

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

Desert

Lent is a time of paradox. We are starved of holiness, yet we initiate a fast. Our relationships are in crisis, yet we are called to be alone in the desert. We are pitifully poor, yet we are encouraged to generosity of giving. God is teaching us, in an almost violent confrontation, about the contrast between our ways, and his Way.

The Great Condition: Covenant

The opening reading of today's Mass is a consolingly negative message; God assures us that he *has not, will not*, come with destruction; on Wednesday we heard *You are merciful to all, and hate nothing you have made; you give us time for repentance*. So the flood will never again destroy the earth, for God has established his Covenant with all who live, for all generations. Therefore, in this season of baptismal renewal, let us establish in our thinking an over-arching truth: God will never abandon us to the power of death.

The Wilderness

For forty days, says Mark, *Jesus was in the wilderness*. He tells us three things about this time: *He was tempted by Satan; he was with the wild beasts; the angels looked after him*. Some people make a great deal out of these few details – not least Matthew and Luke, who clearly relate the whole experience to the ancient Exodus from Egypt. They tell the stories of three temptations, closely modelled on the trials of Israel in the desert, and they have Jesus quoting Deuteronomy – the book of the desert – as he rebuts them. But Israel, like Moses on Sinai and Elijah on Horeb, were called out to meet God, not Satan. Matthew and Luke clearly say that Jesus overcame Satan, where Mark does not. Perhaps he thought he didn't need to say it. And what are *the wild beasts* doing here? Some think that Satan tempted Adam and Eve, and they fell, and they were made enemies of the animals; whereas Jesus does not fall, and makes friends of the animals. But Mark doesn't say that either. Perhaps we are meant to think that Jesus – *hurled* into the desert by the Spirit, as the Greek word has it – passed safely through the terrors of the desert and the testing of the Devil. When he came back, it was not having defeated

Satan – we shall soon see him struggling with the demons that possess people, so the war goes on. But who was doing the testing of Jesus? Certainly not God the Father! Satan was; and at the end of the forty days, *Satan knows who Jesus is*. St James, writing about faith, remarks: *The demons too believe, but they are trembling with fear*. I think that the demons are alerted to the presence of the Son of God by this meeting in the desert; in it, Jesus throws down the gauntlet. Even Luke sees that: after the testing, he writes, *Satan left him...to return at the appointed time* (the Garden of Gethsemane).

Putting Our Shoulder To The Wheel

Lent is the time to stop talking – or even merely thinking – about salvation, and starting to commit our full weight to the tasks of receiving it: in prayer, constant, daily, and devoted, filling mind and heart with the things of God; in fasting, stripping the riches of sense and enjoyment with which the body demands our homage; in the giving of gifts, renewing ourselves in the joy of generosity and awareness of others' needs and burdens. All of these things will release us from the narrow prison of our self-concern, our obsession with serving ourselves, healing ourselves, saving ourselves. There really is little to lose in that fruitless orbiting of our own need, that desperate attempt to find the answer to all things in our little store of grace. We have nothing that we were not given, and the Giver of gifts longs to fulfil his promise to us. We often proclaim our faith in him. Now is the time to turn to him with all our hearts: this is the acceptable time. *Fr Philip*