

The First Sunday of Lent

Mark 1: 9-15

Getting Personal in Lent - Michael Brown

Introduction

In his sermon for Epiphany 4 (31st January), Fr Mike introduced us to ‘Positional Authority’ and ‘Relational Authority’. I thought these ideas were very helpful; and so after obtaining due permission (and paying the appropriate fee), in this script I’m going to borrow and adapt them for my own purposes.

Borrowed and Adapted Definitions

And so here are: ‘Authoritative Meaning’ and ‘Relational Meaning’.

Authoritative meaning is found in a dictionary. It’s the meaning that authorises an editor to say that one of her contributors has mistaken one word for another.

Relational meaning relates the meaning to an individual.

And these two meanings may appear to have no actual connection in the words used.

Examples

On page 4 of our Holy Communion booklet are the words: FIRST READING. For almost everyone in church these words have only an authoritative meaning which is quite literal. But, if all is going to plan, for one person they also have the relational meaning of ‘*Get out of your seat, go to the lectern and read the lesson*’.

That was a very restricted example but here is part of a bible verse which could easily generate relational meanings to several people at the same time:

'When it was decided that we were to sail for Italy,' (Acts 27: 1a).

For one person, this verse might recall a recent pilgrimage during which faith was rekindled, and so the meaning becomes a prayer: *'Thank you Lord Jesus for this gift'*.

For someone else, this verse may remind them of a bereaved friend just returned from holiday, and so the meaning becomes an action: *'I must visit...and see how she is.'*

But the meaning for the praying person may then move on to action: encouraging other people to discover pilgrimage.

And the meaning for the visiting person may then move on to prayer: remembering to pray regularly for the bereaved friend.

So while authoritative meanings are usually static, relational meanings are dynamic.

A critic might complain that these are just subjective impressions which have been given a fancy name. Yes and No.

Yes, in that all experience requires a subject. No, in that these meanings can be tested objectively by Christian standards and found to be a basic part of a Christian life.

Mark 1: 12-13

Now for some verses from today's gospel reading:

'And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness for forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.'

What is the meaning of ‘wilderness’? Well, the first authoritative meaning will be something like ‘a desert place’, and the second might ‘a state of spiritual desolation.’ If we can only use the first meaning, it is hard to see how we can relate to this verse if we haven’t actually visited a desert. But even if we use the second meaning, how can we discover what might be special about the season of Lent for us?

We need to start from the phrase ‘drove him out’. Only Mark uses this forceful expression; Matthew and Luke use the milder ‘led out’ (John has no account of Jesus in the wilderness).

Look at what happens to Jesus. He doesn’t get up one morning and decide to go into the wilderness. Circumstances put Jesus in the wilderness.

To make a beginning of this Lent we could reflect on something in our present church circumstances over which we had no control and which has brought us desolation.

T S Eliot ends one section of his poem *Ash Wednesday 1930*, with the simple five word sentence, ‘*And after this our exile*’. Today for many christians throughout the world, ‘wilderness’ means forced absence from church, from the sacraments, from their brothers and sisters in Christ. They are exiles not just from the world in general, as christians must always be, but from their world of meaning.

What is this ‘world of meaning’? So far we’ve looked at the meanings of bible words but christian meanings are more than words. Examples would be music, stained glass, liturgical colours, the almost undefinable atmosphere of a church in which ‘prayer has been valid’, that is, where prayers have been prayed over the centuries.

Near the beginning of his poem *Burnt Norton*, Eliot has these words, ‘*If all time is eternally present All time is unredeemable*’. God has redeemed the unredeemable time through the gift of his Son.

If Lent is always Lent, then we will always be in the wilderness, always in the land of spiritual drought. Forty days means ‘a long time’ but even a long time can have an end.

If Jesus was fed by wild beasts, that means the world can be restored, our exile from Eden can be ended.

If the inhabitants of Heaven could be with the Redeemer of the world in his wilderness, that means they can also be with us.

Hymn

<p>1. Enter our hearts, O holy Lord, to break the bonds that bind us still; speak to us your forgiving word that we may do your perfect will.</p>	<p>2. Renew in us your Spirit’s flame, burn every evil thought away; that we may love your holy name, and freely run your joyful way.</p>
<p>3. We praise you, Father, for your Son, And Spirit, all-consuming fire; eternal Godhead, Three in One, surpassing all that we desire.</p>	<p><i>Words: The Order of the Holy Paraclete, Whitby; inspired by Eric Milner-White (1884-1963). Tune: ‘Das Leiden des Hem’, German Traditional Melody (as used in ‘Father of heaven, whose love profound, NEH 358).</i></p>
<p>(This hymn isn’t to be found in our current hymn book the <i>New English Hymnal</i>. It will be included in the <i>Revised English Hymnal</i> which was to have been published last year.)</p>	

Precious Lord,
When we dwell in the wilderness
and are tempted to despair,
Take us by the hand
and lead us on.

AMEN.