

Fr. Nick Dant's Homily, Saint Matthew Catholic Church, Indianapolis
First Sunday of Lent, Feb. 20-21, 2021, Cycle B

As with every First Sunday of Lent, our gospel passage tells the story of Jesus' forty day sojourn into the desert. This year we hear St. Mark's version of Jesus' desert ordeal. The author of Mark's gospel is very short and to the point. He describes Jesus' retreat into the desert in only two sentences. ***"The spirit drove Jesus into the desert, and he remained in the desert for forty days, tempted by Satan. He was among wild beasts and the angels ministered to him."*** That's it! That is all Mark tells us. The Gospel of Mark does not go into great detail like Matthew and Luke, describing the various temptations of Jesus: about turning stones into bread, throwing himself down from the parapet of the temple, or seeking political and economic power over others.

With Mark all we know is that during those forty days in the desert, Jesus did face down the temptation and battle evil, preparing himself for the task of proclaiming God's Kingdom. He comes out of the desert with a new sense of authority, proclaiming: ***The Kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the Gospel.***

We need to take note that Mark says: ***The Spirit drove Jesus out into the desert.*** Jesus was just baptized and felt himself full of God's Spirit. He felt this Spirit to be a driving force to rid himself of anything that would stand in the way of his God given mission. As we come to this First Sunday of Lent, it is that same Spirit who drives us out into the forty day desert of Lent, where Jesus challenges us to conversation and to confront and repent of any evil tempting us away from our Baptismal commitment to live for the Kingdom of God. Yes, Lent is our annual time to accept our responsibility for the evil and sin in our world and to seek true conversion of our hearts.

Imagine that I would pass paper and pencils out to all of you, right now; and I would ask you to name what is wrong on the world? To name the evil and the sin in the world. How might you respond? Most could probably fill up our paper in no time; war, poverty, homelessness, violence, unemployment, greed, apathy, crime, child abuse, spousal abuse, elder abuse, and more. Now, if I would ask you, "Who is to blame for such a broken world?" Who would you list? Before we start searching for scapegoats – "those people," whether they be the older generation, the boomers, the younger generation, greedy tyrants, unresponsive political governments, or whoever, let me remind you of the words of the late Peter J. Gomes, a Baptist Minister, who said that just as the sins of society begin with each individual, so the renewal and transformation of society begins with each individual. In other words, we are all accountable for the circumstances in which we find ourselves, by the very fact that I have personally sinned, I have contributed to the evil that is in the world.

Lent reminds us of our need to root out sin in our lives for the renewal and transformation of the world – to confront evil as Jesus did in the desert, to admit our responsibility for sinning and Repent! During Lent we go out into the desert with Jesus, and like Jesus, we fast from all that stands in the way of our hearing God's voice clearly. Our fasting leads us to stand naked before God as who we are – sinners. Fasting leads us to cry to God in prayer, as Jesus did – trying to commune more profoundly with the One who draws us into His Love. Our prayer leads us to deeper fasting to bond with the millions of people around the world who suffer in pain, or go to bed hungry, or are in misery. Being united with God and our brothers and sisters, through fasting and prayer, we become more renewed, made new if you will, freed from that greed which leads to sin, freed to reach out in almsgiving, to meet our God who lives in those who suffer. More free to proclaim with Jesus "The Kingdom of God is at Hand."

May God bless all of you with a spiritually renewing Lent.