

the Sunday Readings



*The Spirit immediately drove Jesus out into the wilderness.
He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan.
(Mk.1:12-13a)*

1st Sunday of Lent

1st Sunday of Lent ¹

'rend your heart; not your clothing' ²

introduction

Lent is about becoming, doing and changing whatever is blocking the fullness of life in us now. Lent is a time in which we are called to live in new ways. The first Sunday of Lent is about preparing to celebrate the heart of our faith; Jesus' death and resurrection. It is a time for both penance and hope. Mark describes Jesus' first announcement of the reigning of God. The evangelist has earlier been speaking of the forty days Jesus spent in the wilderness. The Spirit is present at the beginning of Jesus' ministry, driving Jesus into the wilderness, where he prepares for his mission.³

first reading: Genesis 9 : 8 – 15 ⁴ [the rainbow – a sign of God's patience a promise of divine mercy]

Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him,(8) "As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you,(9) and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the domestic animals, and every animal of the Earth with you, as many as came out of the ark. (10) I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the Earth."(11)

Hope dominates the stories of *Genesis*. The promise from God is open to a new future, which depends on God's fidelity. The substance of the promise is: either an heir; or new land; or blessings. The Flood story,⁵ begins with God grieving that the human imagination is evil. The story ends the same way. Human imagination is still evil. But – there's something new – that newness is the promise of God.⁶

The Genesis writer attributes the disorder and chaos accompanying the Flood to human wickedness. But Noah is provided with the means of surviving the

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- 1 Cover image for 1st Sunday of Lent: **The Temptation of Christ** (Detail) by Vasily Surikov. (1872)
 - 2 In the 1st reading from *Ash Wednesday*, the prophet Joel, convinced that the people have brought disaster upon themselves by virtue of their unfaithfulness, summons the House of Israel to repent. But interestingly, he doesn't call them to attend penance services in the synagogue. He doesn't require them to make animal sacrifices in the temple. He doesn't talk about public displays of remorse; the time-honoured tearing of garments to demonstrate grief. Joel says instead, *'Rend your hearts and not your clothing'*. Cf. *Jl. 2:13*
 - 3 Jesus' testing in the wilderness, experiences the power of the LORD of Life. As Pope Francis comments, *"In the heart of this world, the LORD of Life, who loves us so much, is always present. The LORD does not abandon us, the LORD does not leave us alone, for he has united himself definitively to our Earth, and his love constantly impels us to find new ways forward"*. – Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'* §245 (2015).
 - 4 The biblical excerpts are drawn from the New Oxford Annotated Bible, New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), published by Oxford University Press (1994).
 - 5 *Gn. chs: 6 - 8*
 - 6 *Gn.7:21 "Never again will I curse the Earth because of human beings; because their heart contrives evil from their infancy. Never again will I strike down every living thing - as I have done" (Gn.7:21 NJB).*

chaos. The Flood is ended by God's promise (v.22). The promise is given freely. It is world-changing. As the waters recede, so does the anger of God! New possibilities present themselves. The memory of this powerful promise will become important for the Israelites. It will move them towards new future possibilities, especially at the time of exile.⁷ The Israelite concept of 'covenant' (v.11) is grounded in a distinctive world-view. After the destruction caused by the Flood, God affirms the covenant 'for life', including animal life, signalling that this covenant is made with every living creature (v.9).

An excessively anthropocentric view does not appear to value other forms of life in God's plan. Our viewing the human race as master of Creation, has made us forget the significance of Creation and the respect we should have for it. We tend to a world view that what is not human seems to be outside of the history of salvation. From this contempt for animal life, we move to a religious underestimating of respect for our own physical and material life. Thus, the human body also turns out to be outside of God's purpose. Reducing ourselves to a bodiless spiritualism, we can too easily lose interest in so many other people's daily needs for food, health and housing. Such needs cease to challenge us, because these imperatives come precisely from aspects shared with animal life which we consider of so little value. In destroying creation – for supposedly religious reasons, we are destroying ourselves; and we fail to understand the meaning of our incorporation in *the risen Body of Christ through baptism*.⁸

On the other hand, the Israelite world-view holds that life is complete and joyous – only when there is perfect obedience to the whole of God's purpose for justice and peace. On God's side, the writer affirms that God's loyalty to covenant is more reliable and indestructible than, "*the mountains and the hills*". It follows, that God's covenant is more durable than Creation and takes priority over all created things. The promise of this enduring covenant is symbolised by the rainbow (v.14).

