

## Reflection for Sunday 21 February, Lent 1 by Patricia Ellison

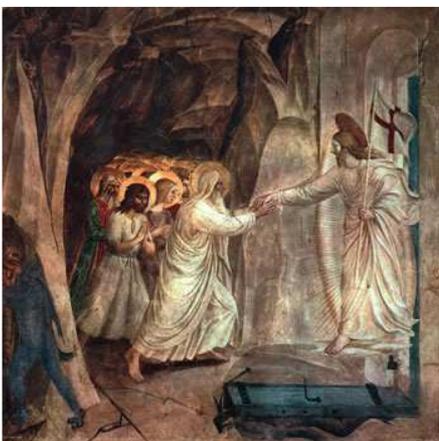
It has to be said that this is the strangest start to Lent that I can remember. Shrivens by post and penitent by Internet, we come together in a way we could never have anticipated, even a year ago. Lent, the time when we lament how far we have come from God, is now a time when we grieve for the distance at which we are from our loved ones, how far away from that touch which we crave, how far from that kindly forgiving touch of peace which we have shared, Sunday by Sunday, across the years. So Lent has a particular poignancy for us this year, locked away as we are, distant, in a frigid safety, a sanitised isolation, wondering perhaps what else meaningful we could possibly give up this Lent.

And today we watch as our Lord walks away into the wilderness, in the company of the wild beasts and the angels.

But the story for today is in fact not one of misery, or privation, or of feeling sorry for ourselves. Today our Scripture overflows with reminders of God's promise of unending love for us, and of our place in the story of redemption. We begin, in the book of Genesis, with the covenant made between God and every creature of flesh that is on the earth. The promise made to Noah reminds us that God does not give up on us. His anger at human behaviour, his bow of rage at the antics of creation, here turns into a rainbow promise of never again. A promise that God is alongside us, that the story is not finished, that Noah and his family – and by extension all of us - will not be abandoned, left alone in a devastated world.

God's promise continues with the gospel scene at the Jordan river. In Mark's hurry-up version of the story, we are presented with this extraordinary moment of revelation. As Jesus is baptised by John and comes up from the water, the heavens are torn apart. As the voice of God speaks in love, recognising and validating his beloved son, so the spirit descends on Jesus as his newly baptised life begins. Another covenantal moment, another amazing, incontrovertible sign. For as Jesus came to the Jordan, he stripped off the disguise of childhood, shed the average life that was waiting to welcome him, and left them behind on the shore of the Jordan. As he waded into that water, and heard that voice, he could never go back to who he was before; and if we join him in his baptism, neither can we. As Mark says – the time is fulfilled – our time. St Peter explains it to us in his letter – that through our baptism we are saved, just as Noah and his family were saved from the flood. Like them, we pass through the waters of death; as they were visited by the dove of new life, so we too are infilled by the spirit, the breath of transformation.

Jesus was in the wilderness for forty days. We are told that he was tempted by Satan who failed to divert him from his chosen and dangerous course. At the end of this time, his ministry began in earnest, with all the speed that Mark suggests – a ministry of teaching, renewing, cleansing, driving out fear, inspiring, a ministry of love, a ministry of touch. Jesus emerged from the water of Jordan and the wilderness privations to love and to heal – to touch the untouchable, and bring sight to the blind, and insight to us. Because when we think about Lent today, about the forty days we keep to remind us of Jesus in the desert, we can see it with the blessing of hindsight. Lent for us is not just the road to the Gethsemane garden, the road to the cross – it is also the road to the resurrection.



Did you notice what happened in the extract from St Peter's letter? He describes Jesus visiting and making a proclamation to the spirits in prison. It's the time between the cross and the resurrection, the time when hell is harrowed. You can picture this in the medieval mind if you like, Jesus, having been crucified, having defeated death and the powers of darkness, visits the souls of all the dead, the shadowy congregation of Adam and Eve, our lost humanity who have been waiting forever for their release; he preaches resurrection and calls them all to new life. In Fra Angelico's painting, you can see the devil skulking away as they are freed.

I feel for those shadowy souls in their prison; I could say that right now I identify strongly with them. But through the blessed hindsight of the resurrection, I know that I am freed and that I live, that *we* live, in a world

where touch matters, where love matters, and where all the evidence is that we can believe in and share the good news. All humanity, all creation, is swept into the Jordan river with Jesus in baptism; God is pleased, God renews his loving covenant with all creation in the person of his son.

So Lent is a time to reflect, a time to follow in Jesus' steps through discipleship – to believe and share the good news, a time to know Jesus' warmth and touch and sustaining love as we reach out in support and love to one another. May peace be with you all this Lent.