

1st SUNDAY OF LENT

Year B

I wonder whether this year we might give serious attention to Project Compassion as a parish focus during Lent – it's not something to which we've given serious attention in recent times. Yet this is a wonderful expression of our concern and care for the most disadvantaged people in our world. The Church calls us to fasting, almsgiving and prayer during this special time – but how that plays out in our behavior and in our change of life is the real challenge of Lent. Jesus' journey into the desert is our journey too. Will our reflection and prayer lead us to seriously consider our response to the needy in our world ?

When political leaders are faced with financial upheaval, they often like to divert people's attention from the obvious crisis. When the emperor Nero was faced with economic collapse in Rome in AD 64, his chosen distraction was the burning of the city. The fire burned for a week and destroyed half of the imperial city. Nero accused the Christians, who up to that time had been tolerated as a Jewish sect, and an era of persecution began. The followers of Jesus were thrown to the wild beasts in the arena, and the citizens of Rome were entertained by the humiliation and cruel death of their fellow human beings. People's attention was diverted from economic questions, but the bill for the diversion was paid by innocents.

The evangelist Mark wrote his gospel for the persecuted Christians in Rome, who lived in constant fear of being thrown to the wild beasts. When Mark opens his account of the story of Jesus, he tells how Jesus is with the wild beasts in the wilderness. Jesus is the innocent one, but his innocence does not protect him from conflict, from trial, from suffering, from facing the adversary. Innocence does not dispel conflict; rather, it attracts it. Before the beginning of his ministry Jesus is seen to face trial in the wilderness, the traditional arena of Satan. Before going public, the resolve of the innocent one is put to the test.

Mark says that Jesus was tempted by Satan. The word Satan in Hebrew simply means an *adversary*, and in the Old Testament it was first used of human opponents. For example, when the Philistines were afraid that the young David would emerge as their *satan*, they simply meant their enemy. The original meaning of the word Satan was anyone who was a dangerous opponent. Later the word came to mean anyone who pleads a cause against another, an accuser of people before God, the public

prosecutor of heaven. Finally it came to mean God's Adversary, a demonic spirit opposed to God.

Jesus has to think God's way, and he becomes a spokesman not for Satan but for the Father. When he begins preaching he tells the people that the time has come to let God rule in their lives. If this is to happen they must repent and believe the Good News. What God is doing is Good News. And the Good News is not only the message of Jesus but Jesus himself.

It would be a big mistake for any one of us to think that Lent is "for others" or that we have no need of repentance. Any honest reflection will reveal the hidden demons within us – those angers, resentments, prejudices and fears that prevent us growing into the whole people we would want to be.

Few of us associate the time of the Lenten discipline with Good News, particularly if that means facing the adversary within and around us. At the beginning of Lent the Church always takes us into the wilderness with Jesus, to face the power that is opposed to the Gospel. The Good News is that we do this *with Jesus and in the company of his followers*.

The Gospel challenges us to change our minds about the way we think, change our hearts about the Gospel we ignore, and change our ways about habits of sin. Project Compassion urges us to seriously translate our stated care for the world's poor into practical generosity.

This is a lifetime's task. Jesus did not overcome Satan in the wilderness, he achieved that only in his death. Lent reminds us of our need *to begin again* facing the enemy within us. And the Good News is that when we do that we take the road that leads us to the kingdom of God.

The Project Compassion theme is "A Just Future". Pope Francis when speaking to young people said, "Let us not be satisfied with a mediocre life.. Be amazed by what is true and beautiful, what is God." Our "Just Future" will happen when we – again in Pope Francis' words – "Cultivate with love the seeds of goodness, beauty and truth that God sows in every new generation". Have a good and productive Lent !