God said, "This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations:(12) I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the Earth.(13) When I bring clouds over the Earth and the bow is seen in the clouds,(14) I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh; and the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh.(15)

God's covenant of promise and peace, can't be ignored. The Flood symbolizes a rupture in the relationship between God and God's chosen ones.⁹ But the rainbow promise announces there is no fundamental break in God's compassion

7 Cf. *Is.54:1-11*

8 Cf. *1 Pt.3:21*

9 *Is.54:12-15*

and fidelity; nor will there be any such break in the future. God's powerful promise is still in effect in the present. Future generations will keep open the options for renewal in their reading of their contemporary reality. Memories of God's promise, counter our tendency to absolutise and reduce reality to the current modes of domination. The new shapings of reality; shapings that are not excessively impressed by, or committed to, the present orderings of power, goods and access to them.

response: Psalm 25 : 4 – 9

[a prayer for guidance and deliverance]

*Make me to know Your ways,
O LORD; teach me Your paths.(4)
Lead me in Your truth, and teach me,
for You are the God of my salvation;
for You I wait all day long.(5)
Be mindful of Your mercy, O LORD,
and of Your steadfast love,
for they have been from of old.(6)
Do not remember the sins of my youth or my transgressions;
according to Your steadfast love remember me,
for Your goodness' sake, O LORD!(7)
Good and upright is the LORD;
therefore he instructs sinners in the way.(8)
He leads the humble in what is right,
and teaches the humble his way.(9)*

A lament which calls upon God to re-orient life. God's covenant and God's love of truth – symbolised by the rainbow in the Genesis reading, is paralleled here by the psalmist's confident statement about God's saving promise against the threatening powers of chaos. God's remembering was considered in the Israelite Scriptures as no mere recollecting of past events. God's remembering brings something out of the past and makes it effective in the present. Here, the appeal of the speaker is for a movement on God's part, towards a new ordering in human affairs (v.10). The speaker's theme about the power and effectiveness of God's transforming love and truth, matches the story of the Flood and the new covenant promises to Noah's family. The speaker reaffirms trust in the powerful promise of God.

second reading: 1 Peter 3 : 18 – 22

[about suffering for doing right]

For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God. He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit,(18) in which also he went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison(19) who in former times did not obey, when God waited patiently in the days of Noah, during the building of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were saved through water.(20)

And baptism, which this prefigured, now saves you – not as a removal of dirt from the body, but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ,(21) who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities and powers made subject to him.(22)

A letter of encouragement to the Christian resident aliens in Asia Minor. Their conditions as strangers and outsiders, threatens the stability of a community. The writer assures them that this is the normal condition of any truly Christian community. The author's reasons for urging the Christians of Asia Minor to stay where they find themselves, are religious and moral. Its normal that the Christian community be apart and in tension with its social neighbours. Jesus Himself, suffered a kind of displacement and alienation also! His innocent suffering, his death and exaltation or resurrection, justifies the people staying put.

An early Christian hymn could lie behind this passage. The passage expresses the Christian interpretation of the death and exaltation of Jesus as a triumph over the powers of death and chaos. It means *'the spirits in prison'* are not, *'the dead'*, but the cosmic powers of evil. Christ announces the final defeat of these powers of chaos and death. The writer has taken a traditional hymn and adapted it to his baptismal purpose. He understands *'the spirits'* (v.19) to refer to the disobedient spirits at the time of Noah. That could mean *the wicked angels*¹⁰ or the wicked of Noah's own generation who were destroyed by the flood. As a result, the author's message becomes a message about salvation. *'The dead'* are given a chance to repent.¹¹

