

1st Sunday of Lent (B)  
(Genesis 9:8-15 / Mark 1:12-15)  
21.02.2021

The evangelist Mark has a gift of being succinct. In a few short lines he condenses what the other evangelists describe for us using many words. Let's look at the short text read this morning, in a bid to tease out its significance for our lives.

The very first word, or rather the first person, to halt our attention in today's Gospel passage is *the Spirit*. The Spirit referred to here is *the Spirit of God*. Mark tells us that *the Spirit drove Jesus out into the wilderness*. Just as the Spirit urged Jesus to go out into the desert, so the same Spirit encourages us to take the desert path these Lenten days.

The text of Mark's Gospel tells us that *Jesus remained in the wilderness for a period of forty days*. There are many *forty days/forty years* periods mentioned in the Sacred Scriptures. Mark's readers would have remembered them. These periods were all important preparation moments in the unfolding of salvation history. Over and over again, a new beginning was prepared by a waiting time of chastening and preparation. So much so, that we might think of these '*forty periods*' as times of probation for God's servants. Noah's *forty days* on the waters were recalled for us in our first reading from the Book of Genesis. Those *forty days* prepared for the first covenant made with humanity after the Fall. While I could go through all '*the forties*' mentioned in the Bible, I will simply remind you of just some of those mentioned in Scripture. In the Acts of the Apostles we are told that Moses sojourned in Midian for *forty years* before the inauguration of his mission to the Israelites who were held captive in Egypt. In the Book of Exodus, Moses is said to have led the Hebrew for *forty years* in the desert. In Deuteronomy we are told how during the course of the Hebrew people's wilderness wandering, *Moses instructed in the Law them for forty days* at the foot of at Sinai, thus equipping them for their mission as God's servant People in the years ahead. In the Book of Numbers we are told that it took the Israelites *forty days* to spy out the Promised Land into which Joshua was to lead them to claim their inheritance. In the Book of Judges, Israel is said to have served the Philistines for *forty years* before the Judge Samson was raised up as their liberator. In the First Book of Samuel, Goliath is said to have taunted the Israelites for *forty days* before David was led on to the battle field where he slayed this menacing giant. In the First Book of Kings, Elijah is said to have journeyed for *forty days and forty nights*, walking to Mount Horeb. His experience there was to be a turning point in his ministry. In the Book of the prophet Jonah the people of Nineveh were given *forty days* to repent when God confided the mission He entrusted to this reluctant prophet who gave his name to that prophetic book. These are just some of the episodes that Mark's little remark about *forty days* would have evoked for his listeners.

Mark tells is that *in the wilderness Jesus was tempted by Satan*. This mention of *temptation* would have evoked for Mark's readers that of our first parents, Adam and Eve. The outcome of what Jesus lived in His temptation will forever stand in contrast with Adam and Eve's Fall. Whereas Adam and Eve succumbed, Jesus stood firm and did not give way to the allure of the temptations presented to Him by Satan.

Mark tells us that *Jesus was alone in the wilderness except for the wild beasts and the angels*. It would seem that there was no other human presence beside Jesus. The *wild beasts* which surrounded Him represented life-threatening forces. The *angels* who ministered to Him represented God's protective presence.

Jesus' aloneness and the contrast between these two opposing energies, whose presence Jesus felt in the wilderness, are evocative of what we are sometimes led to experience deep within ourselves at times. Are there not periods in our lives when we find ourselves alone? Alone, caught between two opposing energies at work within us: a force prompting us to choose what is evil, another to choose what is good? Our feeling alone at such times can be acutely uncomfortable, but it need not frighten us out of our wits. It can and should lead us to connect with God who lives deep within our hearts. The words of a famous hymn attributed to St Columba come to mind. I know I have had recourse to its lyrics in moments of solitude I have encountered – moments that felt like nothing less than painful isolation and which were accompanied by excruciating emotional pain. I suspect we will all have known such passage in our lives: times which were, at one and same time, disturbing, frightening even... and yet, which transpired to be mysteriously graced, filled with God's consolation. Columba's hymn has us sing: *Alone with none but Thee my God I journey on life's way. What need I fear when Thou art near of King of night and day? More safe I stand within Thy hand, than if a host round me stand.* Behind those words we hear resonances of so many verses from the Psalms that carry within them the assurance that even when we feel most alone, and perhaps overcome with fear, the Lord Himself is with us. What great comfort the Lord's abiding presence gives us as we traverse the tougher passages of our lives!

