

LENT 1

The Gospel today holds a strange fascination in it. Jesus has emerged from the waters of his baptism, in which he has solemnly heard the affirmation of his Father: "You are my Son, my Beloved: my favour rests on you!" The vision recounts that the Spirit of God descended like a dove. In today's Gospel the Spirit is neither a dove, nor at rest: the Gospel says, in the Greek, "The Spirit hurls him into the desert." And he stays there for forty days. This period may be shorthand for a long time: After the Exodus Israel wandered for forty years in the desert; after the flood Noah's Ark floated for forty days; Elijah walked for forty days and nights to reach Sinai, God's mountain. Here it is clear that Jesus is walking in the footsteps of his forebears in the story of salvation. He is inheriting the spirit of Israel.

It is in that spirit that the Church gives us this forty-day fast. It is a period which has always preceded the sealing of a solemn covenant between God and his people. The covenant with Noah is that God will never destroy his creation. The Covenant with Israel is that he will never forsake his people. The covenant with Elijah is that he will retrieve the losses caused by sin and apostasy. And the Father's Covenant with Jesus makes his promises to the earth firm with the firmness of the Trinity; now he is swearing by himself. With the fidelity which binds the Father and the Son to each other, that is, in the Holy Spirit, the creation is wedded to God.

This understanding gives us food for thought in Lent: that "word from the mouth of God" which is to be our bread, and in hunger for which we fast from earthly food

When a young man is preparing for marriage, he fills his mind and heart with the image and promise of his bride, until no-one could explain what *he* is like without describing the girl he is going to marry. A bride could in the same way never make any sense as a person, until we include in our understanding the image and promise of her bridegroom.

So in Lent we fill our hearts with the anticipation of the promises of God, until we become people who can only be understood by someone who knows God, and understands our destiny to share his life. That's the sort of belonging to God which is implied by the word "covenant". The Lenten fast of Jesus shows him doing the same work: he goes into the desert, where his human nature becomes trained in the practice of this fundamental choice, of belonging to the Father, belonging to the covenant.

As a person, Jesus has total access to the nature of the Son of God: but his human nature still feels the pull to earthly reality: which is why Hebrews says: *He was tempted in every way that we are, but did not sin.* We have a free tendency towards our limited, earthly self; but in Lent we follow Christ by emptying out all we can of that allegiance, to make room for the covenanted promise of sharing divine life, of becoming like God, of learning the divine life for which he has destined us.

If that takes the form of calling a halt to comfort-food or nicotine or alcohol, well and good. If it enters into the depths we normally shut off with telly and repletion, warmth and jolly noise, so much the better. If we can revisit the faith we think we have, even if we seldom pray, examine our conscience, or speak up for our beliefs, we shall enter neglected gardens of our being. If we can find the fuel to be generous and forgiving, reconciled to one another, we shall put new lead in our pencils. Lent isn't to do with starving ourselves. It's to do with choosing the food we really need instead of the couch-potato stuff we've been full of.

The words are there:

The time has come. The Kingdom of God is near. Repent, and believe the good news.