

Wild Honey (Mark 1. 1-8)

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“We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.
Through the unknown, unremembered gate
When the last of earth left to discover
Is that which was the beginning;”

So, here we are again. At the beginning: the beginning of the church’s year, the beginning of Mark’s Gospel and the story of the Christ, and very almost the beginning of Advent. It’s a time for renewal of intentions, for sloughing off the despond of recent times and for starting again, right? We should shake our heads and smile knowingly at all the recent political shenanigans. We should rest easy in the thoughts of the numerous vaccines coming our way. We should trust that social and environmental ills will surely be put right in time? Why not just kick back and rest easy in the knowledge that God’s got it all sorted? Our most onerous chore, surely, is one of hanging up that Advent calendar and opening the windows of certain promise?

Well of course it doesn’t feel like that. I have a sense I’m not the only person to look at the reappearance of Christmas flim-flam in the shops with a wonder missing from previous years. Surely *all that* can’t be appropriate this year? How can we simply drop the normal running agenda of our lives as we’ve done every December holiday period previously? How can we unquestioningly go through the celebration of rebirth and the sense of renewal at the turn of the year as we have done before?

The lines from T S Eliot with which I began this reflection are often quoted – at least the first four lines in particular – as encouragers for those who strive ever onwards in life to *keep at it*. And yet I feel inside me a bit of an objection arising at this time. It's along the lines of wondering what's so great about this ceaseless exploration. Haven't we had enough of trying new things and having new experiences? Hasn't this year of all years made us weary of unexpected events and of meeting new frontiers? What is wrong with a bit of stability – of becoming grounded by a modicum of certainty? Please, Lord, give us a bit more of what we already know!

And of course there is good reason to push back against constant unwelcome novelty. Repeated shocks of the new subverts our very human desire to ensure the safety needs so fundamental to our functioning. Put simply, we are not going to be in a position to wholeheartedly welcome adventure unless we are assured of a bedrock of security that we can return to if necessary. And yet ... what do we risk losing if these needs for comfort and stability start to become perhaps too dominant? How might they skew the vision we may have of our place in the world and our journey through life?

The words from the Gospel of Mark that we just heard are quite possibly unsettling to our Year 2020 minds. What I am struck by in the passage is the writer's embrace of the *inevitability* of radical change. Jesus is, of course, being introduced as the one for whom all humankind has been waiting – the one who will baptise with the Holy Spirit, instigating an entirely new order from what has gone before. And it appears that there is widespread thirst for such a change: it is “all the country of Judea, and all the people of Jerusalem”, we are told, who go out for baptism via John the baptiser in the desire to repent of their sins and be forgiven. This deep break with what has gone before seems to be of the essence of salvation for at least this slice of humanity.

So it is, it seems, for Jesus himself. In the verse immediately following today's passage, Mark has Jesus coming from Nazareth to be himself baptised by John just as the other people have been. It is striking that the Messiah has no qualms about being

baptised by this inelegant vocal outsider in society. Indeed, another account of this same story in Matthew's Gospel recognises this possible awkwardness where Matthew has John saying, "Oh but I really couldn't – surely it should be the other way around!", and Jesus assures him this is the way it *should* be.

But it seems to me that there is something important about the Messiah being willing to undergo the same treatment as everyone else. Certainly he is, as each gospel writer reminds us, fulfilling the Old Testament prophecies that Jesus will be introduced by a messenger preparing the 'way of the Lord'. And yet, did that messenger have to be quite so distinctively eccentric a character? What is it about his embodied nature as "one crying in the wilderness" that allows him to qualify for the job description of sponsor to the Christ?

It's apparent that John would not have made it into the society pages of the Jerusalem Gazette, had there been such a publication at the time. Clothed in camel's hair and feasting on locusts and wild honey, he most likely wouldn't have looked or smelt too great. And yet (who would have thought it) thousands of people seemed ready to flock to him as a precursor to, perhaps, turning their lives around. What's going on here?

