

March: Lent prepares for Easter



March is the month of Lent, and this year it fits squarely, for Lent begins snap on March 1st , giving the first four Sundays of Lent within the month. For the Sunday readings of March this gives a special quality. During Lent the Old Testament readings each year lead us steadily through the history of the Chosen People: the Fall, the Call of Abraham, the Exodus, the Anointing of David, the Promise of a New Covenant, which will be fulfilled at Easter. The Gospel readings have their own rhythm too, starting with two great events in the life of Jesus, his Testing in the Desert and the Transfiguration.

In the former we watch Jesus, after his Baptism, coming to grips with his vocation as Messiah and Son of God, being tempted in the desert for forty days and nights just as Israel, God's son, was tempted for forty years. The Tester (for that is the meaning of 'Satan') suggests three ways of bringing the Kingship of God: by producing material plenty, by a startling exhibition of his status, by worshipping the devil through political power. Each time Jesus rejects the suggestion with a quotation from scripture drawn from the Book of Deuteronomy, that blueprint of how to love God. We shall soon see that the true way for Jesus is the path of suffering – in which we may share.

At the Transfiguration the chosen disciples are strengthened for the coming Passion by experiencing in a unique way the divine dignity of Jesus. Like that of Moses on the mountain, his face shines like the sun and his clothes are white as the light. With him are the two figures who in the Old Testament experienced God on the holy mountain just as the disciples are doing, Moses on Sinai and Elijah at the entrance to the cave on Mount Horeb. The divine Voice from the cloud declares publicly that Jesus is God's own Beloved Son.

For the remaining Sundays of Lent we desert the Gospel of Matthew and turn to John in his prime concern to lay before us the mystery of salvation which we will celebrate at Easter. The three themes chosen prepare specifically for the celebration of Easter Night, with its renewal of baptismal promises. Water, Light and New Life are the themes, illustrated by the scenes of the Samaritan Woman at the Well, the Man born Blind and the Raising of Lazarus.

The first of these is a delightful, light-hearted scene, full of banter: both Jesus and the Woman tease and provoke each other. Jesus seems deliberately to mislead her as he guides her step by step to the understanding that the water he offers is the source not merely of life but of eternal life – this will prepare us for a renewal of baptism. The explosive story of the Man born Blind issues in the sarcastic confrontation between the Man and the Pharisees: the more they protest that they can see, the more clearly they are shown to be blind, until finally the Man pays full homage to Jesus – this prepares us for the new Paschal Light of the Easter Vigil. Finally (already in April) the Raising of Lazarus symbolizes the new, eternal life given by Jesus. It is not itself the gift of eternal life, for Lazarus will die again: his life is renewed, not transformed in the Resurrection of Jesus. Paradoxically, with a climax of Johannine irony, it is precisely this gift of life which leads directly to the High Priest's decision that Jesus must die 'to save the people' – the central mystery of Easter Night.