

Today marks the first Sunday in Lent. A time that allows us to take to heart the call to repentance and the assurance of forgiveness proclaimed in the Gospel, and to grow in faith and devotion to our Lord.

On Ash Wednesday we were invited to the observance of a holy lent, by self-examination and repentance, by prayer and fasting, by self-denial and acts of generosity, and by reading and study of God's word.

The season of lent is a time that invites us to embrace an intentional way of life. This maybe through fasting, giving up something for lent, or being more focused on our study of the scriptures.

We may be excited to start Lent and go on the journey that leads to growth in our relationship and knowledge of God.

But when push comes to shove we may find it hard to step out of our personal comfort zone and into the space where God wants us to be, and where God is calling us to be.

Entering into the season of Lent takes a leap of faith, a commitment to journey with God into the heart, into the inner self, so that we may experience the greatest love of all God's love, that meets us in that vulnerable place deep within us and which is protected by the things that make up our identity.

I believe that this is what is at heart of Lent.

On Ash Wednesday we heard in the Gospel of Mathew that "whenever you pray go into your room and shut the door and pray to your father who is in secret and your father who sees in secret will reward you."

This room is not merely a physical room that we go into alone and shut the door and pray to God.

Jesus's words here in Mathew draws us to enter the room within the depths of ourselves, that is sacred and of God. We are being invited to journey into the inner closet of the heart.

When we take this journey we start to gain an awareness that God's presence is not something we can attain, but that we are always in the presence of God.

In this secret place of the heart we encounter God in a truly transformational way. For prayer is meeting God in the darkness and solitude of the secret place, and such an encounter with God in the depths of our soul will provide access to the deep and true knowing of God's presence within us and who God truly calls us to be in Christ.

In today's Gospel we hear about Jesus being led into the wilderness by the Spirit for a long and difficult time of testing.

During the week I caught myself reflecting on this first part of the Gospel, and I thought what if Jesus was not just led into the physical wilderness of a desert. What if the wilderness was the inner wilderness of the self.

We are being invited like Jesus to allow the Spirit to take us on a journey into the wilderness of our self both individually and as a community of faith.

Maybe we are being asked to go through the wilderness of the self to face the temptations and fast from our inner attachments, from those ways of behaviour that stem from our

vulnerability. In Lent I believe we are being invited to find an inner freedom and experience God's transforming work of making us into our true self that is hidden in God.

We heard of the extraordinary claims in today's Gospel that the tempter asserts his dominion over the kingdoms of the world and that the kingdoms have been given over to him, and he can give them to anyone he pleases.

One would expect that Jesus would immediately reject this. But he doesn't - Jesus never denies the tempter's claim, he accepts and concedes that the tempter can give him "all the kingdoms of the world" at the price of demonic worship.

Jesus' response is simple however, he refuses to enter any dialogue on the matter, and quotes from Deuteronomy, "it is written worship the Lord your God and serve only him."

It is an interesting point, I believe that the tempter never actually speaks of creation or the world or the earth, but of all the kingdoms of the world and the glory these kingdoms have.

The reason for this is because the tempter does not own and

cannot offer to anyone the “world that God so loved” but only that world we are told “not to love”, the one that contains only “the desire of the flesh, the desire of the eyes, and the pride in riches.”

Therefore like Jesus who accepted and conceded that the tempter can give him “all the kingdoms of the world”

we too need to accept and concede the inner attachments, those ways of behaviour that need God’s transforming work to bring us into who we truly are in God.

For when we accept, acknowledge and are aware of these inner attachments, they are disarmed of the power that they develop in the darkness or outside of awareness.

Therefore as we go through the journey of lent as individuals and as a community, Jesus is inviting us to allow God’s Spirit to take us into the wilderness of the inner self to be tested and to fast from our inner falseness, the things deep within us that makeup our identity in order to protect that vulnerable place in our heart.

But it is there where God is waiting for us to meet him, to come into a deep relationship with him that is grounded in God's love.

When we take this journey, like the Israelites, we too will experience a land flowing with milk and honey, which is God's divine love for us. And like Jesus at the end of his forty days we too will be filled with the power of the Holy Spirit, which is an overflowing joy and love of being in true relationship with God.

As David Benner says "love is our identity and our calling, for we are children of love. Created from love of love and for love, our existence makes no sense apart from divine love."

Let us pray

God of the desert, as we follow Jesus into the unknown,
May we recognise the tempter when he comes;
Let it be your bread we eat,
Your word we serve and you alone we worship.

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