

Today's gospel reading is rich with allusions to the Old Testament (Hebrew Scriptures) and picks up themes that have been running through our readings in recent weeks. The combination of a dove and the Spirit over the water are a reminder of the beginning of creation when the Spirit of God broods over the chaotic deep. The dove comes across the water in the account of Noah and the flood. Those familiar with these references might be prompted to ask: Is Jesus the one who brings the new creation? Could Jesus be the one to rescue his people from judgement?

At his baptism by John in the Jordan, Jesus is affirmed by the heavenly voice: he is God's beloved Son. This affirmation prepares him for the trials and challenges to come and for his momentous mission.

Jesus goes to the wilderness to fast and pray at the outset of his ministry. St Mark describes Jesus' forty days in the wilderness in just two verses. He doesn't go into detail about the testing Jesus experiences: all we need to know is that he triumphed...Satan (the Adversary, the Deceiver) was not able to deflect Jesus from the path to which God had called him.

In their gospels, Matthew and Luke give vivid and detailed accounts of how Jesus was tempted by Satan and how he defeated Satan's wiles. The gospels tell us that while he was in the wilderness, Jesus ate nothing (Luke): in other words, he deprived himself of food, water and other distractions that might protect him from feeling the full impact of his vulnerability, dependence, and need to surrender in trust to God the Father. And in doing this, we're told, Jesus found himself hungry - in all senses of the word - and consequently vulnerable to temptation from Satan... but also, thereby, more open to the strength of God.

Lent is our wilderness experience too. We too are called to consider the condition of our personal lives as we prepare to celebrate Easter.

Over the next six weeks, our Lenten worship may seem rather stark: there is no 'Gloria' and there is a greater emphasis on penitence. There is a focus on different parts of the service and on different words. We should resist the temptation to carry on as usual and instead look more deeply at our lives and consider whether there are things we should try to change.

Lent gives us the opportunity to re-engage with our faith, to purify ourselves of habits and attitudes we know are not remotely Christ-like; and to open our hearts to God. We cannot avoid the challenge of discipline and effort, but we face that challenge in the power of the Spirit - God's gift to us.

So we pray in the words of the Collect:

Give us grace to discipline ourselves in obedience to your Spirit;
and, as you know our weakness,
so may we know your power to save

Amen.