word, into the story of Jesus calling his first disciples.

Because Mark's story is so succinct, we can see in it a model for our own ministry, as followers of Christ. This is the ministry which the season of Lent challenges us to renew and to better prepare for, through repentance and prayer and the study of his holy Word.

The sermon outline in *Connections* is the four initials, **C.P.T.P.** They stand for the sequence which Mark records so succinctly – Jesus' calling, his preparing, his testing, and his proclamation.

C. is for **calling**. Jesus' baptism was both a calling to ministry, and an authorizing of ministry. So was our baptism – we may not remember, but we were immersed in water, or sprinkled with water, or had water poured over us, as we were called to strive to live according to God's holy will and to serve him faithfully throughout our lives.

In the Gospel story, John baptizes Jesus, the heavens are torn apart, and the Spirit descends on Jesus like a dove. Here is a vision of the Trinity, centuries before the church defined the Trinity, the three beings of the Godhead in dynamic relation with each other, calling Jesus to leave home and family and his old occupation to begin proclaiming the good news, and empowering him for his mission.

Some of us are called to leave our regular occupations to be full-time proclaimers – Peter and all our assistant ministers have had other careers before offering for the ministry. Some are called to have a substantial ministry alongside their regular occupations, as Bruce and I have; and every baptized person is called to be a living member of his body. Too many baptised infants die in the Spirit, or are allowed to die, and never fulfil their calling.

We are here today, and come here Sunday by Sunday, to do more than simply be ministered to in word and sacrament -- we are here to fulfil our calling, to be better equipped to witness and to minister to the people we know, and, above all, to deepen our love for God and for other people, for in Christ, everyone else is our neighbor.

For us, the water has a significance it did not have for Jesus – our liturgies ask God to sanctify the water of baptism for the mystical washing away of sin, but, of course, Jesus was sinless, and so

the water of his baptism had a different significance than it had for the others whom John baptised, and for all believers since.

We may have been baptized by immersion, or by aspersion, that is, by having water sprinkled on us, or by affusion, that is by having water poured over our forehead, but the symbolism is the same – it is a triple symbolism: of life, of purity and of cleansing from sin. In baptism we are both called and authorised to serve God faithfully throughout our lives.

P. is for **preparing**. After his baptism, Mark tells us, the Spirit drove Jesus out into the wilderness. This was his preparation for ministry.

In the old prayer book service, the priest simply prays that the baptised child *may be virtuously brought up to lead a godly and Christian life . . . [and] to follow the example of our Saviour Christ*. In modern liturgies there is more direct reminder of the responsibility of parents to prepare their children for their life in the Christian family. The latest liturgy of the Anglican Church of Australia, issued in 2009, is very specific – the priest says

Before this congregation [parents and godparents] must express their own trust and commitment to the promises of God, and their intention to bring up their children in the faith and practice of the Church. In due time these children should make their own response to God, and be prepared for confirmation.

Parents can only do so much, and children must take responsibility for their own spiritual preparation as they grow up. Sadly, many of us have had the experience of doing all we can to bring up our children in the faith and practice of the church, only to see them give up their faith when they grow into teenagers or young adults, or when they hook up with an unbelieving partner.

We know we can't become a serious musician or play professional sport or be successful in any profession without proper preparation, so why would we think we can share our faith with others without preparing ourselves thoroughly? And we have to keep at it – look what happened to Bernard Tomic when he slackened off – he lost both his will to win and his ability to win. We don't want this to happen to our God-appointed ministry.

We can prepare ourselves by giving ourselves to God in worship every Sunday; these 40 days before Easter which we call Lent provide additional opportunities for prayer and self-denial-- the word Lent comes from an old English word for *Spring*; because it comes in spring in Europe, but it has also come to mean *growth* because Spring is the time when crops are planted and grow strongly and when the days grow longer. Lent is a time for spiritual growth.

To prepare for his ministry, Jesus withdrew from his family and friends and went into the desert alone. Again, he is setting us a good example – we all need to make more time to be alone with

God. We can go away on retreat every year, as I try to do; or we can simply shut down our computers and our TVs and our mobile phones, and observe Jesus' teaching to his first disciples – we read it again a few days ago on Ash Wednesday – *go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father, who is in secret.* (Mt 6.6)

T. is for **testing**. As Jesus spent his 40 days in the desert, Mark tells us that he was tempted by Satan, and threatened by wild beasts, but angels waited on him. We all know that the Christian life can sometimes be a tough journey – our faith will be tested, we will be tempted by the lure of easy money or fame or power or whatever. But we **can** overcome temptation, in the power of the Holy Spirit.