Baptism isn't about removal of dirt from the body. Literally it is, *"the answer of a good conscience towards God"* (v.21). That is, an answer given to God which proceeds from a good conscience. The earliest practice of adult baptism included a scrutiny of the candidate, eliciting the fact that he/she came to baptism with good conscience; i.e. with repentance of sins and faith in Jesus as Saviour. The author's instruction on baptism emphasises God's part and the required response of the candidate.

gospel reading: Mark 1: 12 – 15

[the 'testing' of Jesus and the beginning of his Galilean ministry]

And the Spirit immediately drove Jesus out into the wilderness.(12) He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.(13) Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God,(14) and saying,

10 Cf. Gn.6

11 The author refers to Noah and uses the Flood as a type of Christian baptism (v.20). *"Saved through water"* can then mean either that Noah and his family survived the waters of the Flood and so escaped - the water being a hostile element that could have drowned them - or it can mean that water was the means by which the ark was brought to safety. For the author, this double link exists. Firstly, between the Flood and the waters of baptism. Secondly, between the eight people in the ark and the present Christian community.

"The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."(15)

Jesus seemed ordinary enough, yet Mark emphasises that this baptism is a moment of far-reaching significance. The spirit of God descended upon Jesus. He is called *"My Son"*, *"The Beloved"*, *"the Favoured One"*. Jesus' baptism had occurred at a symbolic place; a place linked with the entry of the Israelites into the fulfillment of God's promise of prosperity, peace and freedom. The Israelite Scriptures had prophesied that *the Spirit of God* would descend upon the Messiah. That's what Mark said came down on Jesus, in the form of a dove (vv.12-13).

Jesus went into the wilderness guided by the Spirit of God. The wilderness plays a symbolic role in the Scriptures. The Exodus stories tell of *'the testing'* of *the People of God* in the wilderness. In Jesus' time, some expected that Israel would repeat that experience in the days of the coming of *the new age* (or *the Reigning of God*). John the Baptist, chose the wilderness as the place for his preaching. *The Essenes*,¹² chose the desert near the Dead Sea as a place in which they, *'the faithful people of Israel'*, would prepare the way for the coming of God's realm.

For Jesus, it may have been like a time of retreat, when he reflected on his mission by prayer and fasting. He faced the temptation to be the messiah of the people's expectation; a kind of religious reformer who would clean up things and restore holiness; or a King David look-alike. Jesus begins to understand that liberation had to come through suffering and death (v.13). His acceptance of *the messianic task* (*ushering in the new reigning of God by receiving John's baptism*) means being identified with struggling, sinful, cursed humanity (v.9). He receives a further anointing of God's spirit (v.11). It confirms him in this task of bringing newness and life to all the world.

The picture of Jesus being driven into the wilderness by the spirit of God for forty days of testing, summarises briefly the Exodus experience of the People of God. The detail; *"He was with animals"* (v.13b), suggests a holy person who can live unharmed, transcending the boundaries of creation as we experience them. It is a picture of the wilderness transformed into a place of paradise, where Jesus lives after overcoming *the testing of Satan* (*the power of death*). The same theme is evident in the detail of angels coming to minister to him (v.13c). Jesus' message of repentance is the same as the Baptist's message. These announcings point to

12 *The Essenes*: members of a religious sect or brotherhood that flourished in Palestine from about the 2nd century b.c.e. to the end of the 1st century c.e.. The Essenes clustered in monastic communities. Property was held in common.. They were never numerous (about 4,000 at the time of Pliny). Like the Pharisees, the Essenes observed the Law of Moses, the sabbath, and ritual purity. They also professed belief in immortality and divine punishment for sin. Unlike the Pharisees, they denied the resurrection of the body and refused to immerse themselves in public life. With few exceptions, they shunned Temple worship and were content to live ascetic lives of manual labour in seclusion.

the preaching message of the early Church. God's testing, a special activity of God's spirit, is directed at figures like Abraham, Moses and Jesus himself. Israel is not faithful, but Jesus is! The wilderness is transformed into the expected paradise! It is a symbolic picture linked to the announcement that God's reigning is very near.

