

March 1, 2009

First Sunday of Lent

Reading 1

[Gn 9:8-15](#)

God said to Noah and to his sons with him:

"See, I am now establishing my covenant with you
and your descendants after you
and with every living creature that was with you:
all the birds, and the various tame and wild animals
that were with you and came out of the ark.
I will establish my covenant with you,
that never again shall all bodily creatures be destroyed
by the waters of a flood;
there shall not be another flood to devastate the earth."

God added:

"This is the sign that I am giving for all ages to come,
of the covenant between me and you
and every living creature with you:
I set my bow in the clouds to serve as a sign
of the covenant between me and the earth.
When I bring clouds over the earth,
and the bow appears in the clouds,
I will recall the covenant I have made
between me and you and all living beings,
so that the waters shall never again become a flood
to destroy all mortal beings."

Responsorial Psalm

[Ps 25:4-5, 6-7, 8-9](#)

R. (cf. 10) **Your ways, O Lord, are love and truth to those who keep your covenant.**

Your ways, O LORD, make known to me;
teach me your paths,
Guide me in your truth and teach me,
for you are God my savior.

R. **Your ways, O Lord, are love and truth to those who keep your covenant.**

Remember that your compassion, O LORD,
and your love are from of old.
In your kindness remember me,
because of your goodness, O LORD.

R. **Your ways, O Lord, are love and truth to those who keep your covenant.**

Good and upright is the LORD,
thus he shows sinners the way.
He guides the humble to justice,
and he teaches the humble his way.

R. **Your ways, O Lord, are love and truth to those who keep your covenant.**

Reading II

[1 Pt 3:18-22](#)

Beloved:

Christ suffered for sins once,
the righteous for the sake of the unrighteous,
that he might lead you to God.
Put to death in the flesh,
he was brought to life in the Spirit.
In it he also went to preach to the spirits in prison,
who had once been disobedient
while God patiently waited in the days of Noah
during the building of the ark,
in which a few persons, eight in all,
were saved through water.
This prefigured baptism, which saves you now.
It is not a removal of dirt from the body
but an appeal to God for a clear conscience,
through the resurrection of Jesus Christ,
who has gone into heaven
and is at the right hand of God,
with angels, authorities, and powers subject to him.

Gospel

[Mk 1:12-15](#)

The Spirit drove Jesus out 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.

After John had been arrested,
Jesus came to Galilee proclaiming the gospel of God:
"This is the time of fulfillment.
The kingdom of God is at hand.
Repent, and believe in the gospel."

HOMILY

Jesus went out into the wilderness. We find the Church in the wilderness.

You may remember that just before Jesus went into the wilderness, He was baptized. He stood in the river with John the Baptist, a dove descended upon Him, and from the heavens God spoke: "You are my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased." Immediately after this, Jesus was whisked off into the wilderness by the Spirit. There he met the devil.

Jesus' forty days in the wilderness reminds us of Israel's forty years of wandering to find the Promised Land. Remember how the Israelites were tested time and again: running out of food and water; and those seraphs – the snakes with burning venom – preying on them; and each time Moses provided for them, protected them. Jesus was tested much like the Israelites were. His testing comes from Satan. "Satan": the word means 'adversary.' Satan tries to pull Jesus away from His path of following God.

For ancient people, the wilderness symbolized the place where two opposing forces meet. And it was a dangerous place, the lair of wild beasts and outlaws. It was a place for testing. In the wilderness you learn about yourself. The testing exposes your true personality; crisis reveals character. When Jesus meets Satan and turns away his temptation, He responds to His Father's blessing. By turning away from Satan he shows us why He is the beloved Son, in whom His Father is well pleased. As I've said before, I think God says the same line when each of us is dunked into the baptismal pool: "This is my beloved son / my beloved daughter, who pleases me so much!" And through all those times of testing, when we remain faithful, it is our way of giving thanks to God, just like Jesus did.

