

Lent 1

Fr David Hutt, writing to me last week, began, 'This year, who needs Lent?' We all feel a bit like that at the moment. Lent *is* usually understood as a time of 'giving things up'; even people who have no connection to the Christian faith speak, semi-seriously, of 'giving things up for Lent', just as they wish each other a merry Christmas or a happy Easter or say that something they don't like is 'against their religion'. Giving things up is a good piece of spring-cleaning for our lives at this season, but the self-denial is supposed to be a positive good: at the most basic level, even giving up chocolate or wine should prompt us to almsgiving, to reckoning what we heedlessly spend on those things and giving the equivalent amount to alleviate the lives of those who live on less per month than we may spend on those items in a week or even in a day (which is most of the population of the world). As I believe Fr Ross used to say from that pulpit, Lent is about 'doing more': more generosity in every area of life, in both the corporal and spiritual acts of mercy, to use Aquinas' terms. In short, almsgiving and prayer, including Mass attendance.

Today's Gospel prompts a deeper questioning of the point of the Lenten discipline. In Mark's lapidary version of events, straight after his baptism Jesus was led (or rather in Mark's word, 'thrown' or 'driven') by the Spirit into the desert 'to be tempted by Satan' or, more accurately translating the original, to be 'put to the test' by him. Being 'put to the test' in Greek is not necessarily a bad thing; it can mean being given the opportunity to prove oneself, one's *true* self, which is what happens here.

Our readings this morning make a strong link with baptism: Noah and the flood in the first reading, explained by Peter in the second as a 'type' of baptism; then the temptation of Christ immediately after his own baptism. These connections illuminate history, and especially salvation history, in which we participate through our baptism, but they are still about the past. So how do *we* live out that baptismal calling? What is Lent about for us this year, *now*?

The beginning of the season, as we recall our Lord's retreat into desert, is most obviously a call to recollect ourselves before God, to try and remember who we are - something he does for us all the time, but we busily fail to do most of the time. In reminding ourselves to be the people we are called to be, consistent with our Christian faith, and making sure that we *enact* it, we learn to show forth what we believe by how we are seen by others: not pretence, but consistency. We all try, as conscientious Christians, to *be* better than the greed and competitiveness, the petty jealousies and dishonesties to which we are all subject. But learning to *enact* our Christian selves, so that others can see in us the hope to which we are called, is a piece of behavioural therapy which can make us better versions of ourselves, which can re-create us as children of God. It is a call to an integrated personhood, a faith in which outside and inside become ever more coherent. It mustn't just be for Lent, but Lent is our annual reminder to begin the project afresh.

Last year on Lent 1 I recalled spending a few days in the Chilean Atacama desert, the driest place on earth: no rain has ever been recorded there. I've also driven through some of the desert in central Australia. What you notice in the desert is a unique clarity, in all the silence and dry emptiness, the ancient moon-like rocks and sand gradually reclaiming all the efforts of human beings to live there or tame them. I've never been to the wilderness into which Jesus was driven, but I saw in these places how that profound emptiness and freedom from distraction, profound *silence*, could lead to profitable self-examination.

In my suggestions for Lenten devotion this year I mentioned a booklet, *Our Lady of Silence: The Devotion of Pope Francis*, by Capuchin Fr Emiliano Antenucci. Pope Francis often commends silence, together with pared back language and the rejection of gossip and complaint. Given an icon of Our Lady of Silence, written by the Benedictine nuns of San Giulio d'Orta, Novara, in which Mary holds her hand to her mouth, he placed it between the two lifts in the Apostolic Palace in the courtyard of S Damasus, through which everyone who comes to talk to him in his private office must pass. He blessed this icon with this intention: *May the Virgin Mary intercede before the Lord so that all who enter the Apostolic Palace may always have the right words to say*, signing the back with the words 'do not speak badly of others'.

This devotion to Our Lady of Silence includes five new mysteries for contemplation in the Rosary: the *Mystery of Obedience in Gethsemane*, contemplating Jesus praying in the garden while his friends slept; the *Mystery of Prayer*, referring to the passage in Matthew 6 where Jesus commends going apart for quiet prayer in the privacy of our rooms; the *Mystery of the Passion of Jesus Christ*, in which Jesus makes no reply to Pilate in response to the accusations brought against him; the *Mystery of the Care of the Son of God by his Mother*, contemplating that hidden period of Jesus' upbringing, when Mary 'kept all these things in her heart'; and the *Mystery of Mary's Faith in God*, focusing on Mary at the cross. It concludes with a prayer to Our Lady which is a beautiful addition to our Lenten devotions:

O Mary, Our Lady of Silence
you who were the womb of the eternal Word,
help your children hear the word of love
that flows like living water from your breast.
Give us the grace of an open ear,
open to him who through the touch of his love
transforms our life and history
into a work of art, illuminated and colourful.
O Mary, Our Lady who listens
help us to see the paths of life and the designs of our heavenly Father
who loves us in a unique, eternal and unrepeatable way.
O Mary, help us to love as God desires,
so that we may live in eternal joy together with the angels and saints.
Amen