The disciples must have learned about Jesus' testing time in the desert from Jesus himself. Mark tells the story in a single verse, Matthew and Luke give more detail. From them we learn that Jesus' temptations echo those of the ancient people of Israel, as recorded in the Old Testament -- Jesus is reliving his people's experience in his own person, and he is also facing similar temptations to the ones we all face at various times in our lives.

Mark is not interested in the detail, because Jesus overcame his temptations, and so can we. *The angels waited on him.* That is such a significant verse – in Mark's brief account of the temptations, the angels are with Jesus for the whole 40 days; in Matthew's longer account, the angels show up at the end, after Jesus has overcome his temptations; in Luke's account, the angels are not mentioned at all.

For most of us, ministering angels are around all the time. They may be other members of St Mark's, or family members, or friends or work colleagues, but we may not recognise them because we have never become close, or we may not accept their help because we are ashamed of having a problem and embarrassed about asking for help.

We don't know what form Jesus' angels took or how they ministered to him in the desert – the parallel with the desert experience of the prophet Elijah (1 Kings 19.4-8) suggests that the angels provided him with food and water; so do other uses of the word *diakoneo* [dee-ak-on-eh-o] in the New Testament. Jesus lived, literally, on angels' food. So the angels ministered to his physical needs. But, just by being with him, seen or unseen, in whatever form, they would also have ministered to his psychological and spiritual needs. Jesus was never completely alone as he faced his temptations, and neither are we, as we face ours.

P. is for **proclaiming**. After the calling and the preparing and the testing, Jesus is ready to begin his ministry of proclaiming the good news of God, which was part of his mission on earth, and it is part of ours as well. The message is still the same: *The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe in the gospel, in the good news.*

This passage is part of the liturgy for Ash Wednesday, because it is a summary of what Jesus taught during his brief time on earth, and we need to proclaim to others what Jesus taught, as well as what he did for us and for all humanity in his death and resurrection.

John's arrest signifies the end of the old prophetic ministry to the Jewish people. Other passages in the New Testament make this very clear (eg Luke 16.16); the kingdom of God has come near – that is, in some ways the kingdom has already begun, but it cannot be realised in full until Jesus comes again. So we need to live a kingdom life, facing up to our failings and to our deliberate sins, and doing our best to align our values and our way of life with the values that Jesus taught.

At its best, the Christian faith is counter-cultural, and Mark is the gospel-writer who underlines the message that what Jesus taught often does not make sense to those who do not believe in the good news – more than once he tells us that Jesus had to explain his teaching to his disciples in private. The closer we are to Jesus, the clearer his message becomes.

A lot of the research into the state of Christianity today suggests that many believers have no counter-cultural dynamic, and have become simply a minor middle class sub-culture within the dominant culture, which is acquisitive, self-focused, and materialistic. We like our fine houses and our fine cars and our gadgets and our overseas holidays, just as most people do; we follow the same sporting teams; we teach our children about Santa and about the Easter bunny, but we also tell them about the child of Bethlehem and the risen Christ, and we expect them to know which is true and which is false. We add a dollop of religion to our lives; that makes us different, but not too different.

Lent gives us the opportunity to grow in our faith, to repent more fully and to believe more deeply, to come closer to the One who continues to minister to us in an even glorious way than he ministered to his own people 2 000 years ago. The thanksgiving prayer in a new Anglican liturgy summarises his ministry so well, I've had it printed in *Connections* under the sermon outline:

He lived and died as one of us, to reconcile us to you, the God and Father of all.

In fulfilment of your will he stretched out his hands in suffering,

to bring release to those who place their hope in you;

and so he won for you a holy people.

He chose to bear our griefs and sorrows,

and to give up his life on the cross, that he might break the chains of evil and death, and banish the darkness of sin and despair.

By his resurrection he brings us into the light of your presence.

Glory to God in the highest, and peace to his people on earth. **AMEN**