

Krijtberg, February 21st 2021. Mc. 1:12-15. First Sunday of Lent. Other readings Gen. 9:8-15, 1 Peter 3:18-22

Peter van Dael SJ

A NEW BEGINNING

After forty days

The first reading is about God's covenant with Noah after the deluge, when it rained forty days and forty nights, and everything was flooded. In the gospel reading, Jesus spends forty days in the desert. The number forty is common in the Bible. Think also about the exodus from Egypt and the forty-year journey through the desert of the people of Israel. In the Bible, forty means a difficult period, but also a critical time that can produce good. The desert - like the water on which the ark floats - is an area of chaos and emptiness, but it also refers to the possibility of new inspiration and new courage. It is like a time of crisis: there is a chance that you will come out a better person. Perhaps a better society will emerge from the corona crisis.

Covenant with Noah

The good outcome mentioned in the first reading is the covenant that God makes with Noah and his descendants, but also with the animals. God promises that there will never be another flood to destroy the earth. He confirms this covenant by placing his rainbow in the clouds. As far back as ancient Mesopotamia, the rainbow is an auspicious omen, a symbol of reconciliation between heaven and earth. Whenever God sees this multicolored bow in the clouds, He will be reminded of his promise to Noah.

It is remarkable that this is a *unilateral* covenant, which is actually a contradiction, because a covenant involves two parties that promise each other something. Here it is only about God making a promise. The rainbow in the clouds is a sign not meant for men, but for God. The bow was to remind Him in the future of the covenant He once made with Noah. The initiative comes from God. Man has gone wrong, but God is giving him a second chance.

Jesus in the desert

In the Gospel reading the arid desert is the starting point, where Jesus lived among the wild animals and was tested by Satan. Wild animals are at home in the desert. Desert, as the word suggests, means desolation and disorder. Wild animals have the same meaning. They are associated with chaos and destruction, the pre-creation condition. In the description given by Isaiah (34) of the devastated Edom, only animals appear: ibises, ravens, satyrs, jackals, ostriches, hyenas, snakes and vultures. Where man's dwellings have been destroyed, animals dwell.

We can also give them a more specific meaning by linking them to Satan. The wild animals then symbolize the evil in us: self-satisfaction, hunger for power, assertiveness, possessiveness, jealousy, revenge, aggression, sexual drive. These are natural drives and emotions that we deal with. They well up in us, as if by themselves, whether we like it or not. They are primitive drives related to self-preservation and survival. These emotions are not always wrong in themselves, but we have to control them. When we don't, they become

satanic powers that drag us along and eventually destroy us. Scripture shows another way: not that of self-maintenance, but of selfless giving. Not having and keeping, but giving. Not revenge, but forgiveness. Another word for this is: kingdom of God, God's new world, that is, man as God intended him or her to be.

Jesus has taken this road. We read how the devil tried to tempt him into a life of wealth, power, honor and fame. But Jesus was not persuaded. He did not seek himself, but the glory of God and the happiness of man. In the forty days in the desert, Jesus made his choice, a choice for God's new world.

Jesus is about to proclaim the gospel of God

After those forty days he goes out proclaiming: *This is the time of fulfillment. The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel.* Let us consider these words in more detail.

-*This is the time of fulfillment.* It is not a cyclical time, where nothing new happens, where there is only endless repetition, like the repetition of the seasons. It is about a time that comes, every moment anew. Every moment counts. Every moment is a new beginning. Every moment is a momentum: it is of decisive importance. Marcus uses the word *kairos*: chance, decisive moment. The time has come: the new realm is already here.

-*The kingdom of God is at hand.* At the same time, that kingdom has yet to be realized. It is present as a call in every person who asks for understanding and help, and it becomes a reality whenever one person responds to an appeal that another makes on him or her.

-*Repent, and believe in the gospel.* The gospel is not a timeless truth, a teaching that is presented to you by a magisterium and that you must subscribe to. But it is about an event that actually takes place in time. It is primarily about acts of repentance and faith, where 'faith' can be translated as: trust and surrender. Trust in and surrender to the good news personified in Jesus.

We saw in the first reading that God offers us a covenant, that He wants to be with us. The gospel reading shows how we can respond to this offer: to live in the footsteps of Jesus. *Repent, and believe in the gospel*: with these words the ashes were given to us on Ash Wednesday. Lent is meant to be a time of repentance, a time to choose again and consciously, a time to make a new beginning.