

Intro:

Some of you may be old enough to remember the days before Gift Aid, when, if you wanted to be tax efficient (rather than tax evading, of course) you had to sign a covenant with your church. A covenant is a solemn and binding agreement, something with more weight and moral force than a contract. It has a reference point, if you like, in heaven, or above and beyond us.

One of the texts for today is the promise of God to Noah that never again would a people be abandoned to destruction because of sinful behaviour. Whenever storm clouds gathered the rainbow would be a reminder that God's contract, agreement, solemn undertaking, covenant was for evermore. Never again would there be unavoidable judgement. God would always offer the possibility of rescue. Even when it seemed like God had abandoned his people, he would always keep his side of the bargain.

The First Sunday of Lent may seem an odd Sunday to think about covenant, but, especially in Mark's Gospel, it is perfect. Temptation is a dark time. The call to repentance is a challenging time. The wilderness is an empty and unforgiving environment. In all of these places and situations Jesus is shown to be the answer, the rescue, the hope and the future. In himself he is both the rainbow – the sign of God's presence with us, and the ark, the means of rescue.

On this Sunday we are given the story of the temptations of Jesus. This is not to encourage us to have a detox. It's much more than that. The knowledge that Jesus was tempted in the wilderness does have much to say about what it is to have complete reliance on God, and about the deep motives of our lives which have little to do with cream cakes and everything to do with whether Jesus is Lord of everything that we are.

Jesus's victory over temptation means that we have an example to follow and a friend to guide us in the darkest and bleakest times. There was nowhere more abandoned than the wilderness. Jesus has been there, and God was with him. Jesus is shown to us here as Son of God and Son of Man. Because of Jesus God will not let us go. Having been revealed as the Son of God – the covenant made visible – Jesus finds that covenant made absolutely tangible. The covenant is stress tested and found to be secure. God will never let him go.

Mark's Gospel is famously brief and to the point. Compare the story of the temptations in Matthew and Luke and you find in Mark that it's more like a series of bullet points in a Powerpoint presentation.

- God announces that Jesus is his Son.
- Jesus is driven into the wilderness
- He is tempted.
- He is sustained.
- He comes out and preaches

It will be for Luke and Matthew to tell us about the nature of the temptations and their subtlety – that the one who came to feed the hungry was tempted to go about it in the wrong way by making bread from stones, for example. Mark simply says this: Jesus was anointed. He fasted and was tempted. Then he began to preach. It was in the wilderness that his calling was confirmed, after the voice from heaven had announced it. His message of repentance only works because it comes from

a life completely dependent on God, not his own image buoyed up by the approval of the crowd. It is forged in the cauldron of the desert's midday heat.

We can fully depend on Christ the Son of God because in the wilderness he fully depends on God his Father. God does not abandon his Son. God with us is the rainbow and ark: in him we are covenanted to God.

Jesus's dependence on God is worked out here in the fullness of his being human. He doesn't float above the ground. He lives this, and it is painful. Again Mark does not spell out the nature of the temptations. It is enough for Mark to say 'he was tempted'. If we are human we know what this means. A long time ago the Major accused of cheating on *Millionaire* went to trial. The prosecution stated that 'human nature being what it is, someone was going to try to get the million dishonestly'. *Human nature being what it is...*

There are universal temptations, and one of them will get to you. One of the tasks of Lent is to train ourselves not to be enslaved by whatever it is that we could be addicted to, or could lead us astray. There will be something, and creating a spiritual wilderness helps us find out what it is. Jesus in the wilderness is exposed to every possible distraction and temptation. He knows their full force. Covenanted to him, we know that he has lived every last moment of it, and we can trust him. He is ark and rainbow. The fully human Christ is in the middle of the mess with us, and accompanies us to bring us to glory. That's God's side of the bargain. There is nowhere he is not.

Peirasmos in Greek isn't about negative temptation, but positive testing. It is about proving goodness, not evil – testing, not deviousness. Jesus came out of this series of temptations more able to do the job he was called to do. Our calling to be disciples will be confirmed not in the oasis but in the desert. And as I say it I know I want to avoid it. But the joy here is that temptation has already been overcome in Jesus Christ. He is rainbow and ark, and invites us to join him.

One of the 'calls' in our 'Challenge for Lent is to spend time with God in prayer. Ideally that will be together with others. This is about committing ourselves to being in God's presence, to offering ourselves to be put to whatever God wants of us, to discovering, through testing, what our true motivations are. God's covenant with us is that we will never be let go by God. And knowing that human nature is what it is, and that we will fail in our side of the bargain, God shares the completeness of our human nature, conquers temptation within it, and covenants with us again.

The rainbow is the vision, the announcement. The presence of Christ is the confirmation, the ark. In Christ we have conquered. As you are called to prayer this Lent, discover that truth. Rejoice in God's promise. And live the new life.