It's a question addressed in a song that will be played at the end of today's service. In U2's 'Wild Honey', singer Bono makes what I believe is an instructive commentary on the significance of the person of John. In the song's chorus, Bono appears to use the phrase 'Wild honey' to not just refer to John the Baptist but also to symbolise the nature of God. He states in the first verse that he (and for 'he' read, 'all of us') got a taste of God's abundance in the days "before the clocks kept time" and "before the world was made". Further, he sings that "If you go there with me ... you can do just what you please" – a plea that he is ready to be shaped by God if he will have him. Yet, at the point of the song's crisis, Bono sings:

I'm still standing, I'm still standing
Where you left me
Are you still growing wild
With everything tame around you?

In the last verse he pleads for wild honey to, 'Won't you take me, take me please' so he can return to the garden of honeyed abundance.

In the song it is the wildness of God that Bono emphasises again and again. It is as if he is saying that being baptised into God's fullness requires us not to forget the wild *otherness* of God symbolised by the character of the one who baptised him in the River Jordan. In the song's bridge, following the lines I just quoted, Bono does one of those agonising cries that always seem to be about his giving over control to God. "What is Soul?", he wails, "Love me! Give me Soul!" It is as if he is mourning the effects on his and humanity's true nature following our 'standing still' while God grows wild without us.

The word 'tame' is key in this song and can also, I think, provide us with a way of thinking about the challenge of this particular Advent. What is it that happens when we try to domesticate God? Well, we might think of ex-President Trump defiantly holding up a bible outside the church near the White House in response to Black Lives Matter riots. It was a gesture that said he had God on his side and on the side of his version of law and order. It was a blatant assumption that we can co-opt God in our will to take everything for granted in the name of 'business as usual'.

And maybe there are some echoes of this in our feelings of aversion towards the appearance of the pandemic? Maybe there are parts of us that are wanting to try to control the outcome by disavowing any connection with it? This is not to say that the pandemic is the will of God, but it is to acknowledge that there are probable health and environmental consequences in our pushing ever onwards into the territories of other species.

All this is to say that in taming God, we may run the risk of losing sight of a bigger and richer picture. Maybe the defensive parts of us that look to the safe option every time end up limiting our view or even help to bring pain and suffering on us? According to psychotherapist Richard Schwartz, it is entering into the unknown that gives us the possibility of liberating the fearful parts of us stuck in our pasts. Healing is only possible, he says, where we abandon "the flimsy feeling of

certainty.” Maybe we have to embrace the wild unknown in ourselves and God if we are to truly grow beyond our limits?²

In returning to the Eliot poem with which we began, we may find this same intuition being claimed as the way to attain real knowledge. In the lines that are less quoted than the first four, Eliot states paradoxically that arriving back where we began and properly knowing the place comes through the ‘unknown, unremembered gate’. It is a striking phrase and it is quite deliberate. It is not by going the same way we took before but have since forgotten that leads us to discover what he calls ‘the last of earth’. Instead it is through a portal that we discover through *not knowing* – through trusting in the act of exploring itself as providing what we ultimately seek.

But how do we get to this place? Eliot provides the answer elsewhere in the poem. We are not exploring, he says, in order to “verify, instruct ... or carry report.” Instead, we are to “kneel/Where prayer has been valid.” It seems that this openness to what we are being led to is only accessible in the attitude of prayer. But it is not the prayer, he seems to be saying, that is undertaken in an attitude of presupposition – of already knowing what it is we want God to provide. ‘Valid’ prayer is something else. The act of kneeling is suggestive of surrendering ourselves to the unknown of God as when we enter into silent prayer. It is this prayer that has the power to take us where we need to be. Not my will, but thine, be done.

So here we are again at the point of so many beginnings, and being called to begin again, but maybe this is not so much a call that requires us to prejudge what is to come based on what has happened before. Perhaps it is a time, instead, to freely give ourselves to not knowing, resting in safe uncertainty in trust that Love will be our guide. Maybe it is time to begin our journey again, and perhaps, this time, fortified with a draught of wild honey?

² Schwartz, R. (2020) IFS Immersion: Integrating Internal Family Systems Across Clinical Applications. ‘Internal Family Systems (IFS): Development, Application and Transformational Model to Effectively Help Clients Improve Wellbeing.’ Discussion with Frank Anderson.