

## First Sunday of Lent

We have just heard the story of Jesus being tempted or tested by Satan in the desert. What I hadn't thought about much before was the intimate link between what happened to Jesus just before this.

Mark tells the story of Jesus being baptised by John. This took place where the river Jordan flows through the desert. We read that story only a few weeks ago. It was after Jesus came up out of the water that the Spirit came down upon him and that he heard his Father say to him, "You are my beloved son, in you I am well pleased." It was as if Jesus needed to hear that before he could face the testing that was ahead for him. Jesus needed to know that he was loved by his Father before he could face that time alone in the desert. The same Spirit who came down upon him as his Baptism now drives him out into the desert to face that testing. Mark makes the link very obvious. Immediately after the Father spoke we read, "And just then the Spirit drove him out into the wilderness.

The desert or the wilderness is a place of contrasts. It is the place where Moses first experienced meeting God in the burning bush. It is the place where many of the prophets came to know God in a new and powerful way. But the wilderness is also a place where people are put to the test. We think of the time that the people of Israel

spent in the desert on their way from Egypt to the Promised Land. The forty years they spent in the desert was a great time of testing for them. But it was also a time when God revealed how close he was to his people. It was a time when the people learnt how loved they were God.

Today's gospel speaks about Jesus being with the wild beasts and the angels looked after him. On Monday last I went to the Monarto Zoo. One of the new attractions at the zoo is the opportunity to stand in a very strong steel cage while the lions walk above you. You know why lions are called wild beasts as they tower over you while they are fed. Our gospel has Jesus at home with the wild beasts without any cage to protect him. It was the angels who looked after him. Are we able to recognize some of the angels who look after us when we are at risk? Are we able to recognize some of the times when God may be using us as angels, acting in God's name for others?

You and I need to know how loved we are by our God before we can be free enough to let God use us in the ways that God may desire. You and I need to know that we are loved by God before we can reach out in love to others. During our journey through the desert of Lent we are invited to hear the Lenten call to repentance in a new way. We hear Jesus say to us, "Repent and believe the Good News." The Australian scripture scholar Fr.

Michael Fallon suggested that to grasp the impact of Jesus first proclamation of the gospel we need to reverse it. “Believe the God News and repent.” The good news is that we are loved by God without condition. When we know something of that love, when we believe that good news, then we can invite God in to change our lives, then we can repent.

We are called to repent because the kingdom of God is close at hand. We hear a lot about the Kingdom of God throughout the Gospels. It is a hard concept for us to get our minds around. Jesus begins many parables by saying, “The kingdom of God is like..” Those parables are often invitations to us to enter into a new relationship with Jesus so that with Jesus we can help to make present the kind of world that God desires. Every time we pray the Our Father we say to God, “Your kingdom come; your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” We need to say this every day. Bit by bit as we open our hearts to the Lord we make room for God’s kingdom. The fullness of God’s kingdom will only come at the end of time.

Pope Francis in his Lenten message for this year writes, “The Church offers us in the Lenten season the soothing remedy of prayer, almsgiving and fasting. By devoting more time to prayer, we enable our hearts to root out our secret lies and forms of self-deception,[5] and then to

find the consolation God offers. He is our Father and he wants us to live life well.

Almsgiving sets us free from greed and helps us to regard our neighbour as a brother or sister. What I possess is never mine alone. How I would like almsgiving to become a genuine style of life for each of us! When we give alms, we share in God’s providential care for each of his children. If through me God helps someone today, will he not tomorrow provide for my own needs? For no one is more generous than God.[6]

Fasting weakens our tendency to violence; it disarms us and becomes an important opportunity for growth. On the one hand, it allows us to experience what the destitute and the starving have to endure. On the other hand, it expresses our own spiritual hunger and thirst for life in God. Fasting wakes us up. It makes us more attentive to God and our neighbour. It revives our desire to obey God, who alone is capable of satisfying our hunger.”

Towards the end of his message Pope Francis writes, “Above all, I urge the members of the Church to take up the Lenten journey with enthusiasm, sustained by almsgiving, fasting and prayer. If, at times, the flame of charity seems to die in our own hearts, know that this is never the case in the heart of God! He constantly gives us a chance to begin loving anew.”