

1ST SUNDAY LENT YEAR B

Something very significant occurs in the forty day period between Jesus private life and his public life. His thirty years of living a quiet life in Nazareth with his Mother Mary and learning carpentry from Saint Joseph came to an abrupt end when he is baptised by his cousin John and declared to be the Son of God. But before he begins his public life and ministry of proclaiming the Good News and calling all to repentance, Mark tells us that “the Spirit immediately *drove* Jesus out into the wilderness and he remained there forty days.”

The Spirit did much more than simply prompt or move Jesus along like a shepherd would his sheep. No, the Spirit *drove* Jesus out into the wilderness; and the Greek verb used by Mark is even stronger; it’s the word used for tossing or throwing a rock. So we could say that the Spirit threw or *hurled* Jesus out into the wilderness for forty days.

The wilderness into which Jesus was hurled was not some pleasant mountaintop retreat, it was a desert. The desert is an inhospitable place where the elements are harsh and a person faces tough physical, psychological, and emotional challenges. All alone in the desert you either get tough or die, so to speak. You get tough or you are defeated.

And in the Bible the desert takes on a further significance. It is the place where unpleasant but important and necessary spiritual things happen: It’s the site for brutal self-examination, bitter temptation, painful purification, and sometimes a revelation of God’s Divine Presence. It’s not the place you go for a pleasant stroll. It’s where you go for something important. No wonder Jesus had to be driven or hurled into it. And after forty days of prayer, trial, and temptation Jesus re-emerges from the desert ready and eager to carry out the mission entrusted him by the Father.

A few days ago on Ash Wednesday we began our forty days of Lent, our forty days with Jesus in the wilderness. Lent is not a time or a place into which we happen to wander as if by mistake as we take our stroll through the year. If I do just stumble into Lent it will do me no good: I will not be tested, I will not face my temptations; I will not be purified; I will not draw closer to the Divine Presence.

To be honest Lent is a time *I’d* rather avoid. I don’t look forward to it; I doubt you do either. But the Spirit has hurled me into it for my own good whether I like it or not. It’s now Lent – time for all of us to “get tough” so to speak: to examine ourselves & our conscience; face our temptations; be purified; and draw closer to God.

It is now time for me and for all of us to intensify our prayer; to re-commit to and deepen our daily personal and family prayer, our time spent in direct communication with God; time to come to Mass more often and join in the Stations of the Cross.

It is now time for me and for all of us to intensify our fasting; to feel hunger in our bellies so that we might hunger more for God; time to deny ourselves something and thereby strengthen our wills and regain our freedom by exercising control over our passions and desires.

It is now time for me and for all of us to intensify our almsgiving, our acts of kindness, generosity, mercy and charity to any and all who come across our paths; time to put my neighbour before myself; time to love one another as God loves us.

Whatever prayer, fasting, and acts of charity each of us is able to commit to and do depends on many things. How old am I? How healthy am I? Have I got family or others to look after? Am I well seasoned in these practices or will this be my first serious go at it? When deciding what to commit to this Lent all I’ll say is, and I rarely ever say this: don’t go easy on yourself. I don’t mean we should be extreme; I mean that what we do must be more than a mere token. Lent is not just symbolic; its real.

The Spirit did not go easy on Jesus, but hurled him into the desert. Likewise, the Spirit is hurling you and me into Lent. Not for fun, but for our good; that we may draw closer to God, gain true freedom, and love our neighbour; that we may be ready and eager like Jesus to carry out the mission entrusted to us by the Lord.



Most Reverend Michael Kennedy

Bishop of Armidale

Homily | 18th February, 2018 | Saints Mary & Joseph Cathedral, Armidale