1st Sunday of Lent 2021

Last weekend, I noticed that, once again, television was showing the movie, “An Officer and a Gentleman”. For those not familiar with the film, it concerns a totally self-centred young man, played by Richard Gere, who wants to be a naval flight officer. His tough drill sergeant sees through him, and in an attempt to break him, challenges him with every test in the book. In the process of meeting these tests the young man discovers his soul and undergoes a change of heart. He becomes the man he desired to be, and graduates not only as an officer but also as a gentleman. Lent is intended to be a testing time when Jesus personally challenges us to find our souls and change our hearts – he calls to us, “Repent, and believe in the Gospel”. Lent enables us to become that which we desire to be – Christians, not only in name, but in fact.

Today, this first Sunday in Lent, we hear in the Gospel that, *“The Spirit drove, (that is impelled) Jesus out into the wilderness.”* The wilderness of the Judean desert symbolizes this world – a world which is a “spiritual desert”, a world yearning for love, but in which so many live in fear and desperation. Others yearn for meaning, but live in disillusionment, without purpose, oblivious of God's love *(cf EG 86).*  It was into this wilderness that Jesus came; day after day he “bursts” into this broken world of ours as Good News!

Do not misunderstand the words, *“The Spirit drove Jesus out into the wilderness...”.*  Jesus wasn't reluctant to go into the wilderness. He was driven by his sense of mission, and there, in the wilderness, the mission begins - *“the time had come”* to confront Satan. There, in the wilderness Jesus engages in a mighty struggle with Satan; Jesus is tested. We don't know what form the testing took, but we do know, from the pages of the Gospel, that Satan's basic temptation is not to trust God's Word. It is the trap we all fall into; we seek to control our own lives and don’t trust God enough. That is why the Church says to us throughout Lent, “Repent (that is, turn away from sin), and believe in the Gospel”. Fidelity to the Gospel is our programme for Lent - and indeed our programme for life!

Jesus' trust in his Father does not waver, not for a moment! Rather, his love for his Father is renewed and his determination to do the Father's will is strengthened. Having triumphed over Satan's testing, Jesus demonstrated that nothing could come between him and his love for his Father. Today, as we reflect on Jesus testing in the desert, he is teaching us that we are to trust in God's Word as he did; fidelity to the Lord, who loves us, entails turning away from selfish, sinful desires. Throughout Lent remember the words; “Turn away from sin and be faithful to the Gospel”. Let love triumph!

Perhaps you are wondering about that curious sentence in the Gospel, *“He was with the wild beasts, and the angels looked after him”*? It speaks of the Father's care for his Son, Jesus, emphasised by the fact that he was safe among the wild animals. It deliberately reminds us of the Garden of Eden, before Adam and Eve's sin, where there was harmony and peaceful co-existence throughout creation. This harmony and peace were shattered by the sin of Adam and Eve, dramatically evidenced by Cain's murder of his brother, Abel. Jesus, however, in the midst of raw nature, shows, by his resolute fidelity to his Father, that he overcomes the sin of Adam and Eve, and brings about a new beginning, a restored harmony. Our Christian mission is to share in bringing about that harmony, and to establish right relationships, and we do so by living the Lord's commandment, *“Love one another as I have loved you” (Jn.15:12. )* The inter-connectedness forged by love is what Jesus calls *“the Kingdom of God”* - only love can transform the wilderness of this world into that Kingdom.

Our forty days of Lent, as did Jesus' forty days in the wilderness, are to intensify our fidelity to God's Word. Lent is not so much about what we “give up” as to what we “give to” God and to others. The principle spiritual practices of Lent, prayer, self-denial, and works of charity, are meant to deepen, and sanctify these relationships. Prayer deepens our love for God and helps us to hear the Gospel more clearly; self-denial frees us from enslavement to our appetites, makes us conscious of our wastefulness, and awakens us to the suffering of others; charitable works, or almsgiving, witness to our discipleship and express our love for God through love for our neighbour. This will help make a practical difference in the lives of the less fortunate. This Lent let us not think about giving up something. Simply give, not something, but give of ourselves, our time, our concern, our good fortune – just as Jesus did for us! It is then we will be as we desire - Christian not only name but in fact!

*“Listen to our prayer, Lord;*

*pardon our sins according to your love;*

*deliver us for the honour of your name.*

*Let the whole world know*

*that you are the Lord, our God,*

*and that we are the people who bear your name.”* **Amen.**