

1st Sunday of Lent

Saint Mark is very often brief and to the point, as he is today in presenting Jesus's time of testing in the desert. In the two brief paragraphs we have just heard he presents us with an important fact and an urgent message. The fact is that Satan – the devil – has real power. The message is that we must repent now.

Christ entered the wilderness for a period of retreat and reflection. As God, he already possessed the fullness of knowledge and power. As man, he spent this time in the desert in order to focus his divine mission and to prepare for its expression through his words and actions. His desert experience was a time of trial and testing. Our Lord had to confront the reality of the devil a mysterious but real force contradicting and undermining God's purpose for human beings. In his human nature, Our Lord had to develop the virtue of strength of will in order to be able to resist Satan not only by the divine power, but also through an act of will made as man.

Most of us live very full lives and, as a result, we can often sidestep necessary conflict by displacements activities that stop us having to think about things. We put off confrontations by staying late at the office, or going out, or burying ourselves in work. Much the same is true in our spiritual lives. When did I last set aside a period of quality time for serious prayer, or go on a day of recollection or a retreat? One reason why we avoid these spiritual activities is that they are difficult. A quiet time can be hard to bear – we fill our lives with sound and action. The devil seeks to distract us from our purpose and seeing what really matters in life. In the desert things are strikingly simple. We are there. God is there. And the devil is there. So we face a stark choice and an uncomfortable challenge.

When he returned from the wilderness, Christ's message was straight down the line: "The time has come and the kingdom of God is close at hand. Repent, and believe the Good News." Repentance means to turn our whole lives round to face in a new direction. It means a deep change of mind and heart. It is a re-orientation that enables us to believe, to accept and to live by the Good News. Some people have a life-changing experience but for most of us it is a case of renewing our repentance and re-orientating ourselves at regular intervals. The Season of Lent is a great opportunity to do this. Four days ago, on Ash Wednesday, we were reminded that, at the end of our life, if we rely only on our own resources and ideas, all that will remain is a pile of dust.

We do not need to be frightened by this task. Our Lord came to preach the Good News. The other scripture readings today set a positive note. In the first reading we heard how God saved Noah from the waters of the flood and established a Covenant with him and with successive generations. The rainbow, a sign of hope in a black sky, was to Noah the sign of God's unfailing presence in the world, now washed clean of past confusion and error. In the second reading, Saint Peter meditated on the waters of Baptism. Those of us who have been baptised have already been made sharers in the death and resurrection of Christ, our life. Those preparing for Baptism will soon receive this promise of eternal life. This should be a source of great joy to us!

We know that Christ is beside and within us and goes before us and watches our backs! So we do not go into the desert unprepared or without back-up. But if we are truly to "repent and believe the Good News" we must use this time of grace to face up to the challenge of living as Christ teaches us. Prayer, self-denial and almsgiving are weapons in this struggle. Like Our Lord we must allow the Holy Spirit to drive us into the desert to face Satan and defeat him.