

Ambiguity

God of the wilderness, your Spirit leads us to face the truth, unprotected and exposed: in our times of trial, help us to resist the worship of empty power and the illusion of invulnerability that we might find our true food in Jesus Christ, the Broken Bread. Amen

Prayers for an inclusive church.

The first Sunday of Lent 2022. Where does this journey of faith and life lead us to? Today's readings are a wonderful invitation to explore in faith and hope, from Deuteronomy we remember that our ancestors were a wandering people, seeking a way forward, and as they prepare the offering of the first fruits, they also remember the 40 years they journeyed through the desert. And that the celebration will be open to all: the people, the priests, and the aliens/foreigners... we know what they didn't know: they would settle, but they would also go into exile more than once, and at one point their country would disappear. In our faith, we are all children of Abraham, immigrants, wandering the roads, coming-and-going, seeking to trust God, and offering the first fruits. When then in history did the alien become suspicious, and be rejected? Certainly not what this reading is asking of us.

Today's Psalm 91 reminds us that God walks with the people, and in God we find a shelter, refuge, protection; and yet there are times in life when the people of God felt that the shelter has collapsed, and that the protection is not there. Can we identify with this?

The Gospel reading, is the well know text about Jesus at one of his most vulnerable times, being led to the wilderness and tempted with questions on his identity – “*If you really are the Son of God...*” and tempted with matters of survival for the short and the long term. And I am sure each of us can relate to temptation, and deep questions about ourselves.

These readings at the beginning of Lent set the tone for the weeks ahead, and I would also say they also set the tone for the whole of life. And given the current world situation these readings confront us with deep questions – we are reminded that God is with the community in the struggle for justice, where God promises to always be refuge and strength particularly for those who have nobody to care for them -the widow, the orphan, the foreigner; that our journey of faith is a call to work for justice, and peace, and service to others, this is also the way of the Cross, but also the way of faithful living. And we live this ambiguity – the promises we have lived with since Abraham, and the not always fulfilment of these promises in life. So again, the question I began with – where does this journey of faith and life lead us to?

Promises and the delay of those promises. The world screams out that the promises are not coming true, that they are going to happen and we wait, and often wait and wait and wait. What does this mean to us? How does the vision of Jesus in the Gospel reading help us? Jesus is not the “super-hero” that many have pretended him to be. He has fasted for 40 days, he has been led to the wilderness (which biblically always speaks of the sense of distance from God), he is tempted. Jesus is struggling, this is very early on in his ministry, he is still discovering ways to carry out this ministry, and the temptations are questions on how he will use the

power he has – can there be shortcuts? Can there be ethical side-lines? Does the end justify the means?

In the Gospel, just before this reading today, we have the long list of Jesus' ancestors. There is an identity here and the last words are revealing "the son of Adam, the son of God." So, in the difficult times, with that certainty, I wonder if he ever asked – *Dear God, I am your son, so why are you putting me through all this? You know that I know that the journey has just begun and continues out of this wilderness...* I'm sure I would have pleaded in this fashion; in fact, I have done so, and I am not Jesus.

The key to this journey in Lent is a reminder of the basics – we are part of a wandering father, who was a stranger, a person on the way, we share this common heritage; we think we have settled and yet there is always the reality of change, of newness, or even of tragedy. We go back to the basket of the first fruits being offered and the challenge **to see what we can offer** – so is Lent a time for giving up, or is it a time of giving: our time, our affections; giving up our prejudice, our close minded vision of faith and of God, or to discovering as Abraham did, as the Psalmist did, as Paul did, as Jesus did – that God is not only the provider but God is also in those who receive from us – the victims of discrimination, of hatred, of violence...the refugee, the sick, the rejected – "*what you do for the least of them you do for me*", and in this sense God is always walking with us.

Lent, as every season of our journey of faith, reminds us not necessarily of certainty but of ambiguity. The promises are always ahead of us, and when we feel that the answers are being delayed, we remember that God still walks with us, and we walk together, and the new creation is being affirmed day by day where there is no Jew or Gentile, because in Christ we are all part of that newness God has called us to affirm.

So let us accept the challenge and reflect...

- not on what to give up but what we can do, do for others.
- not only what we affirm but also what needs changing: in our lives, in the church, in the way we do things.
- not only what we already know, but what we have still to learn.
- Amen