

The Holy Spirit Province

NEWSLETTER

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TESTS, TRIALS, AND TEMPTATIONS: 1ST SUNDAY LENT B

How might we see Lent as an opportunity for self-improvement?

The movie, *An Officer and a Gentleman*, starring Richard Gere, is about a very selfish young man, who for the thrill of it, wants to fly jet planes in the navy. A tough drill sergeant sees through him and sets out to challenge him with every test and ordeal in the books. In the process, the young man discovers his moral compass and develops a new set of values. He graduates from boot camp as both an officer and a gentleman, with a strong fresh focus away from himself and towards others and their needs. His tests and trials have worked to get him there, and have re-made him to be the best person he can be.

Jesus, as another young man, was never selfish, but he too needed to discover what new direction his life should take. It comes out in Mark's story today of how the power of God, which is to say the Holy Spirit given to him at his baptism, drives him into the desert for forty days. Instead of human company there, he is with wild animals, and angels provide for his basic needs.

There in the desert, he too is tested and tried, not by another human being, but by Satan, the arch-enemy of God and goodness. It was in the desert too that his own people, the people of Israel, had met their God, and entered into a binding covenant-relationship of love with God. But the Bible shows the desert as not only a place where they met God but also as a place of trials and temptations. It was there too that they gave in to temptations. There they adored false gods and murmured against Moses, God's representative.

Unlike Matthew and Luke, Mark does not specify how Jesus was tested and tried, but says only that he 'was tempted by Satan'. Mark implies that, as happens with all temptation, Jesus was wrestling with the question, 'Will I choose what God wants of me, or give in to other wants and desires?' Mark also implies that with the help of the Spirit of God, Jesus resists and defeats the Evil One, and chooses just what God wants of him.

What God wanted of him, discovered by Jesus in the desert, is revealed in the next lines of Mark's story: '... Jesus went into Galilee. There he proclaimed the good news from God. "The time has come," he said, "and the kingdom of God is close at hand. Repent, and believe the good news".' There and then he came to accept his mission

from God – to tell others that the kingdom of God was happening among them and that Jesus himself was making it happen.

The kingdom of God means God's power, authority, reign, and rule over everything and everybody. The coming of the kingdom of God was the new direction of his life, that Jesus discovered there and then in his desert-experience. It became the central theme and program of his life. It became the basis of practically everything he did and everything he said. It was his guiding-star, his ultimate vision of reality, the cause for which he both lived and died. It was his favourite phrase for what his mission was all about. His sayings, his parables, his cures, his relationships, and especially his practice of sharing meals with outcasts, were all connected to his purpose and program of bringing about the kingdom of God on earth. So much so that Jesus without the kingdom of God would be an incomplete Jesus, and not what he is for us – our way, truth, and life (Jn 14:6).

The coming of the reign and rule of God requires a response from everyone, Jesus insists, a turn-around, a change, shown in the first place by accepting God's offer of mercy and forgiveness for our sins, and in the second place, by living as God wants. In practice, this means living the teachings of Jesus and following his good example.

Jesus is still telling us to repent of our sins, and to believe and live the good news that God is the king of our lives. This is just what Jesus was saying to us on Ash Wednesday, when we received the ashes and heard the accompanying message, 'Turn away from sin, and believe the good news.'

Lent, then, is not just a time for little acts of self-denial, but to believe and live with the greatest fidelity and constancy, the greatest truth of all, that God is our loving and merciful King, that we belong to God as God's beloved children, that God has great expectations of us, and that God is calling us to be loving persons too - loving God and our fellow human beings, with our whole mind, heart, soul, and strength.

That's a message not only for Lent but for every season. No wonder, then, that Jesus wants us to keep praying to God: 'Our Father ... your kingdom come ... lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil'! For that to happen, we must also, like Jesus, let the Holy Spirit drive us into the desert of our lives, and there empower us, to tame any wild beast prowling around to tempt us to sin.

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