

Animals of the Bible (7) The Wild Beasts



St Mark is not one to waste words, and his account of the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness is much briefer than that of Matthew and Luke. Unlike them, he says nothing about what the temptations faced by our Lord actually were. Nevertheless, he makes a point of telling us that Jesus was “with the wild beasts” (Mark 1: 13).

I have written already in this series about the lions and bears that still roamed the Holy Land in New Testament times. Hyenas, wolves and leopards were also present. A man alone in the wilderness faced the real danger of attack by such predatory animals. Yet Jesus spent forty days and nights among them.

Many commentators connect Mark’s words with Isaiah 11: 6 – 9, which reads thus:

“Wolves and sheep will live together in peace,
and leopards will lie down with young goats.
Calves and lion cubs will feed together,
and little children will take care of them.
Cows and bears will eat together,
and their calves and cubs will lie down in peace.
Lions will eat straw as cattle do.
Even a baby will not be harmed if it plays near a poisonous snake.
On Zion, God’s sacred hill,

there will be nothing harmful or evil.
The land will be as full of the knowledge of the Lord
as the seas are full of water.” (Good News Bible)

This vision of humanity and nature at peace with one another and with themselves is what seems to be in Mark’s mind when he speaks of Jesus living unharmed out among the wild beasts. Isaiah’s words come from a prophecy about a new king in the line of David who will rule with justice and equity. Mark is indicating that Jesus is that long awaited king.

In Romans 8: 18 – 25, St Paul writes of all creation longing to be set free from its slavery to decay and sharing “the glorious freedom of the children of God.” Jesus came to redeem not only the human race but everything God has made, and Paul is looking forward to the time when God’s plan for humanity and all creation is finally made clear, and all things are brought together in Christ (see also Colossians 1: 20).

We join in looking forward to that day, but in the meantime, let us treat our fellow creatures on this earth with kindness and respect. God has a purpose for us all.

A prayer:

Lord, may I love all Thy creation, the whole and every grain of sand in it. May I love every leaf, every ray of Thy light. May I love the animals; Thou hast given them the rudiments of thought and joy untroubled. Let me not trouble it, let me not harass them, let me not deprive them of their happiness, let me not work against Thine intent.

For I acknowledge unto Thee that all is like an ocean, all is flowing and blending, and that to withhold any measure of love from anything in Thy universe is to withhold that same measure from Thee. AMEN

(Adapted from Fyodor Dostoevsky, 1821 - 1881)

Rev John Barnett

Image: Christ with the wild beasts in the wilderness (artist unknown)