

1st Sunday of Lent (B)
(Genesis 9:8-15 / Mark 1:12-15)
22.02.2015

Dear brothers and sisters,

A rainbow is a well-known sign, especially here in Ireland where rain falls ten times a day and just as often the sun shines. Yes, here we have many opportunities to see that powerful and meaningful sign of the rainbow which seems to unite heaven and earth. Ever since the time of Noah, the rainbow is the sign of the covenant of love between God and everything that lives on the earth, between God and his people, between God and each one of us. We heard in the first reading from the Book of Genesis: “I set my bow in the clouds and it will be a sign of the Covenant between me and the earth... When the bow appears in the clouds, I will recall the covenant between myself and you”. So when a rainbow appears in front of us, it is not only an invitation to remember God’s covenant with us, but it is also the sign that God remembers his covenant with us. It is not only a reminder of a past event, but this past event is made present and active in our midst today.

At the beginning of this Lenten season, as we are driven with Jesus by the Spirit into the wilderness, the rainbow reminds us that **the wilderness is a time of intimacy** with the Lord, a time where we are invited to celebrate the covenant of love between God and humanity. Our Lenten pilgrimage is above all a time of renewal, a time of grace, and a time of joy. There is nothing boring, nothing dull, nothing sad about the season of lent! To the contrary lent is a celebration of love! The Lenten season provides us with an opportunity to give more time to prayer, to come back to the Lord in order to receive his love for us, to take the time to savour God’s love. The Lenten season provides us with the opportunity of giving more time to our neighbour, to love and serve them as the Lord loves and serves us.

If the Church invites us to engage ourselves on a Lenten pilgrimage each year, it is because we are far from being always faithful to God’s covenant of love with us. We know that the power of love between husband and wife expressed on the day of their mutual engagement in marriage or during their honey-moon period is challenged with time. It goes through ups and downs as time passes, it fades and it is revived. The same is true in our relation of love with the Lord. We give our whole heart to God and yet we take it back so easily. We come back to the Lord and we forget Him again... This is the movement of spiritual life.

So **the Lenten season** which is, as we have already said, first and above all a time of intimacy with the Lord **is also a time of struggle in which we fight against the spirit of evil**, it is a time of combat against temptation, against our tendency to forget the Lord and focus on ourselves alone, becoming so easily self-indulgent. Our stay in the wilderness during the Lenten season is an invitation to come back to the Lord by being faithful to prayer and *lectio divina*, an invitation to reduce all the time we waste far from God, distanced from our neighbour and ourselves. It is an invitation to renounce the deceptive dreams by which we flee reality. It is an invitation to place God at the centre of our thoughts and desires.

Our Lenten pilgrimage is a time to renounce the tendency to dominate and control others, and instead to help others to grow and become who they really are, who they are in God’s eyes.

Our Lenten pilgrimage is a time to renounce acquiring more and being possessed by what we have in order to be..., in order to be set free, to become who we are, a beloved child of God. Herein is found true riches, riches which is not deceptive.

Our Lenten pilgrimage is a time to renounce gratifying ourselves by using and abusing others instead of loving and serving them.

If we make an effort, trying to love God and our neighbour more, trying to master our weaknesses – and all that is good – we have to do it for the right reason, for the glory of God and not for our own satisfaction. For example, if we decide to give up sweets during lent and if, at the end of the Lenten season, we are very proud of having succeeded, we have missed the point. Sacrifices, as we call them, are good, if they help us to love God and our neighbour, but not if they nourish our self-satisfaction and our pride.

Let us enter into this blessed season of lent with hope. Let us freely choose to come back to the Lord who loves us, confident that He will not refuse his help – his grace – to those who ask for it in a definite and decided, yet humble and gentle way.