

Grant this through Christ, our liberator from sin,
who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
holy and mighty God for ever and ever.

Opening prayers, Lent 1, Year B²

Lectionary-based Catechesis • Year B

The First Sunday of Lent

Principal Service readings

Genesis 9.8-17	The rainbow of promise to Noah
Psalms 25.1-9	Prayer in danger
1 Peter 3.18-22	The resurrection and descent into hell
Mark 1.9-15	Jesus is baptised, spends 40 days in the desert, then proclaims the gospel

Opening Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ,
speak to our hearts in the stillness,
keep us steadfast in the foundation that cannot be shaken,
lift up our eyes to behold the vision of your glory;
and perfect our faith, now and always. Amen.

Society of Saint Francis

Gospel Reading

The temptation and proclamation of Jesus

⁹In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. ¹⁰And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. ¹¹And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'

¹²And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. ¹³He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him. ¹⁴Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, ¹⁵and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.'

Mark 1.9-15 NRSV¹

Comments and Questions

In today's reading from Mark, quite a brief reading, we hear about the baptism of Jesus, his forty days in the wilderness and his initial proclamation of the gospel. Mark says that Jesus was 'driven' into the wilderness by the Spirit. We sometimes say that people are driven – by

² *Opening prayers : scripture-related collects for the years A, B and C from the sacramentary* / International Commission on English in the Liturgy. – Norwich : Canterbury Press, 1999.

¹ *New Revised Standard Version Bible* is copyright © 1989 Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America.

ambition, say, or desperation, but what drives Jesus is the Holy Spirit, that has been with him since his baptism (1.10). When he goes into the wilderness or desert, he must struggle with two things, his naming as Son and Beloved by his Father, and his solidarity with sinful humanity. Mark says very briefly that he was with the wild beasts (symbolic of evil), and that the angels waited on him. We get no details of the actual temptations – that is left to our imagination.

Having begun his gospel about John the Baptist, Mark uses the baptism section as a sort of handover from John to Jesus. Jesus goes off on his own into the desert to be tested. However, Mark will continue to mention John, redefining his role, primarily as a herald of the ‘stronger one’. The word ‘Satan’ means ‘the adversary’. In some texts he is a member of the heavenly court who tests the fidelity of God’s chosen ones (Job 6.6-12; Zechariah 3.1).

Is the desert an experience to be dreaded or welcomed? It is a place of challenge and testing, but also a place for strengthening, and for preparation for ministry.

Jesus sees in his ministry the inauguration of the reign of God, God’s kingdom, although the fullness of that kingdom remained in the future.

Quotations

1

I generally avoid temptation unless I can’t resist it.

Mae West, 1893–1980

2

Over the years, I have come to realise that the greatest trap in our life is not success, popularity, or power, but self-rejection. Success, popularity, and power can indeed present a great temptation, but their seductive quality often comes from the way they are part of the much larger temptation to self-rejection. When we have come to believe in the voices that call us worthless and unlovable, then success, popularity, and power are easily perceived as attractive solutions. The real trap, however, is self-rejection. As soon as someone accuses me or criticises me, as soon as I am rejected, left alone, or abandoned, I find myself

2

thinking, ‘Well, that proves once again that I am a nobody’. ... [My dark side says,] I am no good ... I deserve to be pushed aside, forgotten, rejected, and abandoned. Self-rejection is the greatest enemy of the spiritual life because it contradicts the sacred voice that calls us the ‘Beloved’. Being the Beloved constitutes the core truth of our existence.

Henri J. M. Nouwen, 1932-1996

3

A silly idea is current that good people do not know what temptation means. This is an obvious lie. Only those who try to resist temptation know how strong it is... A man who gives in to temptation after five minutes simply does not know what it would have been like an hour later. That is why bad people, in one sense, know very little about badness. They have lived a sheltered life by always giving in.

Mere Christianity / C. S. Lewis. 1942

Related topics

For further study:

Baptismal and penitential themes of Lent; reconciliation; season of Lent; conversion; sin; grace; non-violence; social justice; faith; covenant; prayer; fasting; almsgiving

Closing Prayer

God of the covenant,
as the forty days of deluge
swept away the world’s corruption
and watered new beginnings
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,
cleanse our hearts of all that is not holy,
and cause your gift of new life to flourish once again.