

Forty Desert Days

Mark 1: 12-15

On Ash Wednesday, we start Lent.
The flowers we used last year
on Palm Sunday
to applaud Jesus
were burnt to ashes the day before.

Our resolutions,
the ones we made
to be with Jesus
when we were waving
those branches last year,
had been burned
to ashes
long ago.

We put those ashes,
bitter,
salt,
and coarse
as they were,
on our foreheads
to show
that we had been unsuccessful,
to show
that we hope to do better,
and we started
our period of Lent,
we started to do penance;
and in the gospel of today
we appeal
to the forty days of Jesus
in the desert
to explain to ourselves
what we do.

It is right to appeal
to that period in the life of Jesus
on condition
that we really know
what he did
there in the desert
and on condition
that we are willing
to follow his example,
opening up to what the Spirit
worked out in Jesus during that period
of
his life.

It seems to me
that we often
very conveniently overlook
what happened to him.
We overlook
because like in so many spiritual affairs
we remain the children
we were long ago.

We are quite willing to do
some penance, we say.
Some of us decide
to drink less,
to smoke less,
to eat less,
to spend less,
to give to the poor,
to visit the sick,
to pray a bit more,

and all those resolutions
are excellent
and they all have something to do
with what Jesus did,
but it all remains
at a childlike level.

What Jesus underwent
was different.
Mark is short about it,
but he says
everything to be said.

Jesus was sent into the desert
by the Spirit,
by the Spirit of God.
That must have been
a terrific experience
just imagine
that you were taken up
by the Spirit of God!

That Spirit of God
chased him into the desert.
He did not go there,
he was driven;
and once in the desert
a fight developed,
a very fundamental fight,
a basic fight,
in this world.

The prayer, "Forty Desert Days," is by Joseph G. Donders, in *Beyond Jesus: Reflections on the Gospels for the B-cycle*, Orbis Books, 1984.



The way in which Mark
 indicates and characterizes
 that fight
 is outdated,
 it is a bit primitive.
 It does not appeal to us.
 Even the number 4 in 40
 is an indication
 of what happened.
 Forty days,
 ten times four,
 four was the number
 that stood for *the earth*
 with its four basic elements
 earth,
 air,
 water, and
 fire.

There is the image of
the wild animals,
 and all those elements and animals
 are described
 as beings
 ruled by Satan,
 the enemy,
 the adversary.

 The fight is won
 by him.
 That is why,
 when coming out,
 he can proclaim
 the good news from God:
 the time has come,
 the kingdom is close at hand,
 repent
 and believe.

It is at this point
 that we come in.
 Those words are
 addressed to us.
 We should not only look
 at his past
 in that desert;
 we should look
 at ourselves
 in the present

and join Jesus
 in his cosmic struggle.

 All this can be said
 in another way:
 it is in that desert,
 in that wilderness
 with those animals,
 with those elements
 - and the angels
 assisting him -
 that Jesus entered
 as an active participant
 in the history of humankind,
 humanity
 on its way
 to itself
 and to God.

We are invited
 during this Lent
 to enter into that history too,
 to participate
 in that fight.
 Amen.

