

Readings

Gen 9:8-15

Ps 25:4-5, 6-7, 8-9

1 Pet 3:18-22

Mk 1:12-15

Luis A. Vera, O.S.A.
Church of St. Nicholas of Tolentine
Bronx, New York

Are you a curious person? Usually young children are very curious. They love to try new things and explore new places, to ask questions and have things explained to them. It seems to me that we adults, for the most part, have lost that sense of curiosity. Very often we take things at face value. We might think that asking questions is a sign of ignorance or weakness or even a sign that we are not capable of doing what we have been asked to do.

On this First Sunday of Lent we hear from St. Mark's gospel, which provides us with a very short version of the temptations of Jesus while in the desert; but even though this is a very short version of this well known account, St. Mark gives us some very interesting details and here is where we must be curious, we must be like little children asking questions and exploring new things! We hear that "the Spirit drove Jesus into the desert, and he remained in the desert for forty days, tempted by Satan." It sounds like this driving of Jesus into the desert was the working of the Holy Spirit, the Spirit that Jesus had just received at his baptism in the Jordan by John.

If we are curious enough then, we might ask: why was it important for St. Mark to tell us that Jesus "was among wild beasts" or that "the angels ministered to him"? Why is this so important in this very short account? And the reading doesn't stop there! It goes on to tell us that "Jesus came to Galilee proclaiming the gospel of God: 'This is the time of fulfillment. The

kingdom of God is at hand!” Some very interesting details in such a short version of the temptations.

Are we curious enough to enter into this Lenten season with open hearts and open minds, to hear the call to “repent, and believe in the gospel”? We enter into these forty days as a time of testing, of tribulation and purification. Any first-century Jew who heard this reading would’ve remembered the forty days and forty nights of the flood during the time of Noah. They would have also remembered the forty years of Israel in the desert; indeed a time of testing, tribulation and purification!

The image of the wild beasts reminds us of Adam in the garden in the Book of Genesis, where God put all the animals before Adam, and so Jesus is presented not only as the new Israel but as the new Adam! Adam’s disobedient actions turned that garden into a desert, but Jesus’ obedience to his Abba and his mercy for all will restore its beauty. St. Mark tell us, “And after forty days the angels ministered to him.” There is a Jewish tradition that says that the angels ministered to Adam while he was in the garden. Now, after Jesus’ days in the desert, the angels minister to the new Adam, the one who comes to be humble and obedient until death – death on the Cross!

This Lent we are once again invited to pay attention to our own desert. We look into the desert of a society divided morally, politically, and in so many other ways. But we are also aware of a desert which we are called to enter willingly because, as committed Christians, we are curious...and that curiosity helps us to open our hearts and our ears to the words of the Lord: “Repent, and believe in the gospel.” We are invited once again into a process of *metanoia*, that is, of conversion and a change of mind and heart, of turning away from sin and turning to God with all we are! We turn to our God who made a covenant with “every living creature,” as we heard in

the first reading, “all the birds, and the various tame and wild animals” and who gives us a sign of that covenant: a bow in the clouds. We turn to our brothers and sisters in need and we try to be a light for them.

As we begin this Lenten journey with curiosity and faith and hope in our God of mercy and compassion, we walk with catechumens and candidates to the waters of baptism and the Easter Sacraments. For now, let us allow the ashes we received to burn not just our foreheads, but to burn our hearts with the desire to follow Christ to the Cross, to the tomb, and to eternal life.