The Church is like the wilderness: we wander among the wild beasts. Temptation surrounds us. Satan's all around us. But grace abounds with us. We worship in the wilderness. The Church is like the wilderness. But sometimes we treat the Church like a zoo . . . the tabernacle like a cage. This is not a slight on the pastor; he runs a fine parish. But in a zoo the animals are safely contained. We observe them and admire them from a safe distance, but never have contact with them. The wilderness is fascinating but it's not safe.

I visited a wilderness recently. As some of you know I spent the month of January in Nairobi, the capital of Kenya. I was invited to teach at the Jesuit College there, a school similar to mine here in Berkeley. It was a great month. Now, when you're in Nairobi, you must visit Nakuru, a national park. In this park you drive for miles along a dirt road surrounded by African animals. Get there early before the sun reaches its height; then the animals lay down in shady areas.

One day I visited this park with three students and a driver. From the moment you enter the park you know who owns the land. When we went to pay our entrance fee, we parked the jeep and went to the office. We left the windows of our jeep open. From out of nowhere three small monkeys climbed into the jeep and found our bag of fruit. Then they sat in the window frame and chewed our oranges right in front of us. Their relatives, the baboons, were no more welcoming. Inside the park, a pack of them lined the road and let us pass, standing with their hairy arms crossed, wearing these cynical frowns, as if to say "There goes the neighborhood."

We drove on through herds of zebra, gazelles and antelope. Down by the lake we watched huge black mean-looking water buffalo wade next to thousands of graceful white flamingos, each perched on one leg. We got out of the jeep to take pictures, looking cautiously around us. It was the quietest place I've ever visited and I wondered if this is what paradise was like – this peaceful harmony.

A little later we spotted three giraffe in a wooded area. Again we stopped the jeep and stepped out for a picture. As we neared the woods a man shouted to us in Swahili. Our driver translated calmly: "He says don't go in there. A lion may be waiting there." We stepped back. Personally I think he should have added a little more emotion to the man's message. I think that whenever the next line is "... and you could get killed," it calls for some emotion. Sure enough, down the road we found another giraffe lying dead in the grass, probably mauled by a lion. All is not right in this paradise. Finally as we drove out of the park we spotted four rhinoceros taking a siesta. We paused to snap a picture. One of the rhinos stood up to look at us. The driver warned us that if he moves we drive away very fast. The rhino is the most dangerous animal in the park. He'll chase a jeep. You have to stay ahead of him. If he gets perpendicular to you, he'll ram the car with his horn. But this rhino took a look at us, got bored, and lay down again. We drove out of the park, covered with dust and filled with stories.

It's one thing to look at animals in the zoo. It's another to watch them in their natural habitat, the wilderness, as they graze with some animals, and avoid others. When I visit a zoo again I think I'll see them differently. The Park is fascinating, but it's not safe. Is the Church more of a wilderness or a zoo?

In coming to Church today it feels like I'm stepping into a wilderness. While we come inside the Church, there's a crisis outside – this economic crisis – and we're not sure where we are going. We are like the Israelites wandering through the desert – trusting that Moses is leading us in the right direction, not knowing how long this will last. I am preaching inside while outside ten per cent of Californians are out of work, and others wait in hope. It is time to bring the burdens from outside to the table of the Lord. The Church is in the wilderness. It is not a zoo. Jesus meets us in the wilderness and here we bring our burdens.

This is our sacrifice. "Sacrifice": from the Latin *sacrum – facere*, 'to make sacred.' We hand these burdens over to God who turns them into something sacred and they become a source of grace. This week Cardinal Roger Mahony of Los Angeles published his "Ash Wednesday Message." He writes that "most Catholics in (his) diocese do not need to select a special form of sacrifice this Lent; they already have more than their share." The same can be said for many Americans. Living through this economic crisis is a sacrifice. He explains that Jesus' call to "Reform your lives" means to put aside any pride or a spirit of self-sufficiency, and embrace humbly all that surrounds us. We know that God is present to us in the midst of helplessness and weakness.

Church, for the next six weeks of Lent we will bring our burdens here, making sacred our many sacrifices. And we look forward to hearing again the Lord's voice, "This is my beloved son / my beloved daughter, in whom I am so pleased."

Amen.

Thomas Scirghi, S.J.