

FIRST SUNDAY OF LENT

Gospel: Mark 1:12-15

And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the desert. He was in the desert forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him. Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."

REFLECTION 1: JESUS IS THE GOOD NEWS

When the Emperor Nero was faced with economic collapse in the Rome of A.D. 64, his strategy was to set the city on fire. He then accused the Christians of perpetrating the inferno and consequently an era of persecution began. The followers of Jesus were thrown to the wild beasts in the arena – the citizens of Rome were entertained by the mutilation and cruel death of their fellow human beings.

The Evangelist Mark, companion of St. Peter, lived in constant fear of being thrown to the lions. So, when he opens his account of the story of Jesus he tells how Jesus is with the wild beasts in the wilderness. Jesus is the innocent one, but his innocence does not protect him from conflict. Jesus is seen to face this testing in the wilderness, the traditional arena of Satan. Before going public, the resolve of the innocent one is put to the test.

Mark says that Jesus was tempted by Satan. The word 'Satan' in Hebrew means an adversary and in the Old Testament it was first used of human opponents – a demonic spirit opposed to God. When Jesus came to be baptised, the Father declares him to be his beloved Son and in the wasteland the Son of God encounters the Adversary of God. Now Jesus, the Son must decide whether to follow the way of the Father or the way of Satan.

When Jesus emerges from the wilderness of temptation, he does not leave temptation forever behind him. Jesus was to think God's way and be the spokesman, not for Satan but for the Father. When he begins his mission, he tells the people that the time has come to let God rule in their lives. If this is to happen they must repent and believe the Good News. What God is doing is Good News. And the Good News is not only the message of Jesus, but Jesus, in his person, is himself the Good News. Satan was considered to be the origin of temptation and of sin. It is therefore fitting that Jesus, 'the more powerful one' who is filled with the spirit, should confront Satan.

Few of us associate the time of Lent with Good News, especially if that means facing the adversary within and around us. At the beginning of Lent the Church takes us into the wilderness with Jesus, to face that power opposed to the Gospel. None of us should have to face the wilderness alone. We are all tempted, we all sin. All of us need to hear, like Jesus, the voice of the Father that recognises us as his beloved children. When we hear that voice, the call to repent is the call to stay in the company of the One who loves us. The Gospel challenges us to change our minds about the way we think and change our ways about habits of sin.

This is a lifetime's task. Jesus did not overcome Satan in the wilderness, he achieved that only on the cross of Calvary. Lent reminds us of our own need to begin again, facing the adversary within.

Pope John Paul II wrote 'Lent is a time of profound truth which brings conversion, restores hope, and by putting everything back in its proper place, brings peace and optimism'. G.K. Chesterton declared that he had only found one religion – Christianity – that dared go down to the very depths of self discovery. Lent is not a long brooding over sin, but rather a journey that could be called our upward

descent. It ends before the cross and the wounded face of Christ where we see ourselves in the white light of a new beginning.

REFLECTION 2:

FORTY DAYS

Mark's account of the temptations of Jesus is told in today's Gospel with astonishing brevity (Mk. 1: 12-15). The evangelist presents three major themes that are rooted in the richest traditions of the Bible. In all that Jesus experienced, the very Spirit of God accompanied him. Having come upon him in the form of a dove at his baptism, the Spirit, we are told, subsequently literally drove Jesus into the wilderness. The wilderness would be the place of Jesus' testing as well as the spot where later he would seek refuge from the crowds in prayer with his heavenly Father. In every instance, the Spirit would be with Jesus to inspire and guide him.

Next is the reference to the 40 days of testing. Throughout the scriptures, the number 40 figured significantly in several important biblical accounts – the 40 days of flooding in Genesis, and Israel's 40 years of wandering in the desert. In all these stories God is depicted as one who protects and preserves life, even in the midst of danger. The mention of 40 days in reference to Jesus' temptation suggests to us that the presence and power of God was always with Jesus. So we too can rely on that same presence and power of God in our struggle with evil and weakness this Lent.

Finally the mention of the wild beasts and the protecting angels further affirms the constant care of God for his Son, sent into the world to save sinners. It was here in the desert away from human society, that Jesus came to accept and appreciate the messianic ministry he was about to embrace – a prelude to the struggle he will accept and endure for the sake of sinners. That struggle began immediately after Jesus emerged from the wilderness experience. Announcing the kingdom and calling for repentance and belief, Jesus went out to confront and overcome evil wherever he found it. Jesus' struggle against evil would end in victory only on the cross – the suffering Saviour of sinners. In that capacity he extends hope to all of us and elicits our trust and hope.

Each of us is involved in a constant struggle against temptation. We see from the Gospel that Jesus too was tempted and so understands our weaknesses in the face of temptation. And because he was victorious over temptation, he can help us. Let us then approach him with confidence asking him for the help we need to overcome temptation. Jesus can identify with us. He is like us in all things and ways, sin excepted. He was fully human but that does not mean that he was merely human. He rejected none of our joys, he only rejected sin and this is the most profound mystery of God's love.