

Homily by Canon Philip Dyson: Sunday 21st February 2021

1st Sunday in Lent

Readings (Year B): 1st: Genesis 9:8-15. 44-46. Psalm 24. 2nd: 1 Peter 3:18-22. Gospel: Mark 1:12-15

Most of you know **all sport** passes me by: one reason is my eye doesn't follow a ball. So a Greek word from the gospel today has always stuck with me; Ekballo, of which Professor Evans at King's said: think of it like chucking, or really flinging a ball; that is how the Spirit drove Jesus into the wilderness; a violent driving him into the desert.

The gospel today comes immediately after the baptism of Jesus, where Mark says the 'heavens were torn apart, and the Spirit descended upon him.' Mark then uses the word 'immediately,' always in this gospel a sense of urgency. The Spirit of God, active in creation and leading God's people through the Old Testament to bring new heart and new life, and which has now come upon the Messiah, driven out into the wilderness, the desert, and the opposite of the garden of Eden where it all began. The desert, where in history the people of Israel had been led for 40 years, and the presence of the wild beasts, as the first Adam had been tempted amid the beasts in paradise.

Jesus succeeds, indicated by the prophet's messianic peace, Isaiah's vision of 'the wolf lying down with the lamb and the leopard with the kid.' (Is. 11:6) Mark makes no mention of the specific temptations that Mathew & Luke do, but does give us some important theological themes.

The first, **the Spirit** we have already noted. Note the urgency of the Spirit which has filled Jesus with the zeal and energy to commence his mission to recall humanity from the ways of sin and restore them to the rule of God.

Also there and throughout all the scriptures are **the angels**, who minister to Jesus. There also is **Satan**. The name Satan means adversary. In the book of Job we are given a vivid picture of Satan in God's heavenly court, along with the other angels, where he has the role of accuser or prosecutor. The Scriptures identify Satan as the serpent in the Garden of Eden who tempted Adam and Eve, and therefore as the origin of sin and temptation.

What scripture and tradition make clear is that humanity has a mortal enemy, who although a finite being created by God, is in a desperate struggle to overthrow God's reign, usurp his Lordship and lead his creation into darkness and death.

Tempted here means being tried and tested like a contestant in the boxing or wrestling ring. The result of this first bout was victory for Jesus, but the war was to continue, and does to this day.

The struggle for God's kingdom continues in the hearts of all of us. The **covenant** made with Noah in our 1st reading is a promise to every living creature.... for all generations; and the sign the **rainbow**, you will recall was taken up during this past year as what it ever was, a **sign of hope**. When we went into lockdown in the middle of Lent last year, who would have really imagined we would still be in lockdown now?

Read the Psalm again, and then reflect on the 2nd reading from St Peter, who urges Christians to endure all trials and tribulations rather than betray their baptism. Encouragement is rooted in the reason for hope.

Notice how many times Peter mentions the **Spirit**, and so remember the final 50th day of Eastertide is Pentecost, the coming of the Spirit on us all. Following Noah, all of us in the new ark, the Church, are the 'you' addressed by Peter; all who believe and are baptised in the purifying death and resurrection of Christ.

Jesus emerges from his personal Lent with the victory of the **Good News from God**, which to receive needs repentance. The decisive defeat of everything opposed to God, his ruling authority over all: the wilderness victory is extended to the whole world. The kingdom can be entered only through one gate: repent, and believe the Good News. At the imposition of ashes we hear the Lord's battle cry: Repent and believe in the Good News.

Bishop Mark reminded his clergy on Ash Wednesday: Crisis in scripture is not to depress us, but a new opportunity to be open to what God is wanting to teach us. In Lent we listen again to the Lord speaking to us.

Canon Philip Dyson