*The gospel, or 'good news' (Greek = *evangelion*), in ancient times had the sense of a joyful announcement of a message of joy or victory. Good news was announced when a prince was born; a battle won; the emperor visited a city. In reality, when messengers arrived with such 'good news', the rejoicing had been a false joy; it was the announcement of some new form of oppression. For example, when Herod came to power, the cities of Galilee received something like one of these good news messages. In Jesus' time, the word was a political term linked with the cult of the emperor. The emperor was considered 'a saviour'. By using this word, Mark indicates that the announcement of Jesus was the announcing of a 'new reigning of God'.*

for sharing:¹³

- *The covenant God made with Noah's family, is scandalous – that God would be moved to change. **Coment on Genesis chapters 8 - 9***
- *Peter encourages the Christian minorities in asia Minor to do good even in the face of hostility. **Comment on 1 Peter 3: 18 – 22***
- *Jesus embraces the wilderness and enters exile. He faces the collapse of the old order, but he points beyond this collapse. **Comment on Mark 1: 12 – 15***

prayer:¹⁴

*God of the covenant,
as the forty days of deluge
swept away the world's corruption
and watered new beginnings*

13 Lectio Divina: reading GOD'S WORD in a moment of prayer and allowing it to enlighten and renew us: The practise of *lectio divina* requires a quiet space, a passage of scripture and the willingness to give time to the project. The passage used should be short. For the purpose of this leaflet, we suggest using the gospel reading of the up-coming Sunday. There are four steps in the traditional practise of *lectio divina*. The steps don't have to have the following order: *lectio (reading)* – read the passage of Scripture read slowly - more than once. If a particular word, phrase, or sentence seems significant (even if you don't know why) you may want to write it down. *meditatio (reflection)* – let the significant words fill your mind without straining to analyse them. We are in GOD'S presence and so let the Holy Spirit lead your understanding of the words. *oratio (prayer)* – allow your heart to speak to GOD, in words inspired by the passage of Scripture, or by the thoughts that have come to you, while reflecting on it. *contemplatio (rest)* – let go of ideas and words and allow yourself to rest in the presence of GOD, in simple and wordless contemplation. This leaflet gives the context and some commentary on each of the readings and the psalm used in the Sunday's liturgy. Familiarity with the texts and the commentary beforehand, can better prepare our hearing and understanding the passages in our worship. Whatever our preparation for doing this exercise and whatever questions we may use to break open the passage, we must be conscious of Christ's promise: 'Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them'

14 The prayer that concludes the Lectio Divina is ICEL's 1998 opening prayer from the Proper of the Day. These prayers draw upon the concrete and vivid images of Scripture and conclude with a clearly focused petition inspired by the readings.

*of righteousness and life,
so in the saving flood of baptism
Your people are washed clean and born again.
Throughout these forty days, we beg You,
unseal for us the wellspring of Your grace,
cleansing our hearts of all that is not holy,
and cause Your gift of new life to flourish once again.
Grant this through Christ, our liberator from sin. Amen.*

review:¹⁵

The gospel speaks of Jesus' testing in the desert. To understand sin, we must understand *the normality of testing*. To be tested isn't necessarily to be a sinner. Jesus was tested. Testing in Israelite and Christian tradition, consists in the fact, that other things are genuinely attractive and as a result God's call seems less attractive, and may go unheeded.

About our regular sins - few of them are things about which we instinctively feel guilty. We are used to the reasonableness and desirability of what we do. So much so, that there's no space in our thoughts to allow for another view of things. We need the time to reflect on the Word of God in these readings. They reveal our sinful attitudes. And we need *the infused spirit of penitence*, to even feel sorry for our sins. Our first sin is to be reluctant to follow the Spirit, who would drive us out into the desert, as Jesus was driven.

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¹⁵ the review – at the end of each reflection the review examines one of the themes of the readings, usually drawn from the gospel, that provides an opportunity to check our own performance, in the light of the WORD and Eucharist that we have previously heard and experienced.