

The next three days fit together integrally in our experience of Lent. Each of them has something vital to tell us about our lives; and the connection with Lent becomes very clear as we allow these messages to reach us.

Today we listen to Moses telling the people in the desert that they are a people covenanted or wedded to God. As such, they must not place any limitations on the consequences. The analogy with a wedding is obvious: “Are you ready to give yourselves to each other with no conditions or reservations, for the rest of your lives?”

The great symbol of this fidelity will be in our taking of the ways of God to be our ways, the keeping of the commandments. In this we shall find ourselves made ready to partake of his life and joy; but if we prove faithless in this, our joy will be damaged and eviscerated; and what should be a total divine experience will be a mockery of itself, and bring us nothing but disappointment. In some ways we can approve of the decision not to believe in God, if the alternative is hypocrisy and a religion which does not deserve the name: just as it is better not to marry, than to experience infidelity and betrayal in marriage. *Do not enter into this covenant, says Moses, unless you are ready to be consecrated to God.*

In the Gospel, Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount takes this nuptial obedience into the heart of the furnace, when he speaks of God’s way with sinners. He does not blot them out, and neither must we; he does not withdraw his blessings even from the worst of them, and nor must we. He loves the worst of them, and so must we. Perhaps the hardest word he speaks seems to us to be the last: *you must therefore be perfect.*

When we love another person, we experience their perfection, which is often invisible to others. It is the greatest power of our personality that this can happen, and the greatest share we have in the grace of God. Tomorrow this perfection will blaze in the eyes of Peter, James and John on the holy mountain, as they see their Lord transfigured with divine light. On Monday we shall hear Luke’s version of the words Matthew delivers to us today; and we shall hear him say *not* “You must therefore be perfect” but “You must therefore be compassionate”; because the perfection that is asked of us is truly that of compassion, the duty of forgiveness as we hope to be forgiven.

God does not demand perfection of us, because *he knows of what we are made: he remembers that we are dust.* So we must hear the words of Jesus today, not as a crushing demand, but as a divine promise: you must be perfected, and it is I who will perfect you. Moses said to the people at the Red Sea: *It is the Lord who will fight for you: your part is only to keep calm.* So with the command to be perfect: it must not be received as yet another experience of weakness. It is the Lord who sees you with the eyes of love, in your potential perfection. Your part is only to receive this love, which will bring you to perfection.

*Lord,  
let no despair or fear of ours  
stand between us  
and the mystery of your redemption.*