The desert was to be for Jesus a testing ground. We are told that *Jesus was tried and tested by Satan*. Jesus' wilderness sojourn was a time in which He experienced what it meant to *walk through the valley of darkness*; what it meant to come up against doubt and feel desolation and yet, it was also in the desert that Jesus came to know Himself to be held safe and to stand secure in God's love. During the time Jesus spent in the desert, He came to appreciate His deepest identity. It was there that the great truth of His being, which had been revealed to Him at His Baptism, sunk in and took root in the depths of His heart. Jesus would have certainly recalled those words He had heard spoke over Him when *the Spirit descended upon Him in the form of a dove and the Father's voice was heard to say: This is... You are my beloved Son*. In a similar manner, desert passages, desolate moments, in our lives can become graced times in which we are led to realise *just how much God loves us*; and just who and what we are in His sight: His beloved children.

We cannot avoid taking desert paths and undergoing wilderness experiences along life's way. Solitude/aloneness is part of the human experience and it is, therefore, part of the Christian experience. Desert paths, wilderness spaces, take on various forms in our lives. They come about for all of us in a great variety of ways. For each one it will be different. For some the desert/the wilderness will take on the form of a loss, for others a depression, for others still the painful breakdown of a relationship. For some it will be a moment of spiritual desolation, a period of spiritual dryness, a dark night of the soul. It can stem from a disappointment with ourself or a deception that another has awoken within us. It can even be wrapped up in our feeling of having been let down by God Himself. We think of Jesus' cry upon the cross: *My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?* Whatever our loneliness' cause, whatever form it takes, it will be experienced, at least initially, as a moment of deep suffering and real sadness. And yet, mysteriously, as I have already suggested, with the grace of hindsight (but sometimes even when we are within it), it can come to be appreciated as a moment of graced encounter with the Living God: a time in which we were blessed to grow in our relationship of communion with the Lord of Life.

With time, and hindsight, we can come to see that often we have been *lured into the desert*, so that there the Lord could speak into our hearts in a new way. In the desert the Lord will have

expressed the intimacy of His love for us and also allowed us to express the intimacy of our love for Him. The desert can come to be appreciated as the place in which our covenant bond with the Lord was renewed and sealed afresh. In the most desolate moments of our lives we can be led to rediscover the Lord as our *Lover-God*: One who cares for us and tends to us in our dire need; One who espouses us to Himself anew, even after our multiple infidelities, whispering into the ear of our hearts that we are His beloved child. To such a desert invitations the words of the prophet Hosea invite us to pay heed.

Mark tell us: *After John had been arrested Jesus went into Galilee and there He proclaimed the Good News from God. Jesus spoke of the time having come, the proximity of the kingdom and all the good that came with that.*

I believe that we can and should emerge from the temptations set before us as Jesus did: confirmed in God's love for us; strengthened for the particular mission that has been confided to us as missionary disciples. I am convinced that our wilderness experiences are offered to us to *refine us* in the biblical sense of the word refinement. I believe they are given to us to purify our hearts; to make us more and more the precious persons we already are and are called to become all the more.

Just as in Luke's Gospel Peter is said to have been prepared for his mission by being sifted like wheat, so often it will be by a similar experience that we will be prepared for our mission in life. We will be sifted as Peter was – as Jesus told him he would be, while adding: *Simon, Simon, Satan has asked for you, to sift you like wheat, but, do not be afraid, for I have pleaded for you that your faith should not completely fail. So when you have repented and turned to me again, strengthen and build up the faith of your brothers and sisters.*

Our passages through the desert can scorch us. It is often by our having been burnt by the heat of the desert sun, purified in the crucible of suffering, that we are made fit for the mission confided to us. Just as the desert path and the wilderness experience proved to be part of God's plan to prepare Jesus for His mission, so the desert passages and wilderness moments we experience in our lives will frequently be an important part of God's work upon our hearts to prepare us for what is asked of us in God's service.

Significantly, *Jesus was led into the desert straight after His baptism in the River Jordan.* I read therein a reminder that our baptism (our Christian identity, we could say), offers us no respite from the struggles of life. Baptismal grace and an affirmed Christian identity, do not serve as a guaranteed insurance policy against suffering, trials and temptations. To the contrary! We are called as disciples of Jesus to engage in the spiritual combat, part of which will be desert training. The important thing for us when we find ourselves therein is to allow ourselves to be encouraged and comforted by the Lord's word of life: His eternal promise to be with us always.

The Lord has been, the Lord is, the Lord will be, with us... always... through thick and thin. Like Jesus may we come through our desert sojourns ready to share the Good News of the coming of the kingdom with others! Like Jesus, with Jesus, may we become fearless, loving heralds of the Gospel!